



COMMITTEE ON RACIAL AND ETHNIC FAIRNESS IN THE RHODE ISLAND COURTS

First Quarterly Report: March 31, 2026

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, Associate Justice, 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. 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; resigned effective August 20, 2025)

** 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.

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 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., General Counsel
Alexandra (Lexi) Kriss, Assistant State Court Administrator, Community Outreach & Public Relations
Sara Gilkenson, Diversity Coordinator

Committee Outreach, Engagement & Activities

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

The three-person team from Connecticut continues to spearhead 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.

Justice Riders

Justice Riders 2024 brought together judges and legal professionals on a powerful journey in October 2024 to Montgomery and Selma, Alabama. The self-funded trip explored the nations' painful and persistent legacy of slavery, Jim Crow laws, and the ongoing struggle for civil rights, deepening participants' understanding of how this history informs justice today. Since the journey, Committee members and participants have continued to reflect and share their experiences; the trip has catalyzed other learning opportunities.

- Inspired by the 2024 Justice Riders discussions, several groups have begun working with past participants to plan upcoming educational trips to Alabama. The Student Justice Riders program brought law students from Massachusetts and Rhode Island to Alabama during the week of January 5-11, 2026. Bryan Stevenson, Esq., addressed the group when they visited the Equal Justice Initiative. Students also visited with Judge Myron Thompson and others in the ceremonial Frank M. Johnson, Jr. courtroom at the U.S. District Court for the Middle District of Alabama.





- A student group from Bishop Hendricken High School made a similar student trip in February.
- The Rhode Island chapter of the Federal Bar Association has registered interested attorneys for a trip scheduled in May. Participants will visit Montgomery Square, the newest Equal Justice Initiative site that “explore[s] the Montgomery decade that changed the world from 1955 to 1965.” (On March 25, 2026, Bryan Stevenson spoke with Terry Gross of Fresh Air about the Equal Justice Initiative and Montgomery Square.)

Turning Pages

The fifth season kicked off on January 16, 2025, with a discussion of readings on the autism spectrum disorder: “*Parallel Play*” by Timothy Page, *The New Yorker*, Aug. 13, 2007 and “*Autism Has Always Existed. We Haven’t Always Called It Autism*” by Roy Richard Grinker, the *New York Times* Opinion Guest Essay, Sept. 24, 2025. Participants also read *Dark Work: The Business of Slavery in Rhode Island*, by Professor Christy Clark-Pujara; and *Abundance*, by Ezra Klein and Derek Thompson. On April 17, 2026, participants will watch *Join or Die*, a documentary film centered on America’s civic unraveling and based on the work of Robert Putnam, author of *Bowling Alone*.

Rhode Island Ministers Alliance

On January 19, 2026, Committee members and RIBAR members of the Committee on DEI attended the Ministers' Alliance of Rhode Island's annual MLK Jr.'s Scholarship Breakfast in celebration with scholarship recipients.

Holocaust Remembrance Day, Lunch & Learn

The Committee, in collaboration with the Community Outreach and Public Relations Office and Judiciary's Diversity Office, co-hosted a Lunch & Learn event on January 27, 2026 in tribute of the Holocaust Remembrance Day. The Holocaust Remembrance Day is observed annually on January 27. The virtual event was moderated by Assistant State Court Administrator, Community Outreach and Public Relations Alexandra Kriss, welcoming Brown University Professor, Omer Bartov.

Professor Bartov, is an Israeli-American scholar and Dean's Professor of Holocaust and Genocide Studies at Brown University, widely known for his work on war crimes, interethnic relations, and genocide. His award-winning books include *Anatomy of a Genocide* (2018) and *Genocide, the Holocaust and Israel-Palestine* (2023), and his essays frequently appear in national and international media. His forthcoming book, *Israel: What Went Wrong?*, will be published in April 2026, and he is also the author of the novel *The Butterfly and the Axe* (2023).

Health Justice at Brown School of Public Health, Associate Justice Luis Matos

On March 2, 2026, Judge Matos participated in a panel discussion before a class on Health Justice at the Brown School of Public Health. The focus of the discussion was incarceration and health. Other panelists included physicians specializing in mental health and addiction services supporting at-risk populations and a community health worker. Judge Matos was asked to participate and discuss relevant issues from the perspective of a judge and how issues of health and addiction are considered and factored into judicial decision making.

Rhode Island General Assembly, House Civics Presentation

On March 10, 2026, Speaker Shekarchi welcomed the Committee in the House Lounge, where members participated in [a conversation on civics education and engagement](#), revisiting the successful costs and fines program and discussing the importance of jury service in a people-driven government.

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, Lunch & Learn which was rescheduled on March 12th due the historic Blizzard of 2026. The informal virtual session featured Debbie Suggs, a Director of Special Populations in the Office of Admission and an adjunct instructor at College Unbound in Providence. A lifelong history enthusiast, Ms. Suggs regularly lectures and presents workshops on genealogy, historic cemeteries, Rhode Island history, and folklore. Ms. Suggs shared her recent discoveries of slaves buried in historic cemeteries in Rhode Island and her genealogy research of the individuals diverse stories.

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

On March 12, 2026, 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. Tamera Rocha, Director of the Access to Justice Office and a Leadership

Academy graduate, moderated the discussion panel. Committee members Justice Long and Judge Cardoza, Family Court Associate Justice Elizabeth Ortiz, 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.

RWUSL Annual Diversity Law Symposium Dinner, Expanding The Voices in Civic Engagement

The Annual Diversity Law Symposium Dinner, hosted by the Office of Student Leadership, Access, and Engagement took place on March 23, 2026. Dr. Taino J. Palermo, an alum and faculty member of RWUSL, moderated the discussion with Committee members, Justice Long and U.S. District Court for the District of R.I., District Judge Melissa DuBose, along with RWUSL 2L, Julia Ortiz, about civic participation, representation, and the barriers that have limited full participation in American democracy and the practice of law.

Law Enforcement Officers' Due Process, Accountability, and Transparency Act

Pursuant to the Law Enforcement Officers' Due Process, Accountability, and Transparency Act, the Committee[±] presented to Chief Justice Suttell final recommendations of attorney-applicants interested in participating in hearing panels to evaluate alleged misconduct of law enforcement officers.

[±]*Justice Long did not participate.*

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.

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.
- Continuing collaboration with the Northeast Region Workgroup for Racial Justice Education.
- Continuing collaboration with Community Outreach Public Relations on future outreach and lunch and learn initiatives, including a learning opportunity concerning the Indigent Cemetery Project at the Rhode Island Training School.
- Continuing collaboration with the Jewish Community Center as part of the Leadership Institute for Teens (LIFT) program.

- Continuing collaborations with the following on future civics education outreach: Rhode Island Foundation, Secretary of State's office, and Girl Scouts of Southeastern New England.

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, 2026.

Respectfully submitted,

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

March 31, 2026.