1. The Arboretum

Good afternoon

About three years ago, I woke up on an oral argument morning and went for a run through the UW Arboretum.

As I came off a dirt path onto the road, I saw something out of place. A white SUV. And standing next to it, a young woman in shorts and a short-sleeved shirt. It was far too cold for that.

I asked, “Are you OK?” She said no.

I asked, “Do you feel safe?” She said no.

Then she asked if she could walk with me.

As we walked away from that SUV, she grabbed my arm and told me her name. She told me the man, semi-passed out, inside the SUV had trafficked her and drugged her for days.

She was terrified. I asked if I could call 911, and she said yes.

The police came in minutes, though it felt like forever. As she told an officer what had happened to her, she started to feel sick. She was seeing colored dots.

She sat down, then lay down in the middle of the road.

And then she began to seize.

I told the officer I would hold her head so he could run to his squad car for Narcan.

So I held her head, and I did not let it hit the pavement. For those few minutes, I thought she might die in my arms.

She didn't. She came to, and an ambulance took her to the hospital.

I ran the couple of miles home to burn off the adrenaline. By the time I got out of the shower, I was shaking like a leaf. There was no way I was making it to the Capitol.

Here is what happened next.

Chief Justice Annette Ziegler, when I called her, could not have been more compassionate. She assured me I could Zoom into the oral argument. She called me later that day. Then she called me every day for a week. Then every other day. Then every few days, until she was sure I was OK.

Director of State Courts Audrey Skwierawski rushed to my house and nearly took my front door off its hinges. She wrapped me in the biggest hug of my life. I can still feel it.

Justice Becky Dallet was right behind her. She set up my computer so I could join oral argument remotely. And she did not let me out of her sight for most of that day.

Justice Ann Walsh Bradley called and kept checking on me almost every day. Justice Janet Protasiewicz called and sent text after text. Justice Brian Hagedorn called and told me he would pray for me. And I knew he meant it.

The last call came from Justice Rebecca Bradley. I still remember exactly where I was sitting. She told me she thought I had saved someone's life that day.

That's when it all hit me. I sat there and cried. And she stayed on the phone with me.

I tell you this story for two reasons. The first is simple: **none of us does this work alone.** We are in this together. The second I'll come back to in a few minutes.

2. The people who hold this work together

So let me start where we always start: with the people.

Each year we pause to remember the colleagues we have lost. Please join me in honoring them:

DECEASED

Justice Louis J. Ceci

J. Denis Moran
Director of State Courts

Hon. Burneatta L. Bridge

Hon. Daniel L. LaRocque

Hon. James T. Bayorgeon

Hon. Michael Brennan

Hon. Raymond S. Huber

Hon. Charles E. Kuehn

Hon. Benjamin D. Proctor

Hon. Emmanuel J. Vuvunas

Hon. Francis T. Wasielewski

Hon. Joseph E. Wimmer

Hon. Edward F. Zappen, Jr.

--

We also welcome the judges who have joined us on the bench this year:

SUPREME COURT

Justice Chris Taylor

COURT OF APPEALS

Hon. Anthony LoCoco

Hon. Nathan A. Petrashek

Hon. Katie York

Hon. Todd Ziegler

CIRCUIT COURT

Hon. Samuel T. Berg

Hon. Jeffrey Erickson

Hon. Malinda Eskra

Hon. Sara Gehrig-Woodman

Hon. Jeremy Guza

Hon. David Hughes

Hon. Michael D. Hughes

Hon. Robert A. Kennedy, Jr.

Hon. Tanner Kilander

Hon. Diane Meulemans

Hon. Owen Piotrowski

Hon. Jay Pucek

Hon. Susan Roth

Hon. Kyle J. Sargent

Hon. Grant Scaife

Hon. Michael Schindhelm

Hon. Kathryn Schmidt

Hon. Hannah Schuchart

Hon. Shawn Woller

I want to also acknowledge my colleagues on the Wisconsin Supreme Court, who work so hard and care so deeply for the State of Wisconsin: former Chief Justice Annette Kingsland Ziegler, Justice Rebecca Frank Dallet, Justice Brian Hagedorn, Justice Janet Protasiewicz, Justice Susan Crawford, and our newest colleague, Justice Chris Taylor.

Finally, it’s really important that we recognize that today is Veterans Day. We live in a free society, with the freedom to speak, to fight for our rights, and to criticize our leaders without fear of imprisonment. Our freedom has been hard-fought, and the soldiers, sailors, airwomen and airmen, and Marines – and their families – who have served throughout the nation’s history deserve our thanks and praise.

3. The state of the judiciary

Last year, I stood here and told you that the state of our judiciary was troubled. I won't pretend the threats have gone away. They have not.

But this year, as I travel around the state and talk to so many judges, I have been struck by how special this community is. It is clear that **the state of our judiciary is resilient. And it is resilient because we hold each other up.**

But resiliency is not the same as security. Resiliency is not a staffing plan, and it is not dollars allocated in a budget. Judges should not have to be heroic to be safe, and courts should not have to run on grit alone.

4. Real people, real trauma

Which brings me to the second reason I told you that story.

What happened in the UW arboretum could easily play out in one of your courtrooms. A young woman who has been trafficked and drugged. A petition for a restraining order. Or a jury trial where she has to tell a room full of strangers what happened to her.

The work we do every day affects the real lives of real people. We can never lose sight of that.

Trauma shapes how many people show up in our courtrooms. A survivor may tell her story out of order. She may seem flat, or angry, or confused, or even laugh. That is not a reason to doubt her. That is what trauma looks like. Our job is to see the person in front of us and give her a fair process. Our job is to treat people with dignity and respect. Our job is to meet people where they are.

That is why I am so proud of our new restraining order portal. After an eight-county pilot this summer, it went live statewide in September. Anyone in Wisconsin can now petition for a domestic abuse or harassment restraining order online, even on a phone, with help from prompts written to help real people, any hour of the day or night, without creating an account.

Domestic violence does not keep business hours. Now our front door doesn't either. Advocates tell us survivors are finishing the process faster, at a moment when they are most afraid for their safety.

It takes an act of courage to ask for a restraining order.

We should make it as easy as possible for people who find that courage. My thanks to the court staff who built the portal, the pilot counties, and the advocates who tested it.

Trauma and mental illness walk through our doors every day. And across Wisconsin, judges are building better responses.

Mental health treatment courts in counties like Brown, Marinette, Milwaukee, Outagamie and Wood give people with serious mental illness a path to treatment and supervision instead of a jail cell.

Counties are holding Sequential Intercept Model workshops, mapping every point where a person in crisis meets police, jail, or a courtroom, and finding the places to step in earlier.

And Wisconsin judges have studied the Miami Model, which connects people to crisis assessment, case management, peer support, and housing.

I want to credit former Chief Justice Ziegler, who made mental health a priority for this court system and convened our Mental Health Summit. That work continues, and it is getting results.

And I want to say a word about you.

That October morning, I was shaking after one hour on one road. You witness trauma every single day: the testimony, the photographs, the videos, the AI submissions. That weight adds up. As our guest speaker tomorrow, Dr. Bessel van der Kolk notes, “It takes courage to listen to the testimony of survivors.” Yes, it does.

A few years ago, Judge Guy Dutcher of Waushara County did something brave. He told his fellow judges, publicly, that he had lived with severe anxiety and depression for most of his life, and had hidden it well into his judicial career. A colleague noticed and started a conversation that changed his life. Judge Dutcher went on to build an informal network of judges who check in on one another.

As he put it, no judge would think twice about taking time off for a knee replacement. Mental health deserves the same treatment.

Trauma permeates so much of our work. It’s important to recognize its impact on us and the people who enter our courtrooms.

So please hear me: asking for help is not a weakness. It is part of doing this job well. Steering a struggling colleague towards help is not overstepping. It is doing the right thing. Every state court judge and employee has free, confidential access to our Employee Assistance Program. The State Bar's Wisconsin Lawyers Assistance Program is there for judges, too. Use them. Also remember that this is a community that answers the phone. Use it. Call the judge in the next county. Call your mentor. Call my colleagues. Call me. No one does this alone. We are all in this together.

5. Earning public trust

The judiciary’s strength comes from confidence from the public - public trust. Last year I told you about the woman at my yoga studio who stopped me to say she had served as a juror in my courtroom. She didn't remember much about the case. But she remembered that she had been part of it.

Jurors are where many Wisconsinites meet our courts up close. So, this September, during Juror Appreciation Month, we made a point of thanking them. Justice Dallet led that effort. She wrote to county leaders across the state, talked with reporters, and reminded everyone that our justice system only works if people show up when they are summoned. The court system sent every county a Juror Appreciation Kit with thank-you letters, certificates, and ideas for courthouse events. To every court that used it: thank you. A juror who feels respected leaves the courthouse trusting it a little more.

Earning trust also means going to where people are. Last month, Justice on Wheels brought the Supreme Court to Justice Crawford's hometown, Chippewa Falls (or "The Chip" as we fondly call it). It was the program's 34th stop since 1993. Students, teachers, local officials, attorneys, and judges filled the room to watch us hear two cases. And in the new year, we will bring Justice on Wheels to Milwaukee.

When people watch us work, they see something the headlines rarely show: careful questions, hard thinking, and a process that takes their rights seriously. That is how trust is built one case, one courtroom, and one community at a time.

Trust also depends on the public believing that the judge in front of them is fair.

It is no secret that Wisconsin's Supreme Court races are now among the most expensive judicial elections in American history. People notice. And they ask whether money shapes outcomes. That is a fair question, and it deserves a public answer.

For years, many of our colleagues and I have said our court should consider recusal rules in the open. In June, we finally did. We held a public hearing on a petition from nine retired circuit court judges, and then we debated it in open conference, with the public watching.

We did not all agree. Some of my colleagues pressed hard on what problem a new rule would solve, and whether a committee to make recommendations would be worth the effort.

That is exactly the kind of debate that belongs in public. In the end, the court voted to create a committee to study recusal and recommend rules that fit Wisconsin and respect both our state and federal constitutions. Soon, we will name that committee and charge it with making recommendations.

These rules apply to every judge in this room, not just to the Supreme Court. I hope you will follow that work and share your views. Whatever rule comes out of it has to work in a courtroom in Superior or Sheboygan, not just in Madison.

And trust depends on one more thing: judges who can decide cases without fear.

6. Independent and safe

To do this work, judges have to be independent. And we have to be safe.

As most of you know, we are at the beginning of the next state budget process. Crafting a proposed budget is about setting priorities. And this year, rather than just setting the priorities the Supreme Court thought were most important, we looked to you first. We set the priorities together. We asked all judges and state court staff to offer their ideas. And this is what we heard.

In 2025, Wisconsin judges reported 129 security threats. Many of you have called me about threats you received simply for doing your jobs. I know from personal experience that these threats are real. That is inexcusable and unacceptable.

We all carry the memory of Judge John Roemer, who was murdered in his own home in 2022. A tragedy like that was once unthinkable. Sadly, across this country, it is no longer an isolated event.

In March, Judge Jessica Fehrenbach, from Lincoln County, faced several threats and criticism on social media for imposing a sentence that both the defense and prosecutor agreed upon. Yet she was blamed for the defendant going to Milwaukee, where he is alleged to have shot and killed another man over a necklace. Every day Judge Fehrenbach lives in fear for her family's safety.

In July, Judge Michael Aprahamian from Waukesha County received a threat from an inmate at Dodge Correctional Institution that was nothing shy of bone-chilling. I'm not going to repeat the threats here.

Every person who walks into a courthouse deserves to be safe. That includes judges, jurors, staff, attorneys, witnesses, victims, and defendants. And you deserve to be safe in your homes and in public, too.

Right now, nearly 300 judges and justices in Wisconsin are protected by only four state-funded law enforcement officers. These officers responded to Judges Fehrenbach and Aprahamian after they were threatened. These four officers assess courtrooms, courthouses, and judges' homes statewide. These four officers coordinate with your sheriffs. These four officers provide security at public events. They are all here with us today. If you've had one of those assessments, you know how valuable it is.

That is why court security is the top priority in our 2027–29 budget request. We are asking the state to do three things.

First, fund those four officer positions, permanently.

Second, create a Court Security Improvement grant program, about $1.5 million over the biennium, to help counties buy equipment and make their courthouses safer. As of October of

last year, only 33 of Wisconsin’s 72 courthouses had staffed security screening at the entrance. Every county's needs are different, and this funding would help local leaders address the gaps in their own courthouses.

Third, bring the Marshal’s Office from one full-time and one part-time position to three full-time positions. Threats don't arrive on a part-time schedule, and our response shouldn't either.

These requests are modest, responsible, and vital. They must be funded. Full stop.

Safety is also about independence. A judge who is afraid cannot decide a case without fear or favor. No threat, from anyone, can be allowed to decide a case.

Last year I asked you to speak up for the rule of law, whoever appointed you and whoever supported your campaign. I ask you again. People have every right to criticize our decisions. But threats and intimidation, or suggestions that court orders are optional, weaken the rule of law and public trust in every courtroom in this state.

7. Capacity to do justice well

Safety is the foundation. But people also need courts with the capacity to hear them. And you helped us set priorities here as well.

Our most recent workload study confirms what you already know: cases take more of a judge's time than they used to. Filing counts don't capture the hours spent reviewing submissions, holding hearings, and making hard decisions.

So, our budget request asks for eight new circuit court branches, and an additional Court of Appeals judgeship in District III, where the need is greatest. As one Court of Appeals judge recently noted, the Court of Appeals is the workhorse of the court system. Indeed.

Of course, a courthouse is only as strong as the people who work in it. Our budget asks for better pay for judges. According to the National Center for State Courts, Wisconsin trial judges' pay ranks 39th in the country. You deserve better.

But we also need that intentional investment across the board: for assistant district attorneys, for assistant public defenders, and for the clerks, reporters, and our administrative staff who keep the doors open. When a seasoned prosecutor or defender leaves for better pay, cases slow down, and people wait. When we lose experienced staff, we lose knowledge that takes years to rebuild.

And in too much of Wisconsin, there simply aren't enough lawyers. Nearly three-quarters of our active attorneys practice in just three judicial districts that hold less than half of our population. Since 2020, some northern and southwestern counties have lost 8 to 13 percent of their attorneys. Without attorneys, the courthouse doors are closed for too many Wisconsinites.

Last year I told you we were working to let new lawyers bring their bar exam scores to Wisconsin. In March, the Supreme Court adopted the Uniform Bar Examination. A lawyer who earns a qualifying score in another state can now transfer it here and, after a Wisconsin law course component, start practicing without sitting for another bar exam. Our diploma privilege remains unchanged.

This is about more than paperwork. It means a young lawyer from Minnesota or Iowa can hang a shingle in Ashland or Platteville. It means more public defenders, more prosecutors, and more family lawyers in the counties that need them most.

In the budget, we are also asking for continued investment in CCAP, the technology that judges, attorneys, litigants, and justice partners rely on every day.

Courts do not work alone. Fully funding justice means funding the whole system.

Here is my ask of you. You are the best witnesses this budget has. Tell your legislators what you see. Invite them into your courtroom; allow them to sit next to you. Show them the security gaps in your courthouse and the calendars that keep growing.

Safety in our courts is not a partisan issue. Fully functioning courts are not a partisan issue. I look forward to working with the incoming Governor and Legislature to fund our judicial system so it works for all Wisconsinites.

8. Close: we catch each other

On that October morning, my job was simple. Hold her head. Don't let it hit the ground.

That is what my colleagues did for me that day. It is what you do for the people who come into your courtrooms on the worst days of their lives. And it is what the State of Wisconsin must now do for its courts.

The courts of Wisconsin belong to the people of Wisconsin. Our job is to keep them safe, independent, open, and worthy of trust.

We will not do it alone. We will do it together.

Thank you.