

**Fund for Modern Courts, 2024 Cyrus R. Vance Tribute Breakfast  
Remarks of C.J. Wilson, 5/2/2024**

Good morning. Judge Halligan, thank you for that kind introduction. On a couple of occasions, I've said that my greatest accomplishment in 2023 was appointing Judge Zayas as Chief Administrative Judge, and from my perspective at least, Governor Hochul's greatest accomplishment in 2023 was her nomination of Judge Halligan to the Court of Appeals. Pay raises for judges are a distant second.

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In May of 1970, Cyrus R. Vance delivered the commencement address at Salem College in West Virginia. His remarks centered on the role public servants play in ensuring our nation's storied institutions are responsive to modern needs. He urged the new graduates:

We live in a society which, despite its many shortcomings is blessed with more individual freedom than man has ever known. In creating it, our forebears drew upon the long-held dreams of many men in many lands. What they really did, 194 years ago, in declaring our liberty, was to make the individual sovereign rather than subject. And those who are sovereign are also responsible.

Each member of each new generation, then, is responsible for what he, his fellowmen, and his nation become. They build on the past. They live in the present. But they must reach for the future.

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We must seek and embrace change not for its own sake.  
We must seek it to keep our institutions responsive.

By molding our institutions to fit changing conditions,  
needs, and aspirations we preserve the best of the past.  
When structures harden, they easily break.

The important point is that each individual be concerned  
with the fundamental issues, that he seek responsible,  
flexible, and compassionate solutions for them, that he  
take his position upon them.

For the past year, my leadership team and I have endeavored to do just that: to  
“seek responsible, flexible, and compassionate solutions” for the “fundamental  
issues” that the New York Unified Court System faces today—to “preserve the best  
of the past” while we “reach for the future.”

My team’s efforts, however, do not and could not exist in a vacuum. It is all  
about collaboration—within the court system; with our coordinate branches of  
government; with private associations throughout the state; with practitioners; and  
with the organizations, like the Fund for Modern Courts, that are dedicated to  
strengthening and improving the New York State court system. The Fund for  
Modern Courts has consistently provided independent and in-depth analysis on  
issues that are vital to the court system’s ability to meet our society’s ever-changing  
needs. And the Fund for Modern Courts has supported many of our recent efforts.  
I’ll list a few examples:

First, over the past year, we have made concerted efforts toward modernizing every courtroom, jury room, and courthouse public space in New York State. In 2023, our brand-new Division of Court Modernization undertook projects involving audio and acoustics, accessibility, evidence presentation, videoconferencing, streaming, and digital signage. (In fact, there is a 5-minute video narrated by a computer-generated voice on the UCS website showing everything that the Division accomplished last year.) Adapting human-centered and innovative technology makes our court spaces more functional and more accessible for all stakeholders in the justice process.

Second, the Fund for Modern Courts supported increasing judicial salaries. And just this month, as part of the 2025 Budget, state Supreme Court justices achieved pay parity with federal district court judges, with all New York State judicial salaries raised commensurately. That overdue pay raise is tremendously important: it ensures that we can attract and maintain talented people to serve as judges; it makes it financially attractive for lawyers from our many communities to serve in the judiciary; and it honors the essential role that judges play in our democratic society.

And third, the Fund for Modern Courts has been a strong advocate for cameras in the courtroom, as a way to increase the transparency of the judiciary and better inform citizens about the day-to-day work of the courts. For many years

now, the video of arguments in the Court of Appeals and in the Appellate Division departments has been livestreamed and archived for viewing.

As you undoubtedly know, a state statute prevents videography of any court proceedings involving the testimony of witnesses. We have been working with the legislature to craft a revision that would allow the press to apply for access to broadcast video from our trial courts, subject of course to the court's discretion to take measures to protect the privacy of, for example, children, victims of crime, or to protect other sensitive information that might expose a party or witness to danger or embarrassment. Furthermore, as we modernize our courtrooms to include the built-in capacity to record the proceedings, and as we transition to software that will allow livestreaming without the need for the press to bring cameras into court, we may be able to livestream proceedings in our trial courts, subject again to the privacy concerns I mentioned. There are, of course, cost and operational issues to surmount, but I do want you to know that your longstanding efforts on this front are coming to fruition.

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All of the topics I've discussed so far—courtroom modernization, judicial pay raises, cameras in courts—are of tremendous importance. They are the means by which the Unified Court System moves into the future with greater strength and

sophistication. But, as important as they are, the topics I've discussed so far are just that: means. So, now I'd like to turn to the "ends"—the ways we can and should substantively modernize the provision of justice in New York.

First, a modern court should be one that solves problems rather than one that solely adjudicates right and wrong. We may not think of it that way, but in the commercial context, the move over the last 40 years to more ADR is just that: a way to get commercial litigants to quit fighting about who is right, get the courts out of that business, and get the parties, with the assistance of the courts or others, to try to arrive at a solution to business problems. That approach has reached other types of civil matters, such as matrimonial matters, and it should be the paradigm for all types of disputes, including many criminal matters. In that regard, it is vital that we increase the number of "problem solving" courts in New York State, as well as increase the ancillary mental health, drug treatment, counseling and other supportive resources for the more than 300 problem solving courts already at work throughout New York State.

Our problem solving courts treat instead of punish. They make our communities safer and stronger. They save taxpayer dollars and increase public trust in our judicial system. They provide troubled New Yorkers with care and compassion, and an off-ramp from the criminal justice system and back into productive society. Our problem solving courts are the future. And there is great

demand for their work—more than we can meet even with the surge of resources we are so grateful to have received in the 2025 Budget. We do not yet have problem solving courts in all of our 62 counties, but I am determined that we will get there.

Second, a modern court system works proactively on integrating itself with our communities. When members of the public understand how the court system works; when they see that they, or their neighbors or relatives received a fair and meaningful process; when they view their local courthouses a positive, safe, welcoming spaces in their communities—they are more likely to trust the court system, and to respect and honor the courts’ decisions in their lives. Confidence in the judiciary nationally has fallen measurably, and although I do not believe the Unified Court System has contributed to that decline, I believe it is our responsibility to reverse it—at least within the borders of our State.

Today, public trust in our institutions is sorely lacking. Greater and greater numbers of our citizens are slipping into civic detachment—a state where private concerns trump community interests, where crime and other antisocial behaviors become more prevalent. Increasing civic attachment—breathing renewed efforts into civic education and engagement activities—is how we can correct course, and is something to which the Unified Court System is deeply committed. There is no silver bullet here—plentiful and consistent, modest efforts are the only medicine.

A quote often attributed to Mother Theresa springs to mind: “there are no great things, only small things with great love.”

To that end, as you may have noticed from numerous press releases and news articles over the past year, the Unified Court System has undertaken a wide variety of efforts to foster a sense of civic responsibility, engagement and understanding. Next week, I am participating in the New York State Bar Association’s first-ever Civics Convocation, which I hope will be an annual event on the scale of Law Day—celebrated around our State in locations great and small. We’re even going to have a Unified Court System booth at the New York State Fair. And although my idea for a dunk-a-judge attraction was not met warmly within my leadership team, we’ll try to engage the public while we’re there.

Third, a modern court system is committed to the betterment of the law, and should not shy away from offering to work with our co-equal branches of government to that end. Over the past year, my leadership team and I have worked with great intention to reset the relationship between the courts and our partners in the legislative and executive branches. Judges, legislators, the Governor’s office—we all go to work to serve the people of New York, and we are all better at our jobs and get more done when we collaborate.

Over the past year, our renewed partnerships have already yielded great fruit. The Enacted 2025 Budget, which was passed by the Legislature just last week and signed by Governor Hochul yesterday, was a huge uplift for the Unified Court System, which had been starved by more than a decade of near-flat budgets that represented declines in real dollars. The 2025 Budget includes all the funding sought by the judiciary, including long-overdue pay increases; the creation of new judgeships and support personnel; paid parental leave for UCS judges and employees; and significant investments in problem solving courts and family courts. The Budget also included the Judicial Security Act, which will make it easier for judges to protect their personal information, which is all the more important in our current, polarized political climate.

Fourth and finally, I'd like to close on a topic that is near to my heart, and I know very important to the Fund for Modern Courts: reimagining family court. A modern court system is one that can deal effectively, intelligently and compassionately with families in distress or headed for it. Just as with our problem solving courts on the criminal side, our family courts must become the best problem solvers they can be.

From the moment my leadership team and I began our new roles last spring, our central focus has been identifying and implementing ways to better support families in distress. For us, there are two key questions to answer.

The first question is a big one, and is not limited to the courts: what can the State do to improve the lives of distressed families, both before and after a family's situation rises to the level requiring court involvement? Enhancing various forms of support could be highly effective in keeping children safe and well cared for. When we can assist a distressed family through the provision of support services, whether through courts or otherwise, outcomes for children are better.

The second question is narrower, and squarely within the court system's mandate: how do we better care for the children and families who must rely on the court system? All litigants who pass through the halls of family court are there to resolve difficulties relating to the most precious people and relationships in their lives. They are there, under enormous stress, fighting for their safety and their dignity.

It is essential that their cases are resolved promptly and in accordance with the law; that every person is treated with dignity and compassion from the moment they walk through the courthouse door; that our facilities reflect the respect commensurate with the life-altering decisions that happen within them; and that our judges and staff are well-versed in the latest research and best practice standards regarding trauma, addiction, substance use, and mental health challenges so they can understand the people we serve as the full, complicated, and potentially redeemable humans they are.

The challenges faced by our family courts are numerous and well-documented. We are grateful to the Legislature and Governor, who have added new family court judgeships and provided funding for the additional staff necessary to support that expansion. We will continue to pursue funding levels for legal service providers that allow them to attract and retain lawyers to handle matters in family court. And we will continue to try to find solutions for some problematic family court facilities, which are located in buildings that are owned by the cities or counties where they are located, not the courts or the State, and where, historically, vital repairs and enhancements are often ignored or incompletely addressed.

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Thank you for your time this morning, and for honoring me with the Cyrus R. Vance Award. When I was a very young lawyer, I briefly met Secretary Vance, and was overawed. I am humbled to receive an award bearing the name of such a revered and effective public servant. I strive to follow in the example he set—serving the people of New York, preserving the best of the past, and—with your continued support and guidance—building a future fit for modernity. Thank you.