

**MESSAGE FROM PRESIDENT JUDGE RIDGELY  
FISCAL YEAR 1997**

**The total number of new cases filed exceeded the previous year's record high number for the fourth year in a row. The increase in the Court's caseload is particularly acute in the number of criminal cases filed in Kent and Sussex Counties. Since Fiscal Year 1986, criminal case filings have increased by 149% in Kent County and 174% in Sussex County.**

**Final plea offers, a feature first developed in the Drug Court, are incorporated into the management of all criminal cases. Final plea offers, which include deadlines for the acceptance of plea agreements, are set prior to the trial date. The effect is to reduce the number of cases scheduled for trial thereby increasing the chances that cases scheduled for trial are tried the first time scheduled. By reducing the number of cases scheduled for trial, the Court is able to reduce the cost to the public, keep police officers on the street and to minimize inconvenience to jurors and witnesses.**

**The Court is participating in several joint initiatives with Executive Branch agencies to improve efficiency. Operation Safe Streets targeted probationers who were found in high crime and drug use areas or who violated curfew restrictions. Probation Officers accompanied Wilmington Police Department officers on patrol. Superior Court expedited the processing of the resulting violation of probation (VOP) hearings.**

**The Court is participating in the Courts/Correction Transportation Committee to find ways to adjust court schedules and increase the use of technology, including videophones, to reduce cellblock overcrowding, prisoner transport costs and security risks.**

**The Court negotiated the installation of a Probation and Parole Intake Office in the Daniel L. Herrmann Courthouse. It will be operational in November 1997. The intake office will expedite the referral of defendants sentenced to probation and eliminate the problems which occur when a defendant fails to report to P&P after sentencing.**

**The Drug Court continues to provide a lower-cost and more effective alternative to incarceration for offenders with chronic drug addictions. The Court also launched its Drug Court Data Integration Project. With funding provided by the**

**U.S. Department of Justice (USDOJ) and the State Justice Institute (SJI), it will establish an electronic network for the exchange of offender performance and other decision support information between the Court, Probation and Parole, TASC and treatment providers. It will also create a central database of information about Drug Court referrals which will be used to evaluate and quantify program performance. Also with USDOJ funding, the Court has retained the Statistical Analysis Center to conduct a major performance evaluation of the Drug Court.**

**The Court received a \$300,000 Delay Reduction Grant from the Bureau of Justice Assistance (BJA). The funds will be used to employ criminal case managers and to acquire hardware, software and communications equipment for the Drug Court Data Integration Project.**

**The Court continues to seek new opportunities to expand the use of Alternative Dispute Resolution (ADR) techniques to resolve disputes. The Court is developing a community justice center concept for resolving disputes before they are filed as complaints in a court. Another example is our participation in a meeting of the Delaware Claims Association, a group of insurance industry specialists and claims adjusters. The Court's ADR Coordinator conducted an educational presentation regarding the various ADR procedures which are available in the Court and through other organizations.**

**Perimeter security of the Kent County Courthouse was implemented. All visitors are now screened before entering the building at a single public entrance.**

**The Court conducted educational presentations for visiting groups which covered such subjects as Drug Court, using technology in the courtroom, and general Court operations. The visitors included judges and court personnel from Michigan, Florida, Texas, Latvia, Israel, Tanzania, and Ukraine. Other visiting groups included law firm personnel, citizens groups and school students.**