Remarks by Hon. Audrey K. Skwierawski
Director of State Courts
Annual Meeting of the Wisconsin Judicial Conference
November 11, 2026

Good afternoon and welcome, Chief Justice Karofsky, Justices of the Supreme Court, Judges of the Courts of Appeal, Circuit Court Judges, Tribal Court Judges, Municipal Court Judges, and Reserve and Retired Judges, Director of the State Bar Association, elected officials, fellow state administrators, and a heartfelt special acknowledgment of all the veterans among us today.

May it please the Court. I'd like to begin my remarks today with an attitude of gratitude.

Thank you, Chief Justice, for setting out the vision for how we can best endeavor to serve the people of Wisconsin, delivering on our justice system mission: to protect individuals' rights, privileges, and liberties, to maintain the rule of law, and to provide a forum for the resolution of disputes that is open, accessible, independent, and safe. It is an inspiring, sweeping vision, but one I know we can achieve if we heed your final exhortation – that none of us can do it alone; instead, we must do it together.

In fact, I look forward to this conference each year because it provides an amazing opportunity for us to come together to learn, set goals, and exchange ideas. Planning and running a large conference like this takes many hours of dedicated work. I'd like to start out with gratitude for those efforts, first with thanks to our Judicial Education Committee under the leadership of Chair Justice Rebecca Dallet and Co-chairs Judges Faun Phillipson and Michael Zell. I also want to recognize Justine Suleski, our Director of Judicial Education, along with her team, including Kelly Vujnovich and Christine Casey, for all they have done to ensure we experience a successful conference. I am further grateful to the presenters who will soon be sharing their knowledge and insight.

To our circuit court and appellate court judges, thank you for your leadership and your service. We recognize the care you bring to the cases before you and how often you are asked to do more: to mentor a new judge, teach a colleague, serve on a committee, or help solve a problem affecting courts beyond your own.

Whenever we convene here in Lake Geneva, we are kept safe through the efforts of Sheriff Dave Gerber and the Walworth County Sheriff's Department, Chief David Erwin of the Capitol Police Department and his Courts Protection Unit led by Sgt. Adam Haas, our own marshal Matthew Goncher, and the Grand Geneva Hotel security team led by the two Daves. We extend our appreciation as well to the staff here at the hotel for their kind hospitality throughout these three days and to the Walworth County Sheriff's color guard for helping us open the conference.

This year it has been the honor and privilege of those of us in the Director of State Courts' Office and our court system agencies to answer the Chief Justice's clarion call to reimagine the work we do, making it more inclusive and cooperative by opening our committees and processes to allow for more participation by judges, court reporters, circuit court clerks, attorneys, the State Bar Association, our law schools, and other partners.

In Court Operations, the division designed the first-ever restraining order portal in our state, as the Chief Justice described. This portal puts the ability to ask the courts for orders of protection directly onto phones and other devices. Court Operations and CCAP worked with pilot counties, court staff, advocates, and project partners to test the service and make improvements before its statewide launch. Their feedback helped our team improve a service now available throughout Wisconsin. I want to thank everyone who contributed to that effort. The portal reflects both the skill of the people who built it and the practical knowledge of those who tested it. Most of all, the successful outcome reflects the strength of a model built on working together, rather than alone.

Court Operations and our Children's Court Improvement Program followed that same approach in sponsoring this year's Summit on Domestic Violence and Child Welfare, which was one part of a broader effort to help courts and their partners examine how they serve children and families. Judges, staff, and local professionals all contributed their expertise together to create a domestic violence and child welfare training whose positive outcomes drew strength from the various viewpoints and experiences of the training team, including participation by judges in rural and urban parts of the state. Together, rather than alone.

In CCAP this year, our colleagues worked to form and lead our AI Committee to address the explosion of AI–related issues you all are facing every day across the state. This group has met numerous times, expanding membership to include circuit court judges, our courts of appeals, the Lavinia Goodell State Law Library, our law schools, our State Bar, clerks of courts, Chief Judges, and many others because the AI challenge is reverberating throughout our system. The Chief Judges worked together with this committee to create an interim policy in the districts. And later in the conference, you will hear about other AI-related steps coming soon. Given the fast-moving and broad implications of AI, the group's success will depend upon this equally broad coalition for generating practical solutions together, rather than alone.

Perhaps nowhere has the Chief Justice's commitment to working together been more evident than in this year's budget process as carried out by our Office of Management Services. Assembling and evaluating budget priorities looked very different during this budget cycle. The Chief Justice heard the suggestion that the circuit and appellate courts needed to play a bigger role in the budget process, so the Management Services budget team, including Court Operations and our Legislative Liaison, went to work with the Chief Judges and the

Planning and Policy Advisory Committee (whose work in this regard is ongoing) to ensure your voices informed our priorities in a new way.

The Court Operations division's judicial workload study released this year, for example, gives us a stronger basis for discussing circuit court resources. Thank you for all the hard work you put in to make sure it accurately captured your working conditions and capabilities. It helps us explain the time needed to handle cases and informs requests for additional branches. We must consider its findings alongside staffing, facilities, county resources, and other demands on the justice system. A new branch requires both a demonstrated need and planning with the county that would support it.

In addition to your participation in the workload study, your responses to surveys, feedback to the Chief Judges in your districts, and service on committees all gave us information about budget priorities we could not gather alone. Thank you for taking the time to contribute. You help us explain what is happening in your courts and what would make a practical difference.

Our budget process also involved a more in-depth look at the needs of the Court of Appeals, resulting in a request for an additional District III judgeship with supporting staff, and our request includes two additional staff attorneys to assist with appellate cases across all four districts.

All this additional information and feedback helped inform the finance committee, the Supreme Court, and the Chief Justice, who has in turn outlined and instructed me to submit the resulting 2027–29 budget priorities. Our role as the process unfolds will be to continue to explain the needs behind those requests and work together with you, our counties, and our partners in state government as the budget is considered. Because ultimately, we know that the success of our budget request depends on all of us working together to achieve what none of us could alone.

Although I have highlighted just a few programs and special projects here, please know that all of us continue to recognize that you and your staff spend much time finding coverage, securing counsel, arranging interpreters, managing DAR requests, and adjusting when someone is unavailable. Those demands take time from other responsibilities. That is why our continuing work includes attorney recruitment and retention efforts, bar exam evolution, assembling the Court Reporter Advisory Committee to assist in addressing court reporter issues, including technological changes, refining our Interpreter Program, including efforts to contain costs, work on digital audio recording policies and transcript production, plus many other endeavors aimed at making sure you have the time and tools to work to the best of your abilities.

I started my remarks today with an attitude of gratitude, and I'd like to end my remarks today in the same vein. My gratitude here is for the many people who support the work of our courts

in the administrative realm. Some of you may remember a little procession held in Milwaukee a few weeks ago to celebrate our World Series Champion Brewers. There were many things I loved about that day, but one thing the Brewers did stood out to me as truly special. You see, in addition to players and coaches, the organization included its operational and support staff in the parade, putting them on dedicated buses and floats during the procession. And the people of Wisconsin gave them some of the loudest cheers of the day in recognition of their contribution to the team's success.

I have the privilege of daily seeing the effort put in by our administrative support staff. And I am deeply appreciative of their dedication. I would like to recognize members of our divisions who retired or will retire this year: if you are here, please stand as I read your name:

Randy Sproule – Medical Mediation Panel

Jacquelyn Rothstein – Executive Director of the Board of Bar Examiners

I've already named some of our offices and divisions. In addition to the divisions I've named, I'd like to recognize our Marshal and Deputy Marshal, Chief Legal Counsel team, support and communications staff, Office of Lawyer Regulation, Board of Bar Examiners, Medical Mediation Panel, Supreme Court and Court of Appeals staff, Clerk of the Supreme Court and Court of Appeals office, and Supreme Court Commissioners.

Could I ask that any members of these divisions, plus the Director of State Courts Offices and any other administrative or support staff members, please stand? Would you please join me in recognizing them?

We are proud to support you. Thank you for your leadership, your generosity to one another, and your service to the people of Wisconsin. It is my honor and privilege to serve alongside you, and I look forward to what we will accomplish together.

I hope you have a great conference!
