

**MESSAGE FROM PRESIDENT JUDGE RIDGELY
FISCAL YEAR 1998**

The Superior Court is busier than ever. For the fifth year in a row, the total number of new cases filed exceeded the previous year's all-time record. During fiscal year 1998, there were more than 16,000 filings in the court, with a notable growth of 700 civil cases in New Castle County in just one year. More cases were resolved in one year than at any other time in the Court's history - more than 15,000 of them.

We manage our growing caseload through differentiated case management, alternative dispute resolution methods, and a "customer service" focus in order to serve the public in pursuit of justice. Our strategic planning is based upon the Trial Court Performance Standards which emphasize the needs of those who are served by the Court, in addition to what the Court itself should accomplish as an organization. There are several projects this year which exemplify our methods.

The Court has revised the civil jury instructions to juries to provide a more clear and understandable language. A similar project was initiated for the jury instructions in criminal cases. These initiatives will improve jury comprehension and help demystify the language of trials.

The Court established a public information desk in the lobby of the Herrmann Courthouse. It provides a place for litigants, jurors, witnesses, attorneys, defendants, and other courthouse visitors to report for specific instructions about what courtroom they will be in and to answer other routine questions. Information desks will also be established in the Kent and Sussex County courthouses as renovations create space to accommodate this important function.

Our Drug Court continues to receive national and international attention. To manage these cases even better, the Court completed a functional analysis for a new Drug Court Information System (DCIS). DCIS will bring electronic filing to the Drug Court. With unprecedented funding support from three federal agencies, this project will establish an electronic network for the prompt 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 all Drug Court referral clients which will be used to evaluate and quantify program performance.

Criminal rules were amended to provide for restitution procedures to set the amount due and its apportionment among multiple defendants. We improved enforcement of the collection of restitution and fines by scheduling contempt of court hearings to provide an accessible forum for the prompt prosecution of these claims. A combination of intercepts of tax refunds and lottery winnings, contempt hearings, and the entry of civil judgements resulted in the collection of more than half a million dollars.

Civil rules were amended to broaden the availability of summary proceedings for commercial disputes to all claims not subject to mandatory arbitration. Litigants in all commercial disputes in excess of \$100,000 may now agree to this streamlined process.

The Court continued to engage in joint initiatives with Executive Branch agencies. The video phone network was expanded to the Kent and Sussex County courthouses. The number and variety of video proceedings have been increased with the objective to reduce cellblock overcrowding, prisoner transport costs and security risks at each Courthouse.

Operations Safe Streets continues to succeed. This program, which brings certain probation violators before the Court within one day, has been credited this year for a substantial reduction in the number of shootings in Wilmington.

The Court coordinated a two year project to automate the process for issuing Rule 9 Warrants. Under the new system, warrants are electronically transmitted for use by all Delaware police agencies instead of being mailed. This project will also help eliminate duplicate charges in the system and improve the accuracy of the criminal history database.

The Court received Byrne Grant funds to install digital audio recording equipment and a bar code-based case file labeling and tracking system.

The Court again expanded its capacity for alternative dispute resolution by conducting its fourth three-day mediation training program for 55 Delaware attorneys. This year we amended our civil rules to provide for the payment of mediators by the parties just as arbitrators are paid. A total of 140 Delaware attorneys have now completed this training program.

Public understanding of the work of the Court was improved through an open

house in Kent County in cooperation with other courts, the Chief Justice's Task Force on Citizen Involvement in the Judicial System, and the Criminal Justice Council.

In conclusion, as President Wilson said, "So far as the individual is concerned, a Constitutional government is as good as its courts. No better, no worse." The credit for our accomplishments this year on the front line of Constitutional government is shared by the Judges, staff, and the many others who have helped us improve the administration of justice.