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Chief Justice Rabner Continues Push to Reform Municipal Court System

While New Jersey's municipal court system has made important strides in the fair administration of justice, the effort to reform the Judiciary's local courts continues, Chief Justice Stuart Rabner said Friday.

Delivering his annual State of the Judiciary address before the New Jersey State Bar Association in Atlantic City, Chief Justice Rabner said a forthcoming report from a 38-member Supreme Court committee will propose recommendations to assure that municipal courts serve as a fair and neutral forum for resolving disputes.

"The one overarching concern, of course, is to separate a town's need for general operating revenue from the operation of the municipal courts. Otherwise, the system can inappropriately place pressure on police officers to write tickets, and on judges to impose fines and fees," Chief Justice Rabner said. "There is no place for either organization to be a party to raise funds for local government."

Chief Justice Rabner detailed some of the improvements the Judiciary made to the municipal court system in recent years "by shining a light on the problem and following up on it."

For example, the Supreme Court placed a cap on maximum penalties for failure to appear or failure to pay; municipal courts reduced the issuance of contempt fines by 60 percent following an Administrative Office of the Courts review; and the Supreme Court dismissed thousands of old warrants for low-level offenses so that "minor matters don't hang over people's lives for decades," Chief Justice Rabner said.

Areas that still need to be addressed, Rabner said, include improvements to the appointment process for municipal court judges and the consolidation of municipal courts.

“New Jersey’s municipal court system is strong. It’s guided by strong leaders and able judges whose mission is to administer justice, and that is what they do,” Chief Justice Rabner said. “Working together, we can make the system even stronger.”

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