

**Remarks by Chief Judge Anna Blackburne-Rigsby
President, Conference of Chief Justices
As delivered to the House of Delegates
2024 ABA Midyear Meeting
February 5, 2024**

Thank you, **Gene (Vance)**, for that warm introduction.

I would also like to thank President (**Mary**) **Smith**,
President-elect (William) **Bay**, and all members of the
House of Delegates.

It is my honor as the president of the Conference of
Chief Justices to continue the tradition of keeping our lines
of communication open with you, the leaders of the
American Bar Association. Just last week, President Smith
joined CCJ at **our** midyear meeting, hosted in Nashville. In
her remarks, she spoke of shared concerns about attacks
on judges, the future of the legal profession, and AI.

By making this important time to hear about each other's priorities, opportunities and challenges, the ABA and CCJ reaffirm that we are stronger when we work **together** in the pursuit of the fair and impartial courts and the efficient administration of justice.

Our nation's courts are increasingly a fulcrum in society's daily challenges. Our courts must resolve both major policy issues—which presidential candidates shall appear on the ballot, and which shall not—while at the same time serving, as many have noted, as the *de facto* mental health care providers for far too many Americans who can't get the help they need elsewhere.

It is difficult to recall a time in recent memory when courts, both state and federal, were in the headlines of newspapers and websites as frequently as they are today.

This speaks to the hard truth that in our democratic society, when we do not agree—which is frequent!—it is **courts** that we trust to hear the facts, apply the law and provide resolution to the dispute.

It is courts that protect our cherished civil liberties.

It is courts that protect us from overreach by the state, or malfeasance by the corporation.

It is courts that hold the balance.

For these reasons, I ask you to join me today in considering how the work you do every day—whether it's in your firm, or in your community, or here with your colleagues at the ABA—can contribute to maintaining and increasing the public's trust and confidence that our citizens place in the judicial branch of government.

Some of this work is already underway with Law Day 2024 activities focused on “[Voices of Democracy](#),” along with the important work of the [ABA Task Force for American Democracy](#) and its charge to inspire and mobilize members of the legal profession to actively support and defend American democracy, the Constitution and the rule of law.

For years, the National Center for State Courts has surveyed public perceptions about the courts. And while the courts remain the most trusted branch of government, that trust in the courts, as in most public institutions, is declining. As CCJ president, it is my top priority to stop this decline. To kick off this effort, last fall we worked with a public opinion research firm to conduct focus groups to

better understand public attitudes and perceptions about state courts.

We found that many of those interviewed believe that there are two systems of justice in America—one for the rich and the powerful, and one for everyone else. This cynicism exists across all political and demographic groups—people now feel like they are on the outside of the system, unable or unsure of how, or where, to enter. We must focus on restoring faith that when we say ***equal justice for all***, we truly mean those words and the public perceives that we are turning those words into actions.

The interviews also identified interest in how courts help address societal issues like housing, mental health, and substance use. Understanding what issues and concerns are important to the public will inform a new set

of messages that are relatable, relevant and reinforce the impact of state courts in local communities. We must reverse the negative trend and swing public trust and confidence in state courts back in a positive direction.

But our collective interest in fostering public trust and confidence in the Courts is not a recent flight of fancy. Eight years ago, CCJ and numerous justice partners embarked on a mission to address declining public perception of the courts in minority and disadvantaged communities. The multi-year Community Engagement in the State Courts Initiative began with the ***Courting Justice Listening Tour***, which provided valuable insights into understanding pilot community perceptions of social inequities and biases in the courts. We learned that misperceptions and misunderstandings lead to a lack of

trust. To address this, courts must engage in two-way dialogue and listen to the challenges and realities of minority communities. Often, the best way to build trust is to build trustworthiness. We must listen to the communities we serve and we must act on the feedback we receive.

Of course, listening isn't enough. We must act. 95% of people who go into any court go into our state courts. We launched two new racial justice projects in 2023 that hold great promise. The first is the Racial Justice Organizational Assessment Tool for State Courts. This tool can help courts evaluate their current operations and offers guidance for best practices and actionable steps to improve fairness outcomes that help ensure equal justice for all. The second is **CORA**—which stands for Court

Opportunity Recruitment for All. CORA is an online recruitment portal that connects students to state court clerkships and intern and externship opportunities nationwide. Essentially, CORA is the state courts cousin to OSCAR in the federal courts. I have been personally involved in seeing this project come to fruition and am deeply encouraged by the response from our pilot courts and others. We encourage the bar and law school deans to help us grow this effort by identifying students at your law schools who would benefit from participating in CORA. Projects like CORA are critical to ensuring we cultivate a diverse bench and bar, both now and into the future. By connecting law students with invaluable clerkships, internship and externship opportunities in state courts.

I also want to briefly touch on two other high priority initiatives under way with the Conference of Chief Justices.

This summer, CCJ adopted a resolution establishing a group that we are calling **CLEAR**—the Committee on Legal Education and Admissions Reform. The committee had its first full meeting last week in Nashville. Our objective is to examine the state of legal education and bar admission processes in the United States along with the decline in attorneys dedicating their careers to public interest and public sector practice.

As you can imagine, we have some tough questions to ask and answer. Responsibility such as how to fulfill members of the profession have to close the access to justice gap? How can we help address the crisis of legal

deserts in America particularly in rural areas? The list goes on and on. This important work comes as the legal profession is experiencing profound change in the aftermath of COVID and with the advent of the NexGen bar exam. We have to be innovative as we contemplate reforms that may include alternative paths to bar admission programs and testing approaches for providing essential legal services.

Lastly, you've probably all been waiting for me to use the two words that seem to permeate every conversation today about the future of the law. ***Artificial intelligence.*** Generative AI CCJ and state court leaders know how quickly technological advances have transformed operations and procedures, and we are now conditioned to look for new, nimble ways to solve unique problems. To

address AI's unknown and evolving impact on courts, CCJ has formed an interdisciplinary AI Rapid Response Team to help state courts identify the promise and potential pitfalls of AI and next steps to prepare for this emerging technology in our nations courts. Over the coming months, I look forward to learning more about the challenges courts are facing and the innovative solutions being developed across the country.

This year, the Conference of Chief Justices is celebrating its 75th anniversary. It's an exciting time to be leading this organization of dynamic and visionary leaders. Over the last 75 years, CCJ and the ABA have worked together on important initiatives to improve the administration of justice. On behalf of CCJ, we invite

continued collaboration so that we can, together, continue to pursue the promise of ***equal justice for all***.

It has been my honor and privilege to be with you this morning. I thank you for your attention, and for your service to the legal profession.