

Remarks by Hon. Audrey K. Skwierawski
Director of State Courts
Annual Meeting of the Wisconsin Judicial Conference
November 12, 2025

Thank you, Chief Justice Karofsky,

Your remarks today, invoking our mission and sacred promise to the people of Wisconsin, inspire our work. I want to continue that conversation by talking about ways the Director of State Courts Office can help support all of you as you tirelessly strive to make real these promises in courtrooms around the state.

But before I do, on behalf of the Director of State Courts Office I want to thank the people working hard to keep all of us safe while we attend this conference. Thank you to Sheriff Gerber, the Walworth County Sheriff's Department, and their color guard for helping us open the conference. A special thank you to Chief David Erwin of the Capitol Police Department for providing support through Sgt. Tammy Johnson and the members of the Court Protection Unit. We are deeply appreciative of the Grand Geneva Hotel and staff – from the security team led by the two Daves, to all the staff who extend their kind hospitality throughout these three days. We are so grateful.

Planning and running a large conference like this takes many hours of dedicated work. I want to thank the members of the Judicial Education Committee and Chairpersons Heather Iverson and Yadira Rein, as well as our own Director of Judicial Education Justine Suleski and her Judicial Education team members for all they have done to ensure we experience a successful conference.

There are also many other members of the Director of State Courts Office here today: my Executive Assistant Sara Foster; Deputy Director Holly Szablewski and her Court Operations team including the District Court Administrators; Deputy Director of Management Services Caitlin Frederick and her team; CIO Brittney Richmond and Deputy CIO Tim Duggan and the CCAP team; PIO Stephen Kelley; Chief Legal Counsel Karley Klein; and Legislative Liaison Adam Plotkin. We have State Law Librarian Amy Crowder and her team; Director of OLR Tim Samuelson and his office; Executive Director of the Board of Bar Examiners Jacquelyn Rothstein and her team; Director Randy Sproule and his team from the Medical Mediation Panel program; and from the Supreme Court and Court of Appeals we have Clerk Sam Christenson and his team, law clerks, staff, and court commissioners, led by Dave Runke. Their efforts provide the foundational scaffold sustaining our beloved Wisconsin justice system.

To our Circuit court Judges, Municipal Judges and Court Commissioners, as the Chief Justice observed, you are the face of justice for all those who come before you. Our focus is therefore on ensuring that you and those in your courtrooms are safe, that you have the professional support you need, and that the court system writ large has the resources and resilience to serve the people of Wisconsin effectively. Those are the three areas I want to focus on today.

As to judicial security: Justice depends on safety. Judges and staff must be able to do their work free from fear or intimidation. We have all seen the rise in threats facing public officials, and our courts are not immune. That reality has made security one of our highest priorities over the past year.

Ensuring that you and the people who come to your county courthouses are safe is a team effort. Working together with your local sheriff's department, the Supreme Court Marshal's Office and the

Capitol Police Court Protection Unit provide security support for circuit courts around the state. One layer of such support involves conducting on-site security assessments for any county that requests one. The Court Protection Unit and the Marshal's Office, working together with your local county sheriff's department, examine entrances, screening stations, communications, and emergency planning in your courthouse. The result is a tailor-made set of recommended action steps, some that can be implemented right away, some appropriate for long-term planning. This is help available now, and I encourage counties that have not yet taken advantage of it to make a request.

In addition to security assessments, the Marshal's office and Court Protection Unit can support your local sheriff's department in meeting your security needs should you receive a threat. After contacting your local law enforcement, you can initiate this additional support by filing a formal "Threat Report," which is currently available on CourtNet. We encourage you to report these incidents so we can better track trends and demonstrate the very real security concerns judges face around the state.

Finally, the Court Protection Unit is available upon request to partner with your local sheriff's department in conducting presentations on responding to specific kinds of risks, for example, the risk posed by active shooters.

Not all risks originate inside the courthouse. Protecting personal information can be just as important. Act 235 and its trailer legislation give judges the tools to restrict access to home addresses and other identifying details. Our team worked closely with Chief Justice Ziegler, Chief Justice Walsh Bradley, and now Chief Justice Karofsky, along with the legislative committee and state legislators, to draft, refine, and advocate for these protections. Once the bills became law, we dedicated significant resources to establishing a process through which you could successfully utilize those protections. That meant creating the forms you can now rely on, developing the guidance, identifying a point of contact with government agencies, and providing training across the state for the judiciary and stakeholders. Members of the legislative committee assisted in this undertaking, especially Judge Nordstrand, who provided invaluable assistance to turn the legislation into working protections.

We are also investing in digital security. As more case information moves online, we know that unguarded data can make our system as vulnerable as an unguarded courthouse door. CCAP has been proactive in strengthening cybersecurity — upgrading firewalls, tightening access controls, and monitoring for threats — so that the information we depend on remains secure.

And this is work that expands beyond our IT staff. Last month, several court system leaders participated in a national cybersecurity training, joining colleagues from across the country to sharpen our awareness of threats and to strengthen our ability to respond. That training reinforced what we already know: protecting our courts requires both strong technology and informed leadership ready to act once a threat has been identified.

The risks are serious, and we are meeting them with focus and resolve. Our goal is to ensure that every judge can carry out their duties with confidence, knowing their courtrooms and systems are secure.

Security is one part of the foundation. Just as important are the people who keep the courts running every day. Judges cannot do this work alone. Attorneys, court reporters, interpreters, clerks, and staff are all part of what makes justice possible. Supporting them is essential to supporting you.

Like many professions, our courts are feeling the strain of retirements, limited pipelines, and competition from other sectors. Court reporters are leaving the profession, interpreters remain in short

supply, and attorney availability is limited and uneven across the state. These are real challenges, and we are addressing them head-on, with constructive steps that are already making a difference.

To address the attorney shortages, the Attorney Recruitment and Retention Committee (ARRC) was established in 2024 under Chief Justice Ziegler. That work continues into 2025, supported by the leadership of Chief Justice Karofsky and Justice Hagedorn. The committee is a collaborative effort involving the Committee of Chief Judges, the State Bar, and the deans of Marquette and UW law schools, along with other partners. Its charge is to explore solutions to Wisconsin's lawyer shortage, with particular attention to rural counties. The committee is studying approaches from other states, considering a multitude of strategies, outreach to law students, and incentives for service in under-resourced areas. Access to attorneys has a profound impact on access to justice for all parties as well as the workload of our courts. Highlighting this issue is a priority for the court system.

Court reporters remain indispensable, yet their ranks have been hit hard by retirements and national shortages. To support them, the Director's Office convened the Court Reporter Advisory Committee — the first of its kind in Wisconsin. Each judicial district now has two representatives, one stenographic and one digital, chosen by their peers. They meet virtually each month to share updates on rules and legislation, discuss the day-to-day challenges reporters face, and advise our office directly. Their input is already shaping how we think about training, recruitment, retention, and technology support.

Alongside that work, we have also convened an ad hoc Digital Audio Recording (DAR) Workgroup. This group — which includes judges, prosecutors, defenders, clerks, administrators, reporters, and statewide associations — is meeting monthly. On the agenda are issues such as the process for requests of recordings, who completes redactions, and how to capture costs. We want our court proceedings to be accessible and transparent. At the same time, the written transcript must remain the official record — not an audio recording that might include private or off-the-record conversations. The workgroup discussions are giving us the practical direction we need to develop responsible, consistent policies for DAR in Wisconsin courts.

Language access is another focus. Finding qualified interpreters continues to be difficult and expensive. Our Interpreter Program is working to expand recruitment and training, reaching out to bilingual communities and supporting continuing education for interpreters already serving. At the same time, a workgroup assembled through the Committee of Chief Judges is examining interpreter rules and contracts, with the goal of making the process more efficient and consistent. By simplifying procedures and partnering with your court staff and elected Circuit Court Clerks, we can make it easier to secure interpreters when they are needed, reducing delays and ensuring every litigant can fully participate in court.

These challenges are complex and interconnected, and addressing them requires sustained effort — strengthening pipelines, improving training, modernizing policy, and working collaboratively with partners across the state. The goal is simple: every courtroom should have the people, tools, and support needed to function effectively. The public's trust in the courts is maintained not just by application of the law, but by the daily work of professionals who are well-prepared and supported in their roles.

We are also preparing for what lies ahead. That is why our focus is on securing resources, planning carefully, and ensuring resilience while preparing for the changes that will shape the courts in years to come.

This year's budget included a wage adjustment for judges and court staff. Compensation for all court staff remains a key focus in the Director's office now and in the future. We are continually reviewing pay across all court roles with an eye toward recruitment and retention.

We are also gathering better data to inform the future. The Planning and Policy Advisory Committee continues to capture input directly from judges and staff across the state. And judges have been working with Court Operations to conduct a workload study recording how judicial time is spent across case types and responsibilities. Together, these data points will give us a clearer picture of what challenges are most pressing and where in the state resources should be directed. They ensure that the decisions we make about staffing, budgeting, and policy are grounded in the realities of your work. And that if and when we approach the legislature with any requests for additional resources, our requests are strategic, unified, and evidence-based.

Finally, we are exploring what artificial intelligence means for the judiciary. AI is already changing other professions, and has begun to influence ours as well. Our responsibility is not to adopt every new tool that comes along. Instead, we will carefully study where AI might help us serve the public more effectively, and where firm limits must be placed to protect fairness, privacy, and independence.

These conversations will require your input and your perspective to ensure that any future use reflects the realities of your work in the courtroom. Innovation often begins at the local level — with judges, clerks, and staff who see a problem and look for a solution. The Director's Office is committed to listening to those ideas, sharing them, and helping expand them to strengthen the system as a whole.

The Chief Justice has laid out a vision for where we are headed. The role of the Director's Office is to make that vision tangible — through policies, programs, and services that strengthen our courts and support those who serve within them.

We recognize the challenges before us, and we face them directly. Yet progress continues, built on your experience, your feedback, and your commitment to improving the system we all serve. Step by step, we are reinforcing the foundation of justice in Wisconsin.

Building stronger courts requires secure courtrooms, strong staffing, and thoughtful planning. It requires giving you the tools and support to carry out your constitutional responsibilities with confidence and integrity.

Thank you for your leadership, your dedication, and the high standards you uphold each day. It is my honor and privilege to serve alongside you as together we work toward this sacred mission and promise that unites us all.