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Testimony of Richard J. Williams
Administrator Director of the Courts
General Assembly Budget Committee
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Thank you, Mr. Chairman, for the opportunity to appear and present the Judiciary's budget request for the coming year. With me today are Assignment Judges Edward Beglin, of Union County, Lawrence Lawson, of Monmouth County, and Sybil Moses, of Bergen County, as well as Theodore Fetter, deputy administrative director of the courts.

During the past year, the New Jersey Supreme Court and the appellate and trial divisions of our Superior Court resolved more than one million disputes. In addition, New Jersey's Municipal Courts resolved over six million disputes. Those disputes included conflicts between neighbors, disputes within families, differences between persons engaged in commerce, conflicts involving complete strangers and disputes between citizens and their government. The peaceful and orderly resolution of those disputes by our courts provides for social stability and lies at the heart of a just and democratic society. We in the Judiciary appreciate the importance of our responsibilities and value the trust and confidence placed in us by those we serve. It is a trust and confidence that we strive every day to earn. One of the ways we seek to earn that trust and confidence is through our efforts to continually improve the quality of justice in our state. Improving the quality of justice is more than just a nice sounding phrase. It is the result of hard work on targeted initiatives which produces measurable results. I would like to share with you a few examples of initiatives undertaken and successes achieved over the past year.

For the past several years we have been working to improve the quality of justice in New Jersey by making justice more timely. In today's fast-paced world, the quality of service is often directly dependent on the timeliness of that service. In our work to resolve disputes timeliness is critical. Lengthy delays increase costs for litigants and lawyers, prolong upheaval in the lives or businesses of those seeking justice before the courts, and jeopardize the accuracy of testimony in the search for truth. For these reasons, the Judiciary has established goals for the time it should take to resolve each of the types of cases we handle, and most cases are resolved within those goals. Cases that are not resolved within their expected time goals are referred to as "backlogged." Although at the beginning of this court year only 15 percent of all cases were considered backlogged we were not satisfied. For that reason we placed a major emphasis on reducing the number of backlogged cases to the lowest achievable level possible.

During the past court year, 1,009,369 cases were resolved in the Superior Court. In spite of a 3 percent increase in filings during the year, the backlog was reduced by 22 percent from the prior year, which itself had seen an historic 21 percent decrease over the year before.

Dramatic reductions in backlog have occurred in almost every case type. The backlog in Domestic Violence cases was reduced by 49 percent, following a 67 percent reduction the prior year. Juvenile Delinquency backlog was cut by 34 percent, Divorce cases by 32 percent, Civil cases by 27 percent, following a 22 percent reduction the prior year, and General Equity by 18 percent. Finally, although the backlog in Criminal cases was reduced only by 8 percent, it was the lowest number of cases in backlog in the last 20 years. I know of no other state judiciary that has adopted such an ambitious program as ours, or has held itself so publically accountable.

We have also been working to improve the quality of justice by making justice more convenient. During the past year, drivers in New Jersey were provided for the first time with a convenient alternative for paying traffic and parking

tickets. Rather than personally going to court or mailing in the payment, drivers now can use a credit card to pay their fines by e-payment over the Internet. New Jersey Municipal Courts Direct (NJMC Direct), a ticket payment service accessible through the Judiciary Web site at www.njcourtsonline.com is a major step toward improving the convenience of the services provided to New Jersey residents by the Judiciary. The service has been implemented in 535 municipalities, and when completed in one more municipality this month it will be the first statewide service of its kind in the country.

Since the program began in January 2002, more than 119,772 tickets have been paid on the Web site with more than \$5.6 million in revenue collected. Motorists receiving a summons will find the e-payment Web address listed on the ticket. Once at the Web site, they can find the penalty amount, the court date, the points assessed for the violation, and they can be advised whether the fine is payable online. Paying a fine online through NJMC Direct updates the municipal court's records immediately without further work by court staff and the payment information is shared instantly with the Division of Motor Vehicles.

People choosing to pay their tickets electronically via the Judiciary's Web site are charged a small convenience fee, based on the amount of the fine, that covers the cost of maintaining the program. As a result, the program is being instituted statewide at no cost to the participating municipalities, and thousands of people each month are making use of this convenient payment method.

We have worked to improve the quality of justice in other ways as well: making justice more economical by expanding our video conferencing network saves litigants and attorneys time and expense by allowing testimony and legal argument to take place from remote locations; making justice more accessible by enhancing our award winning Web site to provide legal forms and instructions for people who may wish to represent themselves in court; and by making justice more collaborative, working cooperatively with other governmental agencies through such efforts as our domestic violence central registry. This is a statewide data base of all domestic violence restraining orders, instantly available to help law enforcement officers to respond appropriately when handling domestic violence matters, thereby minimizing the risks to both domestic violence victims as well as police.

We are proud of these initiatives to improve the quality of justice in our state. They represent but a few examples of our work. Before I conclude my remarks, I would like to refer to one more initiative which is very important to us and which has received the strong support of the Legislature in the past years. I refer to our initiative to establish Drug Courts throughout the state. As you know, Drug Courts offer a new approach to treating drug-addicted offenders. Rather than emphasizing incarceration, which by itself does little to combat addiction, Drug Courts emphasize close supervision and thorough treatment of offenders, with the continuing direct involvement of a judge who oversees the offender's progress. The record, both nationally and in New Jersey, shows that Drug Courts work. They work because participants remain in treatment and under supervision; they work because the cost per offender is about half the cost of prison; and they work because they result in fewer relapses by offenders and greater success in paying fines and in holding families together. Even more significantly, about 85 percent of offenders participating in our five pilot courts have been minority citizens who otherwise would have been sent to prison. Drug Courts demonstrate that the over-representation of minorities in our prison population can be reduced.

There is good news and bad news to report concerning Drug Courts. The good news is that we successfully expanded our Drug Court program to five additional vicinages during the past court year. Bergen, Cumberland/Gloucester/Salem, Monmouth, Morris/Sussex and Ocean vicinages joined the first five programs in Camden, Essex, Mercer, Passaic and Union counties, bringing the total number of operating Drug Courts to 10 vicinages covering 13 counties. Approximately 800 new participants have been enrolled since the expanded program began. Our success rate for program participants continues to be high.

The bad news concerning Drug Courts is that the proposed budget contains no funds for completing the expansion of the program to the final five vicinages (Atlantic/Cape May, Burlington, Hudson, Middlesex and Somerset/Hunterdon/Warren). These vicinages have all been actively planning for the expansion and are ready to go, but because of the financial circumstances confronted by the state, funding has not been made available. We are very concerned about the fairness of making intensive drug treatment available to defendants in 10 vicinages while sending similarly situated defendants in the other 5 vicinages to prison.

We estimate that the cost for completion of the program statewide, if we delay the expansion until later in FY04, would be about \$2 million. If during the course of your deliberations these additional funds can be identified and appropriated they would be gratefully received and money well spent.

As I close my remarks I want to express the Judiciary's appreciation. For several years I have spoken of the Judiciary's critical needs to modernize our information technology system. Last year the Legislature approved a series of filing fee increases with revenues generated to go to a dedicated fund for information technology. While those revenues will not cover all of our needs, they do provide a very substantial start. With the funds we are receiving this year, we have begun upgrading our local and wide area networks, we are making necessary upgrades to our data center capacity and have begun conversion of our case management and record-keeping systems from antiquated software technology to a new relational technology that will eventually be conducive to Web-enabling and Internet access. While we still have much to do on this multi-year project, and while the dedicated fund will not be sufficient to address all of our IT needs, we recognize that our progress to date would not have been possible without your support. We thank you.

That completes my prepared remarks, Mr. Chairman. My colleagues and I would be pleased to respond to any questions you may have.

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