

News Advisory

From the Rhode Island Judiciary



Courts form panel on racial fairness

September 3, 2020: The Rhode Island Judiciary has established a steering committee to form a Committee on Racial and Ethnic Fairness in the Courts, Supreme Court Chief Justice Paul A. Suttell announced today.

The move follows an open letter in June to the state’s judges and lawyers, in which the Rhode Island Supreme Court publicly condemned the “wanton and violent deaths of young Black lives” following the loss of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, Ahmaud Arbery, and Rayshard Brooks. The Court said that the goal of equal justice for all is “a challenge that we must confront each and every day in our courts, our law offices, our boardrooms, and wherever it is that we practice or seek to adhere to the law.”

To build on that sentiment, Chief Justice Suttell sought this summer to create a group of judges and magistrates to assist the courts in ensuring that all defendants, victims, litigants, witnesses and the public are treated equitably and with dignity and respect.

“It is my sincere belief that we all strive to administer justice fairly and equally,” Chief Justice Suttell said. “Yet it is true that we all harbor unconscious biases that impact our decision-making to one degree or another. It is not only important that we treat all persons fairly, we must be perceived as treating all persons fairly. We must continuously strive to earn the trust and confidence of all members of the public.”

Chief Justice Suttell said he hoped that, among other goals, the committee will develop programs and protocols for education and training with respect to implicit bias and that it will make recommendations concerning the impact of race on various court processes based upon reliable data. He noted there is a lack of reliable data on race in courts across the country.

At this summer’s annual joint meeting of the Conference of Chief Justices and Conference of State Court Administrators, held remotely, several broad topics on racial fairness were recommended as starting points for systemic review. The list includes ability to pay court fines and fees, jury service, digital access, language access, community engagement, expungements, simplifying court processes, pretrial detention for nonviolent offenses, plea bargains, and racial justice and implicit bias training for judges and court employees.

Appointed to Rhode Island's steering committee were Superior Court Associate Justice Melissa A. Long, a member of the National Consortium on Racial & Ethnic Fairness in the Courts advisory board, who will serve as chair of the local committee; retired Superior Court Associate Justice Edward C. Clifton, a former president of the National Consortium; Superior Court Associate Justice Luis M. Matos; Family Court Associate Justice Lia N. Stuhlsatz and Magistrates Edward H. Newman and Alberto Aponte-Cardona; District Court Associate Judges Pamela Woodcock Pfeiffer, Christopher Smith, and Melissa DuBose; Workers' Compensation Court Associate Judges Susan Pepin Fay and Keith A. Cardoza, Jr.; and Rhode Island Traffic Tribunal Magistrate Alan R. Goulart.

The Supreme Court's full statement on racial fairness of June 23, 2020 can be found on the Judiciary's website [here](#).

#