



## COMMITTEE ON RACIAL AND ETHNIC FAIRNESS IN THE RHODE ISLAND COURTS

First Quarterly Report: March 31, 2025

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On October 20, 2020, Chief Justice Paul A. Suttell issued Executive Order No. 2020-15 establishing the Committee on Racial and Ethnic Fairness in the Rhode Island Courts. The Committee is charged with identifying and confronting areas where racism, inequality and discrimination may exist in our judicial system and being the driving force of change within the Rhode Island Judiciary. Executive Order No. 2020-15 further provides that “the committee shall seek to identify and remediate bias and prejudice, both conscious and unconscious, in the administration of justice in this State. It should also work to develop programs and protocols for education and training with respect to racial justice, unconscious bias, and fairness, and make recommendations regarding the impact of race on various court processes.”

The following mission statement has guided the Committee’s work since it was established in 2020:

*To enhance public confidence in the independence, integrity, and impartiality of the Rhode Island Judiciary, and to promote a fair and bias-free justice system by: 1) engaging in self-examination, education, and public outreach; and 2) identifying areas of systemic racism, unconscious bias, disparate impact, and socioeconomic and other inequities; and 3) taking affirmative steps to self-monitor and combat inequities, so as to ensure a system that is accessible to all and treats all persons equally.*

In accordance with Executive Order [2020-15](#) and Administrative Order [2024-12](#), the following judicial officers were reappointed for a second term, alongside the appointment of new selected members. This order reflects the Judiciary’s commitment to ensuring the continued service of experienced judicial officers while welcoming fresh perspectives to the Committee.

Hon. Paul A. Suttell, Chief Justice (ex Officio), R.I. Supreme Court

Hon. Melissa A. Long, Associate Justice (Chair), R.I. Supreme Court,  
(Term expiring October 20, 2025)

Hon. Alberto Aponte-Cardona, Magistrate, R.I. Family Court  
(Term expiring October 19, 2027)

Hon. Keith A. Cardoza, Jr., Associate Judge, R.I. Workers’ Compensation Court  
(Term expiring October 20, 2027)

\*Hon. Melissa R. DuBose, District Judge, U.S. District Court, District of R.I. (Associate Judge, R.I. District Court, 2019-2024) (Term expiring October 20, 2025)

Hon. Alan Goulart, Magistrate, R.I. Traffic Tribunal  
(Term expiring October 20, 2027)

Hon. Colleen M. Hastings, Associate Judge, R.I. District Court  
(Term expiring October 20, 2027)

Hon. Luis M. Matos, Associate Justice, R.I. Superior Court  
(Term expiring October 20, 2025)

\*Hon. John J. McConnell, Jr., Chief Judge, U.S. District Court, District of R.I.  
(Term expiring October 20, 2026)

\*Hon. Mary S. McElroy, District Judge, U.S. District Court, District of R.I.  
(Term expiring October 20, 2027)

Hon. Edward H. Newman, Magistrate, R.I. Family Court  
(Term expiring October 20, 2026)

Hon. Susan Pepin-Fay, Associate Judge, R.I. Workers' Compensation Court  
(Term expiring October 20, 2026)

Hon. Christopher Smith, Associate Justice, R.I. Superior Court  
(Term expiring October 20, 2027)

Hon. Lia N. Stuhlsatz, Associate Justice, R.I. Family Court  
(Term expiring October 20, 2025)

\*Hon. Patricia A. Sullivan, Magistrate Judge, U.S. District Court, District of R.I.  
(Term expiring October 20, 2025)

Hon. Pamela Woodcock Pfeiffer, Associate Judge, R.I. District Court  
(Term expiring October 20, 2027)

*\* On November 16, 2023, the Chief Judge of the U.S. District Court for the District of Rhode Island issued a [General Order](#) Regarding Appointment to the Committee on Racial and Ethnic Fairness in the Rhode Island Courts and subsequently appointed three judicial officers to serve as full members of the Committee for staggered three-year renewable terms. On January 6, 2025, Chief Judge McConnell issued a subsequent [General Order](#) Appointing Judicial Officers to the Committee on Racial and Ethnic Fairness in the Rhode Island Courts to reflect the elevation of the Hon. Melissa R. DuBose to the U.S. District Court for the District of Rhode Island.*

Further, the following additional members continue to engage in the work of the Committee in an informal capacity, and the Committee continues to invite the engagement and input of all judicial officers in its important work, including by attending monthly meetings.

Hon. Edward C. Clifton (ret.)

Hon. Shilpa Naik, Associate Justice, R.I. Family Court  
Hon. Amanda Leigh Valentino, Magistrate, R.I. Superior Court

Executive Order No. 2020-15 authorizes invitations to members outside of the Committee to participate in its work; accordingly, the Committee holds joint meetings, on quarterly basis, with the Committee on Diversity, Equity and Inclusion (DEI) of the Rhode Island Bar Association. The two Committees collaborate on projects aimed at addressing areas of disparate impact and inequities in our legal system.

The following Rhode Island Judiciary staff work with the Committee:

Julie P. Hamil, State Court Administrator  
Chrisanne Wyrzykowski, Esq., Deputy General Counsel±  
Alexandra (Lexi) Kriss, Asst. State Court Administrator, Community Outreach & Public Relations  
Sara Gilkenson, Diversity Coordinator

±The Committee met in-person on March 24, 2025, and bid farewell to Kathy Kelly, Esq., General Counsel and long-time public servant who dedicated many hours to working with the Committee. Her hard work and commitment to the Committee's mission have been invaluable and undoubtedly contributed to the success of the Committee's initiatives and activities.

### **Education and Training**

#### *Turning Pages:*

The third season kicked off on January 17, 2025, with a discussion of The Warmth of Other Suns – The Epic Story of America's Great Migration, by Isabel Wilkerson. Judicial officers also read and discussed Small Mercies, by Dennis Lehane on March 28, 2025. They will close the series on April 28, 2025, when they convene to view and discuss a film that illuminates the struggles of historically-excluded groups.

#### *Justice Riders 2024*

Committee members and other participants of Justice Riders 2024 continue to share reflections of the October 2024 journey to Montgomery and Selma, Alabama to explore the nation's history related to slavery, Jim Crow, and the struggle for civil rights.

- On January 27, 2025, the Flaschner Judicial Institute hosted a reflections/discussion session for federal and state judges who attended the Justice Riders educational trip as well as those interested in future learning opportunities.
- On February 25, 2025, the Rhode Island Women's Bar Association and the Rhode Island Black Women Lawyers Association hosted an event at the Providence campus of Roger Williams University School of Law (RWUSL), featuring Justice Long and U.S. District Judge Mary S. McElroy. They shared powerful reflections on visiting historic civil rights sites, including the Frank M. Johnson courtroom, the Equal Justice Initiative's Legacy Sites, and various places in Selma, including the Edmund Pettus Bridge.
- On March 19, 2025, Justice Long was a guest lecturer at the Kingston campus of the University of Rhode Island. She spoke with undergraduate students who are enrolled in

EDC 103G: Education & Social Justice, taught by Michael Browner, Jr., Ph.D. Engaging with the class, Justice Long shared insights on the intersection of law, education, and civil rights, drawing from historical and contemporary examples. The discussion highlighted the historic role of the judiciary in promoting justice and the importance of legal advocacy. Students had the opportunity to ask questions and explore how legal frameworks can be used to address systemic inequities in society.

#### *Martin Luther King, Jr. Lecture, RWU School of Law*

On January 24, 2025, Justice Long served as the keynote speaker for RWUSL's 2025 Martin Luther King Jr. Lecture, an important occasion for the law school community. She was honored to share her insights and reflections, contributing to the event's meaningful dialogue on Dr. King's legacy and its impact today.

#### *Black History Month, Lunch & Learn*

The Committee, in collaboration with the Office Community Outreach and Public Relations, and Diversity Office, co-hosted its annual presentation of Black History Month on February 27, 2025. The informal virtual lunch and learn featured Dr. Akeia de Barros Gomes, who spoke about the vision behind the Center for Black History at the Newport Historical Society, the significance of the Wanton-Lyman-Hazard House and its former residents, and the Mystic Seaport exhibit *Entwined: Freedom, Sovereignty & the Sea*. She emphasized the importance of engaging communities in preserving and sharing the stories of Black people in New England and the United States, ensuring their histories are recognized and honored. Members of the Northeast Region Workgroup for Racial Justice Education participated in the lunch-and-learn event.

#### *Women's History Month, Lunch & Learn*

On March, 31, 2025, the Committee, in collaboration with the Office Community Outreach and Public Relations, and Diversity Office, co-hosted its annual presentation in honor of Women's History Month. The virtual lunch and learn featured presenters, Kate Wells the State Librarian at the R.I. State House, and Eileen Sweeney, Director of Community Outreach and Engagement at the Secretary of State's Office. They shared insights on civic engagement, public access to information, and community outreach, drawing from their extensive experience in library sciences, government, and the private sector.

#### *Blueprint for Racial Justice – Northeast Region Workgroup for Racial Justice Education*

The three-person team from Connecticut has spearheaded monthly meetings with representatives from Delaware, the District of Columbia, Massachusetts, New Jersey, Pennsylvania, Rhode Island, and Vermont to share thoughts, resources and best practices related to racial justice education in the courts. As noted above, the February 2025 meeting coincided with the Black History Month Lunch and Learn.

### **Community Engagement and Collaborations**

#### *Ministers Alliance of Rhode Island*

On January 20, 2025, Committee members and members of the Committee on DEI attended the Ministers' Alliance of Rhode Island's (MARI) annual MLK Jr.'s Scholarship Breakfast in celebration with scholarship recipients. The Committee and MARI continue to develop a collaborative outreach plan and discuss other efforts to improve the diversity of Rhode Island's jury panels.

### *Leadership Development and Education (LEAD), Black History Program*

The R.I. Coalition of Black Women LEAD program hosted a potluck in celebration of Black History month on February 5, 2025 at Central High School. Justice Long had the pleasure to speak to high school and middle school aged Black girls and their parents and guardians about the importance of civics and civic engagement in securing and maintaining equal rights for Black Americans.

### *Meeting with DARE*

On February 11, 2025, staff members that serve on the Committee on Racial and Ethnic Fairness in the Courts met with a group of community members from DARE to hold a listening session. DARE requested the meeting to discuss the impact of 32F violations. Several DARE members attended and shared their personal experience and how they would like to see the probation violation process amended.

### *Opportunities in the Judiciary: Judicial Internships and Clerkships*

On February 18, 2025, Chief Judge McConnell and Justice Long participated in a panel discussion with college and law students at the Moakley Courthouse in Boston, Massachusetts. Organized in coordination with the Massachusetts Black Women Lawyers Association, the panelists discussed the value of judicial internships and clerkships.

### *The Randall Ashe Story: Celebrating a R.I. Legend in Honor of Black History Month*

On February 20, 2025, Committee members were invited to a presentation of PPAC's Wonders of the Wurlitzer community outreach program, The Randall Ashe Story. In the collaboration with the African American Museum of R.I., Juneteenth R.I., YouthBuild, and Providence's Department of Art, Culture, and Tourism, hosted a free event that featured the legend Randall Ashe accompanied by a select group of musicians and PPAC's House Organist Peter Edwin Krasinski.

### *World Cultures Day – Providence Country Day*

On March 7, 2025, Providence Country Day hosted its annual World Cultures Day, a dynamic event dedicated to celebrating global diversity through a series of hands-on workshops. The day featured a variety of sessions led by both professional and amateur practitioners, each sharing unique aspects of their culture, traditions, and experiences with students and attendees.

Judge Naik served as keynote speaker, representing the Committee on Racial, Ethnic and Fairness in the R.I. Courts. In her address, she spoke to middle-and high school-students, beginning with a Happy Holi greeting. Holi is an Hindu holiday which celebrates the Festival of Colors and the arrival of spring. Judge Naik shared her personal and professional journey, from immigration to the U.S., educational background and her career path to the bench. Judge Naik also reflected on a recent judicial trip to Selma, Alabama, connecting it to the 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Selma's Bloody Sunday. After addressing pre-submitted and live student questions, Judge Naik stayed to engage with students individually before students returned to their classrooms for further discussions and activities.

### *Leadership Academy - Pathways to the Bench Panel Discussion hosted by the R.I. Bar Association*

On March 19, 2025, as part of the Leadership Academy Program, the R.I. Bar Association hosted the “Panel to the Bench” discussion, offering attendees the privilege of hearing from several distinguished judges. Three Committee members, Justice Long and Judges Stuhlsatz and Smith, as well as Judge Rekas Sloan, member of the Committee on DEI, participated in a panel of judges that shared their personal journeys, challenges, and insights into the judicial profession, providing valuable perspectives on the path to the bench. Their experiences shed light on the various ways attorneys can navigate their careers toward judicial service, offering inspiration and practical guidance for those considering this path.

### *Rhode Island Bar Association Committee on DEI*

The Committee continues to work collaboratively with the Bar Association’s Committee on DEI. The Committees held a joint meeting on March 20, 2025.

### *The Legacy Conference by Black Women in Law*

On March 29, 2025, Judge DuBose and Justice Long participated in the inaugural day-long conference hosted by Black Women in Law. Justice Long was a panelist on *Behind the Gavel: Judicial Meet & Greet with The Appellate Project*, and Judge DuBose participated in *Behind the Gavel: Judicial Panel with the Franklin H. Williams Judicial Commission*.

### *Public Inquiries*

The Committee continues to monitor an e-mail address where members of the public are welcome to send their thoughts, suggestions, stories and any other input that they wish to be considered in connection with the Committee’s mission: [CREF@courts.ri.gov](mailto:CREF@courts.ri.gov).

## **A Look Ahead**

- Continuing collaboration with the Committee on DEI of the R.I. Bar Association in pursuit of projects aimed at addressing areas of disparate impact and inequities in our legal system, including the expansion of civics outreach and education to foster better understanding of civic rights and responsibilities and encourage greater civic participation.
- The RWUSL will host its Annual Diversity Symposium Dinner on April 1, 2025 at the Providence Marriott. A premiere networking opportunity to connect with professionals and peers in the legal field. This year’s panel discussion will focus on environmental law.
- The National Consortium on Racial & Ethnic Fairness in the Courts in collaboration with the Rhode Island Judiciary will host its annual conference virtually on April 14-15, 2025. This year’s conference theme is *Resilience Through History: Reflecting on 150 Years of Progress and Setbacks in Racial and Ethnic Fairness*. Click here for the conference [announcement](#).
- The return of the Secretary of State’s Civic Summit will take place on April 15, 2025 and the Committee looks forward to sharing a meal with the students.

- Rhode Island Bar Annual Meeting Workshop: *A Hundred New England Yankee Jurists in Judge Frank M. Johnson's Alabama Court*.
- Continuing collaboration with the Ministers' Alliance of Rhode Island on future outreach and community participation in the Jury Community Listening Sessions.
- Continuing collaboration with Community Outreach Public Relations on future outreach and lunch and learn initiatives.

## **Conclusion**

The Committee wishes to thank the Chief Justice for identifying the need for this important work and his commitment to ensuring that the Committee will succeed in its mission. The Committee looks forward to reporting its progress in the next quarterly report, due on June 30, 2025.

Respectfully submitted,

*The Committee on Racial and Ethnic Fairness in the Rhode Island Courts*

March 31, 2025.