

**MESSAGE FROM PRESIDENT JUDGE RIDGELY
FISCAL YEAR 1999**

During this year, the Superior Court lost a superb jurist and good friend to so many throughout Delaware. On August 15, 1998, Kent County Resident Judge N. Maxson Terry, Jr. died suddenly after presiding at a marriage ceremony. Max will be greatly missed.

* * *

Three new and well-qualified Judges have joined the Court. The Honorable James T. Vaughn, Jr. was sworn in to succeed Resident Judge Terry. The Honorable William L. Witham, Jr. was sworn in as a Judge in Kent County and the Honorable Richard F. Stokes was sworn in as a Judge in Sussex County. The Court now has the strength of nineteen Judges. And while the Superior Court's traditions can be traced to the 1600s, we are embracing new methods and modern technologies so we may serve the people better.

Our nationally known Drug Court continues to set the example for visitors from around the nation and beyond that teamwork between treatment professionals and the criminal justice system works. As the first statewide Drug Court in the country, we completed our fifth full year of operation. More than 750 drug involved criminal defendants graduated from the program during the last two years. All graduates, some who have been hard core drug users for many years, have tested negative for a minimum period of six months and have successfully completed other program requirements to become eligible for graduation. We intend to push the effort forward to reduce crime, recidivism and the need to incarcerate.

The Court has constructed an experimental, high-tech, state-of-the-art courtroom using rented space adjacent to the Herrmann Courthouse. Known as the *e-Courtroom*, it is the result of a joint venture between the Court, the Delaware State Bar Association and Ameristar, a private sector supplier of hardware. This project is providing many important lessons in courtroom design for the new New Castle County courthouse.

Realtime reporting, which is comparable to closed captioning on television, is a major advance in the field of court reporting. This technology is in daily use to assist the hearing impaired. This technology allows Judges to mark testimony for future reference and it expedites transcript preparation.

A digital recording system has been installed in one courtroom in each county to record proceedings for which a transcript request is unlikely. It allows judges to review the record at their desks on our computer network and enhances accurate data entry of case information outside the courtroom.

A barcode-based file labeling and tracking system has been installed in each Prothonotary's Office. File labels are generated using system data and are affixed by machine, instead of by hand.

The Court is involved in two major automation projects which will increase efficiency of operations. The Automated Sentence Order Project (ASOP) and the Drug Court Information System (DCIS) will come online in Fiscal Year 2000.

The Court continued its efforts to find new ways to increase the amount collected of restitution owed to victims of crime as well as the collection of fines, costs and other criminal assessments. In cooperation with the Division of Audit and Recovery of the Department of Health and Social Services, the Court has instituted a Contempt Hearings process for defendants convicted of welfare fraud who have failed to pay restitution to the State. This innovative joint venture will soon be featured in an article in the national journal of the United Council on Welfare Fraud.

The Court has instituted hearings to intercept money seized by arresting police departments which is subject to forfeiture. Forfeited money is then diverted to the payment of restitution and other criminal assessments. This initiative has been a cooperative effort between the Court and the Department of Justice.

Meanwhile, the tax intercept system, which was established several years ago in cooperation with the Department of Finance, continues to produce benefits. The system identifies people who are due a State of Delaware tax refund and who also have outstanding fines, costs or restitution obligations. This program has generated \$200,000 per year for the last three years. With this success comes a heavy workload, however. During 1999 alone, the Court will process 1,400 intercepts, more than 100 appeals and will conduct 25 formal appeal hearings.

Enforcement of the Court's orders is essential to the administration of justice. This includes sentence orders that provide specific conditions of probation. For two years now the Court has participated in Operation Safe Streets, where probation officers accompany police officers during evening patrols of high crime

and drug use areas in search of probationers who are violating curfews or other conditions of their probation. This program has been widely credited for a substantial reduction in the number of shootings in Wilmington. Operation Safe Streets was expanded to Kent and Sussex counties during Fiscal 1999.

We continue to recognize the importance of Alternative Dispute Resolution (ADR) as a process less formal than the courtroom to resolve certain disputes quickly and on a cost effective basis. As part of our long-term commitment to the use of ADR, the Court enforces both mandatory arbitration and mediation which have resolved many cases without the need for a trial.

The hard work of many individuals is responsible for these many accomplishments and the daily administration of justice in Delaware's major criminal and civil cases. We are looking forward to the challenges of the next millennium with a focus on the consumers of our services and a steady determination to build on our success.