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Statement of Chief Justice on Suspension of Civil and Matrimonial Trials in Two Vicinages Due to Vacancy Crisis

Chief Justice Stuart Rabner issued the following statement today:

“Because of the current high number of judicial vacancies, trials in the Civil Division and matrimonial trials will not be conducted in two vicinages, beginning Feb. 21, 2023, except for very limited circumstances. Those trials will be suspended for the immediate future.

At this time, there are 69 vacancies throughout the trial courts – more than one out of every six positions statewide. That imposes heightened responsibilities on sitting judges who handle thousands of proceedings and motions each month. In addition, for the past three years, the court system has operated with an average of more than 50 vacancies. That situation, along with the effects of the COVID crisis, has contributed to delays in handling individual cases and substantial increases in backlog.

Circumstances today are particularly challenging in two vicinages. In Vicinage 13, which is comprised of Hunterdon, Somerset, and Warren counties, there are five vacancies out of a total of 20 judicial positions. In Vicinage 15, comprised of Cumberland, Gloucester, and Salem counties, there are nine vacancies out of 28 judgeships.

The Judiciary prioritizes proceedings in which an individual’s liberty is at stake, like criminal and juvenile delinquency matters; cases that present potential emergencies, like complaints of domestic violence; and other time-sensitive matters. In light of the high percentage of vacancies in Vicinages 13 and 15, and the particular challenges multi-county vicinages face, there are simply not enough judges at this time to conduct civil and matrimonial trials in either vicinage.

Without additional relief, we may well face the same situation in other vicinages in the near future.

We recognize that when the doors of the courthouse are closed – even partially – people entitled to their day in court suffer real harm. We therefore respectfully call on the Executive and Legislative branches to address the current vacancy crisis in Vicinages 13 and 15 as well as other parts of the state. We are prepared to assist in any way that would be helpful.

We look forward to a resumption of all proceedings in both vicinages as soon as possible.”

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