

# STATE OF THE JUDICIARY ADDRESS

**CHIEF JUSTICE S. BERNARD GOODWYN**  
**SUPREME COURT OF VIRGINIA**  
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Good morning, justices and judges of the Commonwealth and honored guests. Welcome to the 2025 Judicial Conference of Virginia. I am Bernard Goodwyn, Chief Justice of the Supreme Court of Virginia.

It is good to be here with all of you. I am grateful that this conference enables us to meet together, share ideas and best practices, and build relationships with each other. I hope you take advantage of this opportunity to learn from each other, and I am sure that you will find the conference's educational programs, provided through the Educational Services Department, to be insightful and meaningful, also.

I am honored to address you today about the state of the judiciary in the Commonwealth of Virginia—for the fourth time now. Like Yogi Berra said, "It's like déjà vu all over again."

I am proud to say that the state of our judiciary remains strong, and I know that the reason why it remains strong is because of the continuing dedication and hard work of all our justices, judges, and staff. Thank you.

I was given some general statistics for the number of cases before courts of the Commonwealth in the 2024 calendar year. General district courts saw over 2.1 million cases filed, and concluded over two million. Juvenile and domestic relations district courts saw over 430,000 cases filed, and concluded over 435,000. In the circuit courts, almost 400,000 cases were filed, and close to the same number were concluded. The Court of Appeals of Virginia processed 2,002 cases. And the Supreme Court of Virginia processed 1,110.

The members and staff of our judicial branch of government have done a lot of work this past year. And in each one of those cases, we as judges were the ones tasked with protecting the

rule of law, administering justice, and protecting individual rights. The work we do is imperative for the functioning of our society. I urge each of you to continue your work secure in the knowledge of how important it is. We must never forget the extraordinary responsibility of sitting where we sit, and we must always strive for excellence, and continue in our efforts to improve the operation and functionality of our branch of government.

As you all know, the Supreme Court of Virginia is responsible for overseeing the administration of the entire judicial system of Virginia, including budgeting matters, staffing, and resource allocation. We are required to ensure the effective functioning of the judicial system, and to maintain the public trust and confidence in the courts.

I would like to acknowledge, with great appreciation, my fellow justices on the Supreme Court of Virginia: Justice Cleo E. Powell, Justice D. Arthur Kelsey, Justice Stephen R. McCullough, Justice Teresa M. Chafin, Justice Wesley G. Russell, Jr., and Justice Thomas P. Mann. I am deeply grateful for their advice and support as we work together to guide the judicial branch of Virginia's government.

The work that the Supreme Court of Virginia does regarding the operation of the judicial branch of government in Virginia would be impossible without the advice and contributions of our Executive Secretary, Karl R. Hade. The hard work done by Mr. Hade and our staff members who work in the Office of the Executive Secretary is essential to the operation of the judicial branch of government, and I very much appreciate their hard work and excellence in carrying out their responsibilities.

In the last year, several members of the Office of the Executive Secretary retired after long and distinguished careers. Steven Dalle Mura, who served for over 30 years as Director of Legal Research, retired in November of 2024. Mike Riggs, who served with distinction as the

Director of the Department of Judicial Information Technology, retired in December. And Eddie Macon, who served as Assistant Executive Secretary and Legal Counsel for the Supreme Court of Virginia, retired in March. All three of these talented individuals have served the judiciary with excellence. Their retirements are well-deserved, and I wanted to publicly thank them for their service.

Eileen Longenecker has been named as the new Legal Research Director, Joby Knuth has stepped into the role of Director of the Department of Judicial Information Technology, and Ron Regnery is now Assistant Executive Secretary and Legal Counsel. We are glad to have these individuals on our team, and they have already done outstanding work for our judiciary.

I would like to talk with you now about some of the many things our judiciary has been doing this year in addition to deciding cases, such as providing the training, support, and technology that our judiciary needs to maintain its strength and excellence. I want to make sure that you are well informed about what we have accomplished since we last met and our continuing efforts to improve going forward.

We know that education, training, and support for judges is critical to improving the administration of justice in our courts. One of the reasons the state of our judiciary remains strong is because of our commitment to providing quality training and support, for not just judges, but also for staff and others who work in the judicial branch of government.

One avenue of support for judges is the voluntary Peer-to-Peer Coaching Program. This program gives judges, in any phase of their career, a chance to confidentially speak with a judicial coach regarding issues both in and out of the courtroom. Through the use of a trained coach, judges may take advantage of having a sounding board to collaborate on ideas or issues and to enhance judicial performance and occupational satisfaction. The program is confidential,

non-punitive, and not affiliated with the Judicial Performance Evaluation Program or the Virginia Judges and Lawyers Assistance Program.

The Peer-to-Peer Coaching Program has received favorable reviews thus far, with judges sharing that it has improved their performance, job satisfaction, and overall well-being. I encourage you to consider taking advantage of peer-to-peer coaching as a means to improving both your personal and professional well-being. If you are interested in being paired with a judicial coach, please reach out to our Wellness Coordinator, Hetal Challa.

On the topic of judicial wellness and support for our judges, I want to remind you of the Virginia Judges & Lawyers Assistance Program. It offers no-cost, confidential, and non-disciplinary assistance to judges, lawyers, and other legal professionals, who may be dealing with, or at risk for, mental health challenges including chronic stress, depression, compassion fatigue, and substance abuse. The Virginia Judges & Lawyers Assistance Program is available by phone 24 hours a day, as well as by email. There are also several support groups that meet across the Commonwealth. I encourage each of you to keep this resource in mind, and to take action if you think that getting help, or even just having a sounding board, would be at all beneficial. The nature of our jobs can create a host of mental health challenges. Remember that your wellness is of the utmost importance in your ability to do your jobs, and getting help early is a big factor in recovery and success.

I would also like to mention the Judicial Performance Evaluation Program. While perhaps this is not most judge's favorite topic, the program is required by the General Assembly, and we need to make sure that the program works as well as it possibly can. At the upcoming 2025 Annual Meeting of the Virginia State Bar in June, Justice Powell and staff from the Judicial Performance Evaluation Program will be on a panel called "Rating Scales and the Scales of

Justice: The Ethics and Importance of Virginia’s Judicial Performance Evaluations.” The intent of this panel is to address a large number of attorneys about the importance of attorney participation in the judicial evaluation process and to encourage attorneys to complete the surveys, as well as stress the importance of civility and adherence to ethical responsibilities when providing feedback to judges. Additionally, several similar presentations were given to local bar groups last year about the importance of attorney participation, which will improve the accuracy and value of the survey results.

The Department of Judicial Services continues its work to improve outcomes through the growth and support of specialty dockets. Currently, there are 91 operational specialty dockets, including 60 Recovery Courts, 21 Behavioral Health Dockets, and 10 Veterans Treatment Courts. Three hundred sixty-five participants graduated from these programs in the past year.

Over the last year, the Department of Judicial Services’ Specialty Dockets Team delivered 272 hours of training to 753 attendees across 86 events, including discussion of issues such as trauma-informed care, mental health first aid, and implementation training. The team also partnered with *All Rise* to train over 50 behavioral health professionals at a specialized Treatment Provider training. This year’s Specialty Dockets Training, supported by a Highway Safety grant, will be held August 4–6 in Harrisonburg, under the theme “*Celebrating Connections, Inspiring Change.*”

Also this fall, the Department of Judicial Services’ Domestic Violence Services Team will host the National Council of Juvenile and Family Court Judges, which will provide training sessions regarding “*Enhancing Judicial Skills in Domestic Violence Cases.*” This interactive, in-depth training is tailored for Virginia judges handling domestic violence matters.

Another help in domestic violence matters is the Hope Card Program. This program assists victims of abuse by providing them with wallet-sized cards that contain essential information about final protective orders issued in Virginia. In 2024, we saw a 21% increase in the number of cards produced, and that is in large part due to the assistance of clerks of court. The program has grown with court engagement, from 46 cards issued in 2017 when the program began in Pulaski, to 2,422 cards issued statewide in 2024, just two years since the program was written into a statute.

The Department of Judicial Services' Dispute Resolution Services Division continues its mission to expand access to justice through the promotion of alternative dispute resolution. General District Court referrals to mediation are rebounding after COVID-related declines, thanks to strong collaboration among Division staff, mediation coordinators, and local judges. Given the high agreement rates in mediated cases, this growth significantly benefits both the parties involved and court dockets.

In 2021, the Virginia General Assembly took a transformative step in the Commonwealth's approach to criminal record transparency. It passed legislation that establishes a comprehensive framework for the automatic and petition-based sealing of police and court records for certain offenses—including acquittals, deferred dispositions, nolle prossed or otherwise dismissed charges, and specific convictions. The Department of Judicial Services and Department of Judicial Information Technology are actively working to implement this major legislation regarding the sealing of certain criminal records.

With an effective date of July 1, 2026, the legislation provides the Office of the Executive Secretary critical time to build and implement the necessary infrastructure. This includes developing new procedures, delivering training programs, and enhancing systems across

all levels of Virginia’s judiciary. The scope of this initiative is significant. It introduces entirely new workflows and requirements for general district, juvenile and domestic relations, and circuit courts, while also expanding existing processes at the circuit court level.

To support this transition, the Department of Judicial Services will provide extensive training—both virtually and in person—to ensure that court clerks across the Commonwealth are prepared to navigate the complexities of record sealing. This training is essential to preserve the integrity of sealed cases and to ensure these records are properly blocked from public access, including removal from the Online Case Information System.

Although a major focus has been on criminal record sealing implementation, the Departments of Judicial Services and Judicial Information Technology have also made significant progress on other court system improvements in 2024. These include the Guardianship and Probate Management System, which is a comprehensive application integrated into the statewide Circuit Court Case Management System. This initiative reflects our commitment to strengthening protections for vulnerable individuals under guardianship and improving the oversight and administration of guardianship and probate matters across the Commonwealth. The Guardianship and Probate Management System is designed to enhance monitoring, ensure policy adherence, and streamline reporting by leveraging technology to improve case management, increase transparency, and reduce the administrative burden on court staff. Over the past year, significant progress has been made in collaboration with our circuit court clerk user group. Their feedback has been instrumental in shaping a user-focused system that meets the operational needs of Virginia’s courts.

Another system development is an automated program to identify and expunge qualifying dismissed or nonsuited unlawful detainers. From July to December 2024, 15,444 cases were

expunged, with a total of 32,000 processed to date—streamlining court operations and reducing burdens on petitioners.

Other recent system improvements include enhancing the case management system to improve tracking of self-represented litigants, adding court interpreters to the Electronic Voucher Payment System, and extending online case record access to substitute judges and caseworkers in the Department of Social Services, to improve service coordination and judicial continuity.

Other system improvements are also currently underway. One is an expansion of the e-Filing system to include warrants in debt, unlawful detainers, garnishments, and protective orders. The goal is to enable direct electronic filing and eliminate manual data entry. Additionally, a new pilot program will support courts in expanding remote hearing access, using Polycom and WebEx platforms. As part of the pilot program, twelve courts across all levels will receive training, new equipment, and resources to enhance public access to hearings, where appropriate.

Another notable technological improvement this year is HAWKS—the Human resources, Accounting, Warehousing, Knowledge System. A contract was awarded for this project in late 2024. Its purpose is to modernize the systems used by the Office of the Executive Secretary and courts for human capital management, accounting and budgeting, warehousing, and inventory. HAWKS is replacing individual accounting, human resources, procurement, and inventory systems that were implemented in the early 90's. The current legacy environment is nearing or beyond its end-of-life. It is becoming cost prohibitive to maintain, requires significant manual intervention, does not provide users a seamless experience, and presents significant gaps in meeting future needs.

The new system will greatly reduce manual processes for the administrative functions of the Office of the Executive Secretary and bring new functionality to our court employees. For example, court employees will be able to submit travel vouchers online via a personal computer or mobile phone, and clerks will be able to order supplies and forms online, just to name a couple of the online features. The human resources module of HAWKS is scheduled to go live in October, and the accounting module will go live sometime around next April. The Department of Judicial Information Technology has created an intranet site with additional information on the HAWKS project.

Along with all of the technological and system improvements, the Department of Judicial Information Technology continues its constant work in improving our network and systems to stay ahead of ever-evolving cyber security threats.

Regarding security measures, this spring, the Department of Judicial Services released updated editions of the *Security and Preparedness Manual* and the *Virginia Trial Court Facilities Guidelines Manual*, which now include guidance for Magistrate Offices. A new statewide Security Committee will be formed to support ongoing updates to court security protocols. We extend our appreciation to the judges, clerks, magistrates, sheriffs, and county administrators who contributed their time and expertise to these important resources. Their input has been invaluable in enhancing safety and security across the Commonwealth.

The Court Improvement Program in the Office of the Executive Secretary has also done a great deal of meaningful work this past year.

Court Improvement Program initiatives and projects in the past year included sponsoring educational events for judges and child dependency attorneys. In carrying out its function of maintaining current, online lists of qualified guardians ad litem for children and incapacitated

persons, the Court Improvement Program responded to over 675 telephone and email inquiries from guardians ad litem and the public during the past year.

Another important part of keeping our judiciary strong is a commitment to improving the public's access to our courts. Our courts must be accessible to the public for the public to effectively use and trust the courts.

The Supreme Court of Virginia's Access to Justice Commission, co-chaired by Justice Steve McCullough and John Whitfield of Blue Ridge Legal Services, continues its work to coordinate and promote access to justice efforts across the Commonwealth. In 2022, the Access to Justice Commission launched the Pro Bono Recognition Project. Work is underway on the fourth annual iteration of this project, which recognizes lawyers engaged in closing the access to justice gap by giving of their time, talents, and resources.

Additionally, the Access to Justice Commission has partnered with the Virginia State Bar to conduct a series of Listening Tours in legal deserts across the Commonwealth, to connect with communities and gather valuable information about the state of justice in the Commonwealth. The first Listening Tour was hosted in April.

The Access to Justice Commission will also be working with the Code Commission to simplify language in the Code, as part of its efforts to overhaul court forms to a "plain English" format.

To advance accessibility in the courts, the Department of Judicial Services' Foreign Language Services Division is streamlining the interpreter request process through a new scheduling method and the creation of a bench card and brochure that outline available services. While these materials are not intended as official court submission forms, they serve as helpful guides for users. Foreign Language Services is also actively translating the most commonly used

forms into Spanish and other languages to improve accessibility for individuals with limited English proficiency.

To further enhance language access, Foreign Language Services has implemented a more rigorous vetting process for court interpreters, evaluating not only language skills but also subject-matter expertise, ethics, and courtroom readiness. In addition, the division is developing updated guidelines and best practices to address evolving needs in multilingual communication and to promote consistency across courts. These efforts demonstrate a continued commitment to fairness, inclusivity, and meaningful access to justice for all court users.

Our judiciary is dedicated to expanding meaningful court access to all. That is one of the reasons why our judiciary is strong.

Now for the budget.

First, in the area of compensation, the state budget includes a 3% raise for all employees, including judges, effective June 10, 2025, which will be included in your July 1, 2025 paycheck. In addition, all employees will receive a 1.5% bonus check to be paid on June 16, 2025, if they were employed on or before February 25, 2025 and remained employed through May 25, 2025.

Last fall, the Committee on District Courts recommended an additional Juvenile and Domestic Relations judgeship in the 2<sup>nd</sup> J&DR district and additional General District judgeships in the 9<sup>th</sup> and 31<sup>st</sup> districts. Funding was included for all three judgeships, and judges were elected to fill these positions effective July 1, 2025.

Over the past several years, our budgetary focus has been on district court compensation and staffing, and we have made great strides in both of these areas.

This year, the focus of our budget process is a number of Information Technology priorities.

The criminal records sealing legislation that was originally scheduled to become effective this July 1 has been delayed until July 1, 2026, at the request of the State Police. This has been one of the most impactful pieces of legislation we have ever had to implement, affecting all of our major systems and requiring thousands of hours of work over multiple years at a very high cost. With numerous changes to the original bill, our actual costs were higher than originally projected. Therefore, we requested and received an additional \$2.9 million to offset this shortfall.

As we continue to roll out more public-facing applications, such as e-filing for pro se litigants, we need to procure an enterprise-wide identity management solution. We requested and received \$1.5 million in funding for this application, which will enable us to better identify and validate who is accessing our systems which will also provide additional levels of protection against an increasing number of cyberattacks.

In regard to cybersecurity, OES has a team participating in a multiday cybersecurity workshop, sponsored by the National Center of State Courts, to learn from the states that have suffered through a cyberattack on their judicial systems. The most recent being the Los Angeles County court system. Please stay up to date on your judicial security training as we are experiencing an increased number of attempted attacks from foreign actors.

Over the past several years, a number of our major IT vendors have significantly increased our licensing and subscription fees, which, combined with a decline in revenue from the Court Technology Fund, has created a strain on our IT budget. We requested additional funding to offset some of this deficit. Although we did not receive the \$5 million requested, we did receive \$2 million to help with these increased licensing and support costs.

As many of you know, after 2010, the General Assembly started making changes to the judicial retirement plan for newly elected judges, doing away with Plan 1 and creating Plan 2 and eventually moving to a hybrid plan in 2014. The hybrid retirement plan modified not only the service credit multiplier based on a judge's age at appointment, but also changed what is called the VRS multiplier, from 1.7 to 1.0, which significantly reduced the defined portion of the retirement benefit. We have worked with the General Assembly over the past several years to address this concern. In fact, bills were introduced in each of the past two legislative sessions to try to address improving the retirement plan, particularly for judges coming on the bench later in their careers. Unfortunately, those bills failed to pass. One of the sticking points has been trying to not only improve the plan but make it retroactive for judges currently in one of the hybrid plans.

I am happy to report that SB 950, supported by both the Senate and the House, was signed by Governor Youngkin, and effective July 1, 2026, it will allow actively employed judges, elected on or after January 1, 2014, to become members of the defined benefit Judicial Retirement Plan 2, for service earned on or after July 1, 2026.

Some judges may have served in various positions covered by different VRS and JRS plans. At retirement, service credit will be calculated using the appropriate benefit formula for each plan under which you were covered when the service was earned and then added together not to exceed 78% of average final compensation.

The Office of the Executive Secretary has sent out an email with examples of how your benefit will be calculated with this change. The email helps to explain how these calculations will work. There are also representatives from VRS here at this conference, who should be able to help you as well. I appreciate the efforts of our staff and that of the General Assembly for this

change, and I would like to give a shout out to several judges, such as Judge Tyneka Flythe, Judge Holly Smith, and Judge Joseph Lindsey, as well as to the Association of District Court Judges and Judge Vanessa Jones, Judge Lucas Hobbs, Judge Cheryl Wilson, Judge Susan Earman, and all the others who were helpful in our efforts to get this retirement modification legislation passed. This change will substantially increase the retirement pensions of judges and will hopefully expand the pool of attorneys considering becoming a judge.

I would like to thank Karl Hade, Eddie Macon, Ron Regnery, Alisa W. Padden and the Legislative and Public Relations Department, and the rest of our staff for their work in ensuring that the judiciary receives the resources and funding it needs for us to serve the Commonwealth to our fullest potential.

In conclusion, I would like to thank Caroline Kirkpatrick and the Educational Services Department, who have again done an outstanding job in organizing this conference and in bringing us helpful and important material. I hope you all will greatly benefit from their hard work.

As many of you probably know, I will be retiring from the bench at the end of this year, after three decades of public service in the judiciary. It has been the honor of my life to serve the people of Virginia, and especially to have the opportunity to be the Chief Justice of the Supreme Court of Virginia, and to be given the opportunity and responsibility to uphold the Constitution and laws that form the bedrock of our Commonwealth and our nation.

As I reflect on my journey—from being a working class kid in Southampton County, the grandson of poor sharecroppers and a first generation high school graduate, to being the Chief Justice of the Supreme Court of Virginia—I find myself more convinced than ever of the

singular importance of the rule of law, and of the solemn obligation we, as judges, bear in protecting it.

We often speak of the “rule of law” in reverent tones—as a principle both sacred and self-evident. But in these times, when institutions are challenged, when public trust in our systems is tested, and when the line between fact and opinion is blurred by noise and misinformation, it is important to remind ourselves exactly what the rule of law means—and why it matters.

At its core, the rule of law is the simple yet profound idea that no person is above the law, and no person is beneath its protection. It means that laws, not individuals, govern our society. That justice is administered through fair procedures, in impartial courts, by judges who apply the law faithfully and without fear or favor.

We must remember that the rule of law is not a naturally occurring condition. It is not inevitable. It is something that must be cultivated, defended, renewed, and protected by each generation, if it is to survive.

The challenges to the rule of law today are real. Courts are often drawn into the center of political storms. Legal processes are mischaracterized and misunderstood. Judges are criticized not for failing to follow the law, but for following it when the result is unpopular. The public’s confidence in the justice system is fragile, and in some communities, it has been frayed by generations of unequal treatment.

We must know and demonstrate that the rule of law is not about partisanship; it is about principle. That courts are not political battlegrounds; they are places of refuge where facts matter and rights are protected. That our justice system, while imperfect, can only be made more perfect by those who believe in it and are willing to work to improve it.

In this great effort, judges have a critical role. It is in our courtrooms where the rule of law is most directly experienced. The rule of law is established in the eviction proceeding that is handled according to the law, in the small business that gets a fair hearing in a lawsuit brought by a large company, in the defendant from a marginalized community who is presumed innocent, and in the victim who sees justice served when a perpetrator is convicted and sentenced, but only after a fair trial.

When I was a boy growing up in rural Southampton County, I did not know much about the law. I had little idea about what a judge did, but I certainly saw that many people were treated unfairly.

What I did know and what I was taught is that fairness mattered; that hard work and truthfulness mattered; that treating people with kindness and with dignity mattered.

I carry those lessons with me still. They have shaped how I view the law—not as a tool of the powerful, but as a promise to the people. A promise that their rights will be honored. A promise that their voices will be heard. A promise that their humanity will be respected, and that they will be treated fairly under the law.

That is the rule of law. That is what it is all about. And that is what we, as judges, are charged with protecting. It is an enormous task and a tremendous responsibility; one which can never be taken lightly.

As I prepare to step away from the bench, I have my concerns. But I am also filled with hope because I know that the rule of law in our Commonwealth is valued and actively protected by judges who strive to do justice without fear and without seeking favor, and who seek to apply the law equally to everyone. I am filled with hope because of you.

Again, I would like to thank all of you for your invaluable service to the Commonwealth. Thanks to the efforts of our justices, judges, and judicial branch staff, the state of our judiciary is strong.

Thank you for this opportunity to speak with you, and it has been my honor to serve you as Chief Justice of the Supreme Court of Virginia.