



COMMITTEE ON RACIAL AND ETHNIC FAIRNESS IN THE RHODE ISLAND COURTS

Fourth Quarterly Report: December 31, 2025

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; 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 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.

RIBAR New Member Reception Panel, From the Bench: Navigating Practice & Perception

On October 8, 2025, the New Member Reception of the Rhode Island Bar Association extended an invitation to three Committee members to serve as panelists: Justice Long, Judges Christopher K. Smith, and Lia N. Stuhlsatz. The program held at the Bar Association Headquarters featured a moderated discussion with the judges and Georgi Vogel-Rosen, Chief Staff Attorney of the Trial Law Clerk Department, aimed at providing new attorneys with practical, real-world guidance on courtroom professionalism, making strong first impressions, building early confidence, and navigating implicit bias.

R.I. Monthly 2025 Christiana Carteaux Bannister Award Reception

The 2025 Christiana Carteaux Bannister Award Reception to honor Rhode Islanders who promote diversity and advance equity in Rhode Island was held on October 9, 2025 at the Roger Williams Botanical Garden. This year marked Rhode Island Monthly's fifth year presenting the awards in partnership with the Rhode Island Foundation. The corresponding Rhode Island Monthly article recognized the work of the Committee concerning the costs and fines initiative. James Monteiro, Founder and Executive Director of Campus Reentry, and Nick Horton, co-

Executive Director of Open Doors, attended the reception along with Justice Long, Judge Matos, Judge Woodcock Pfeiffer, and Magistrate Goulart.



2025 Connecticut Diversity Week

The Connecticut Judicial Branch invited Justice Long to deliver the keynote address for the October 27, 2025 Kick-Off of the 2025 Diversity Week, the Branch's annual program dedicated to promoting diversity, equity, and inclusion. Chief Justice Raheem Mullins and Judge Norma Sanchez-Figueroa welcomed more than 150 attendees to the event, which opened the 12th session of the Branch's Diversity Week. The theme was *Your Place in the Tapestry: How Diversity, Equity & Inclusion Benefit Everyone*. Justice Long spoke about how Connecticut judges (and judges with ties to Connecticut) have been working to help all people to fulfill the American Dream over the last 250 years, regardless of race, gender, or ethnicity. As part of her address, she spoke about the Committee's work and mission and played the When Justice Works video that features [Judge Matos](#) – a judge with ties to UConn's law school.



RWUSL Women in Robes Celebration

The annual celebration, sponsored by the Roger Williams University School of Law, Office of the Dean and Women's Law Society, was held on October 28, 2025, and brought together members of the judiciary for a networking event. The program featured remarks by Judge DuBose as well as from the Honorable Alice B. Gibney.

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 will bring law students from Massachusetts and Rhode Island to Alabama during the first week of January. Bryan Stevenson, Esq., is expected to address the group when they visit the Equal Justice Initiative.
- A student group from Bishop Hendricken High School is exploring a similar student trip for late February. On October 30, 2025, Chief Judge John J. McConnell, Jr., Justice Melissa Long, and retired Justice Francis X. Flaherty attended a meet-and-greet at the school to provide information and answer questions about the trip.
- The Rhode Island chapter of the Federal Bar Association is registering interested attorneys for a trip scheduled in May. Judges in Iowa are organizing a comparable visit, and the Connecticut Judicial Branch has expressed interest in a possible trip.

RIDE Law Related Education Program Announcement at the State House

On November 3, 2025, RIDE in partnership with Secretary of State Gregg M. Amore and R.I. Bar Association President, Patrick A. Guida, hosted a public campaign at the R.I. State House to raise awareness of the civics and law-related educational programs leveraging their outreach networks to expand access across all districts. Justice Long was invited to offer remarks about the legal community's dedication to engaging, educating, and empowering young people who will play a pivotal role in our democracy moving forward into the future. She highlighted Constitution Day and Law Day as successful collaborations with the R.I. Bar Association and educators throughout Rhode Island.

Constitution Day

Constitution Day is celebrated nationally each year on September 17 to commemorate the signing of the United States Constitution in 1787. Due to Rhode Island school scheduling, this year's Constitution Day programming took place on November 14. The initiative is a collaboration between the Committee, the Judiciary's Community Outreach and Public Relations Office, the Rhode Island Bar Association's Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Committee, and the Office of the Secretary of State.

Piloted in 2023, the program continues to expand its reach, bringing legal education directly into classrooms across the state—particularly to students who may not regularly engage with lawyers or judicial officers. This year’s presentations focused on the First Amendment, examining its intersection with social media, artificial intelligence, and the role of media in the spread and verification of information.

Committee members participated in several of the 25 presentations delivered across 14 public and private middle and high schools. The Block Island School and the Rhode Island Training School both participated for the first time. Pictured below is one of two presentations that took place at Shea High School.



ICE Detention of Judicial Intern

On November 20, 2025, ICE agents wrongfully detained a high school student intern in the Superior Court. The Hon. Joseph McBurney, a Superior Court judge, intervened and, following verification of the intern’s information, the agents released him. Chief Justice Suttell issued a statement in response to the ICE detention of the judiciary intern:

This egregious incident underscores both the community’s and the Judiciary’s concerns about how ICE is conducting its operations in Rhode Island,” said Rhode Island Supreme Court Chief Justice Paul A. Suttell. “Given this climate, the Judiciary understands the call to implement remote hearings in Providence County, and beyond. The need to balance constitutional considerations, the public’s right of access, and the integrity of testimonial and evidentiary processes do not allow for a fully virtual court system. What occurred today, however, reinforces the Judiciary’s need to focus on ways to enhance access to virtual hearings and to educate the public as to how to request such hearings. The courts are here to serve the people and the Judiciary remains steadfast in preserving and augmenting access to justice for all persons.

The statement also highlighted contact information for the Judiciary’s Access to Justice Office Resource Center, which assists individuals who seek remote services, accessibility

accommodations, and language services. The Committee worked with the Judiciary's Community Outreach and Public Relations Office to assist with disseminating the statement to community partners.

Lunch & Learn Series Celebrates Native American History Month: Out of sight, out of mind: Reckoning with a Monumental Narrative

The Committee, in collaboration with the Office Community Outreach and Public Relations, and Diversity Office, co-hosted its annual presentation of Native American History Month on November 25, 2025. Judge Hastings introduced the featured speaker, Professor Mack Scott of Slavery and Justice, and Director of Undergraduate Studies at the Brown University Ruth J. Simmons Center for the Study of Slavery and Justice. Professor Scott, an ancestor of the Narragansett Indian Tribe, centers his teaching on the experiences of Indigenous communities and other marginalized groups, emphasizing community engagement in his courses. His research focuses on the history and ongoing presence of Native peoples in the Dawnland (New England), and his current work traces the continuance of the Narragansett Nation from the pre-colonial times to the present.

The 160th Anniversary of the Ratification of the 13th Amendment to the United States Constitution

On December 3 and 4, 2025, the Committee co-sponsored (with the United States District Court for the District of Rhode Island, the United States District Court for the District of Massachusetts, the Flaschner Judicial Institute, the Ruth J. Simmons Center for the Study of Slavery & Justice at Brown University, The Pell Center for International Relations and Public Policy at Salve Regina, the R.I. Chapter of the Federal Bar Association, and the Justice Harry J. Elam Judicial Conference) a commemorative event in recognition of the landmark amendment to the United States Constitution that officially abolished slavery in the United States. *The 160th Anniversary of the 13th Amendment: The Undeniable History – Remembering, Reckoning, Renewing*, opened on December 3, with a screening of *Who We Are: A Chronicle of Racism in America* at the Jane Pickens Theatre & Event Center in Newport, where Rhode Island Historian Laureate Keith Stokes delivered remarks.

A day-long conference held at Salve Regina University followed on December 4; it offered judges, attorneys, law clerks, legal scholars, law students, and community members an in-depth exploration of the historical forces that shaped the amendment, its limitations, and the judiciary's past and present responsibility in advancing its unrealized promise. Professor Sherrilyn Ifill gave the opening lecture, [The 13th Amendment: How Its History Shapes Our Democracy, the Pursuit of Justice and Equality](#). A panel discussion regarding [New England's Slavery Ties and Why They Matter](#) featured Professor Christy Clark-Pujara, Historian Traci Picard, and Kyera Singleton, Ph.D. [Voices of the Enslaved - Soul Value and the Power of Art](#) followed. After lunch and conversation at Ochre Court, Professor Michele Goodwin, Thomas Koonce, and Akeia de Barros Gomes, Ph.D., discussed [Impacts on Justice, Sentencing, and Society](#). [The Reckoning of Slavery: Discussing Legacy and Justice](#), the closing session, was a conversation with the Honorable Myron Thompson, Senior District Court Judge at the United States District Court for the Middle District of Alabama.

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

Pursuant to the Law Enforcement Officers' Due Process, Accountability, and Transparency Act, the General Counsel has convened a subcommittee[±] to evaluate attorney-applicants who seek to participate in future hearing panels to evaluate alleged misconduct of law enforcement officers. The DEI Committee of the Rhode Island Bar Association reviewed attorney-applicants and the Bar Association submitted recommendations to the Committee. The subcommittee (made up of Judges Luis Matos, Christopher Smith, Lia Stuhlsatz and Magistrate Alan Goulart) reviewed the applications and concurred with the Bar Association recommendations. The full Committee will meet in early January to vote on the subcommittee recommendations. Once the full Committee votes, the Committee will present final recommendations to Chief Justice Suttell.

[±]*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.
- *Turning Pages*: The fifth season kicks 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. Thereafter, participants will read *Dark Work: The Business of Slavery in Rhode Island*, by Professor Christy Clark-Pujara; and *Abundance*, by Ezra Klein and Derek Thompson, a book dedicated to the idea that to have the future of better lives we want, we need to build and invent more of what we need. The fifth season ends with a screening of *Join or Die*, a documentary film directed by Pete Davis and Rebecca Davis centered on America’s civic unraveling and based on the work of Robert Putnam, author of *Bowling Alone*.

- Judges Panel on Leadership and Human Rights as part of the Leadership Institute for Teens (LIFT) program scheduled in January 2026, at the Jewish Community Center in Providence.
- Rhode Island Ministers Alliance Annual Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., Scholarship Breakfast on January 19, 2026.

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 March 31, 2026.

Respectfully submitted,

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

December 31, 2025.