GOOD AFTERNOON CHAIRMAN SARLO AND MEMBERS OF THE COMMITTEE. THANK YOU FOR INVITING US TO MEET WITH YOU TODAY.

IT IS MY PRIVILEGE TO INTRODUCE ASSIGNMENT JUDGES: GEORGIA CURIO OF CUMBERLAND, GLOUCESTER AND SALEM COUNTIES, PETER DOYNE OF BERGEN COUNTY, YOLANDA CICONE OF HUNTERDON, SOMERSET AND WARREN COUNTIES, AND VINCENT GRASSO OF OCEAN COUNTY.

ALSO HERE WITH ME ARE SHELLIE WEBSTER, DIRECTOR OF THE OFFICE OF MANAGEMENT AND ADMINISTRATIVE SERVICES AND JAMES REBO, DIRECTOR OF THE INFORMATION TECHNOLOGY OFFICE.

LET ME BEGIN BY RECOGNIZING THE STRONG COLLABORATIVE PARTNERSHIP THAT THE JUDICIARY HAS HAD WITH THE OTHER TWO BRANCHES OF GOVERNMENT. I WOULD LIKE TO RECOGNIZE THE SUPPORT OF THIS COMMITTEE AND THE FULL LEGISLATURE FOR PROVIDING FUNDING THAT HAS ALLOWED US TO MAINTAIN SUSTAINABLE OPERATIONS. BY IDENTIFYING AND IMPLEMENTING FURTHER EFFICIENCIES, THE PROPOSED BUDGET FOR THE COURTS FOR FISCAL YEAR 2013 WILL ALLOW US THE OPPORTUNITY TO STRIVE TO MAINTAIN OUR OPERATIONS AT THE LEVEL WE HAVE ACHIEVED THIS PAST YEAR.

MY REMARKS TODAY WILL FOCUS ON THREE THEMES: ACCESS AND FAIRNESS FOR COURT USERS; THE USE OF TECHNOLOGY TO ENHANCE OPERATIONS; AND THE ROLE OF THE JUDICIARY IN HELPING TO RESOLVE OUR STATE’S LARGER SOCIETAL PROBLEMS. YOU WILL SEE HOW THESE THEMES INTERWEAVE TO PROVIDE ENHANCED SERVICES TO COURT USERS AND TO THE COMMUNITY AT LARGE. OVERARCHING THE THREE THEMES IS THE RULE OF LAW, THE BEACON THAT GUIDES ALL OF OUR EFFORTS TO ADDRESS THE EXPECTATIONS OF OUR CITIZENRY TO RESOLVE DISPUTES AND FOSTER THEIR SAFETY AND WELL-BEING.

I WILL BEGIN WITH A BRIEF REVIEW OF THE PAST YEAR.

WE HAVE, AS YOU KNOW, UNDERGONE REDUCTIONS IN BOTH STAFF AND RESOURCES IN RECENT YEARS. WE HAVE MANAGED THE COURTS WITH GREAT DISCIPLINE AND
remained focused on our efforts to meet our mandates to provide timely access and efficient court administration despite these challenges.

We have, over the past three years, deferred many of our initiatives as we recognized the challenges of a difficult economy. We have continued to focus our attention on our core services despite these obstacles and I firmly believe we have done an excellent job.

We have, once again, resolved more than 7 million cases in our various courts – the Supreme Court, the Appellate and Trial divisions of our Superior Court, the Tax Court and the Municipal Courts. And we have done this with more than 500 fewer staff members than in recent years and with judicial vacancies averaging between 50 and 55 judges. And to add to those challenges, in the past year we have had unprecedented changes in upper management – five new assignment judges, three new trial court administrators and one new member of my executive management team.

On behalf of Chief Justice Stuart Rabner and myself, I would like to publicly acknowledge the hard work, dedication and commitment of our judges, administration and staff to ensure that we meet our responsibilities as an organization. It is only because of them, that we have successfully faced our long-term challenges.

The Judiciary continues to be very involved in attacking some of the larger societal issues.

One of the best examples of the history of collaboration and cooperation between the three branches of government is the Judiciary’s Drug Court program. When drug courts were introduced in New Jersey in 1995 they were perhaps the most innovative access initiative the courts had ever undertaken. Addicts were given an unprecedented second chance by the criminal justice system and the Judiciary stepped into a significant role in trying to help solve one of society’s most vexing problems.

Drug courts divert nonviolent, drug-dependant offenders from costly state prison sentences into treatment and rehabilitation. The Judiciary works with the Division of Addiction Services in the Department of Human Services to provide participants with individualized substance abuse treatment. Since the program went statewide in 2002, the drug courts have diverted 11,329 offenders, most of whom were prison-bound. Of that number, 4,700 are still
active in the program and 1,930 have successfully graduated from the program.

By reducing costs associated with incarceration, the drug court program resulted in a net savings of $23 million to the state in fiscal year 2011, $24 million in fiscal year 2012 and a projected savings of approximately $24 million in fiscal year 2013.

While these budget savings are certainly significant, the savings to our society may be even more so. Reunited families, drug-free babies, employment, health insurance, drivers’ licenses for former addicts, child support payments made, nearly $5.4 million in fees and fines paid and lives broken free from the cycle of addiction and crime. These are the true benefits of bringing drug offenders back into society.

Over the next year, we will be working in close collaboration with the executive and legislative branches to create a program to expand drug courts and provide access to even more addicted residents. Make no mistake: drug court is not easy. There are offenders who choose to do time in prison, hoping for an early release, rather than sign on for the five years of intense, results-driven treatment and supervision that is the underpinning of drug court graduates’ success.

**Another example of this partnership is the Veteran’s Assistance Project.** Last year, I reported to you that our Veterans’ Assistance Program was active in 18 counties and that we intended to expand to serve every county. I am pleased to report that we have reached our goal and are operating in all 21 counties.

Through this program, the courts refer veterans to benefits and social services that can assist them. This program began as a pilot in Atlantic County in December 2008 and was carefully rolled out over three years to all counties. The collaboration among the Judiciary, the Department of Military and Veterans Affairs and the Department of Human Services is a fine example of the best government has to offer. Through this partnership, the Judiciary has facilitated access to services at no additional cost to the taxpayer, but with substantial value to the community. Since the program’s inception, 1,385 veterans have been referred to services intended to help the men and women who have served and who may be suffering from addiction and mental health issues. We owe these heroes nothing less.
In a similar effort, the New Jersey Judiciary has joined with a number of hospitals and safe houses throughout the state to enable victims of domestic violence to apply for temporary restraining orders without going to a courthouse.

Domestic violence victims are often unable to access court services and social services because of the fear of reprisal from their abusers.

The New Jersey Judiciary has joined with a number of hospitals and safe houses throughout the state to enable victims of domestic violence to apply for temporary restraining orders (TRO) without going to a courthouse.

Through the “Hospital to Court Safety Assistance Project” and the “Safe House to Court Safety Assistance Project,” domestic violence victims can appear before a judge via videoconferencing if they are being treated in an emergency room or have sought refuge in a safe house.

This program provides a much-needed point of access because it’s often difficult for domestic violence victims to seek a temporary restraining order if they are injured and need medical attention or if they are afraid to leave a safe house. Allowing victims to apply for a TRO via videoconferencing gives them protection from their abuser, affords them some peace of mind and helps expedite the legal process for obtaining a final restraining order.

The program was piloted in the Passaic Vicinage in partnership with St. Joseph’s Regional Medical Center in Paterson and has expanded to include hospitals in Camden, Essex, Gloucester, Hudson and Union Counties and safe houses in Atlantic, Bergen, Burlington, Camden, Essex, Middlesex, Monmouth, Morris and Passaic Counties. This use of technology will continue to expand for the benefit of our court users.

**We continue to leverage technology to provide services to the public and make our courts even more efficient.**

The Judiciary has made doing business with the courts more accessible to the public by adding more online services for court users. These new programs serve drivers, attorneys, self-represented litigants and court users whose primary language is Spanish.
New Jersey drivers appreciate the ability to pay tickets using our online payment and information system, NJMCDirect. During the past 12 months, we have seen an increase to 1.7 million tickets paid online, from 1.6 million tickets the previous year. We also processed payments of $127 million, up from $120 million the year before. In addition to regular payments, drivers can use NJMCDirect to pay tickets associated with suspended licenses and link to the MVC for license restoration and even get driving directions.

Additionally, we have created technological applications for attorneys to do business both representing their clients and managing their own professional responsibilities as members of the New Jersey Bar.

Attorneys can meet their annual obligations to register, pay annual fees and report on compliance with Mandatory Continuing Legal Education requirements with one easy click on the Judiciary website. All attorneys, whether they practice or not, whether judges or justices, must adhere to the annual obligations in order to remain eligible to practice law or to sit as a judge. The Attorney Online Registration and Payment program makes it easier than ever for attorneys to register. We are currently engaged in a campaign to promote utilization of this system by all attorneys. We’re not there yet, but we’re working on it. This year to date, 34,684 attorneys have registered online, a 41 percent increase compared to this time last year when 24,517 attorneys had used the online system.

Some court users decide to represent themselves in court. Once that decision is made, pro se-- or self-represented litigants-- now have access to a wealth of necessary information on the Judiciary’s website at njcourts.com under the “self-help center.” Forms, instructions and other information are available in both English and Spanish.

In an additional effort to provide access to court users who speak Spanish, we are in the process of translating a larger portion of our web site. We have an “Español” link on our home page to direct Spanish-speaking court users to the translated pages.

We are making a dedicated effort to reach out to various Hispanic bar associations and community groups through press releases and other communications tools we have translated for the benefit of Spanish-speaking New Jersey residents who may need court information.
I would like to briefly mention just a few more areas of technology in which we developed programs to keep attorneys abreast of court information and to provide the general public an Internet location to get information quickly and accurately:

1. Just last week, we added a searchable index of Civil Judgments to the Judiciary website. In the past, court users had to travel to the court houses in the counties or to the Superior Court Clerk’s Office in Trenton to search the index. Now the information is available online to anyone, anywhere, at any time.

   The index allows anyone to find statewide judgment liens filed in New Jersey. It includes liens resulting from civil, criminal, and family cases, administrative agency judgments, defaulted child support payments, Motor Vehicles Commission surcharge debts, certificates of indebtedness from the office of the Public Defender, and unpaid probation fines.

   One of the most common uses of the civil judgment database is to search liens against real property before it is sold. The availability of the database online will make this process easier and will give buyers and sellers of real property the ability to find judgments in advance of their intended transactions.

2. A recently-added attorney index function is available on our website to enable anyone to check the status of individual attorneys. With the index, a consumer can be assured that the attorney they have hired is licensed and eligible to practice in New Jersey. They also can find out where the attorney’s office is located and how long the attorney has been in practice. The database includes the date of admission to the bar, the status of the ability to practice law in New Jersey, and the county and municipality of the business office of practicing attorneys. Private attorneys, government attorneys, judges and in-house counsel are all included.

3. We have now made information about our civil cases available online together with an informational tutorial video to help the public navigate and obtain information regarding civil cases.
4. Jurors can take advantage of technology to meet their obligations to respond to a jury summons and to check each day on their reporting status. Like the NJMCDirect program and the attorney online registration program, the use of this feature grows year by year. It is our hope to be able to eliminate paper juror summonses one day.

5. Both court users and attorneys can find daily-updated court opinions online, including recently added Tax Court opinions and business-related opinions, along with the long-standing posting of Supreme Court and Appellate Court opinions, and certain trial court opinions.

I would next like to turn to the use of technology in the future of court business.

I invite all of you to review the Judiciary website and spend some time looking at the plethora of legal and programmatic resources available. But even with all that we have accomplished through the utilization of technology we still have significant technological challenges to overcome.

Judiciaries across the country have recognized that court systems in the 21st century must expand through what is euphemistically called "eCourts," a system to electronically receive, manage, store and provide to the public court documents and information.

Today, electronic filing of court cases is available for only two case types using the Judiciary’s Electronic Filing and Imaging System called JEFIS: regular Special Civil Part cases and more recently foreclosure actions. We are proud of what we have accomplished with JEFIS, particularly our success in turning JEFIS into a tool to effectively manage foreclosure cases. Our JEFIS Foreclosure project was the cover story in “Court Manager,” a national publication for court management professionals. The article is titled, “Paperless under Pressure. How the New Jersey Judiciary Adapted E-filing to Address the Foreclosure Crisis.”

But as good as JEFIS is, it still has the limitation of being a legacy system that is relying on a technological platform approximately 25 years old. To reach our goal of fully implementing an e-Court system will require a significant financial investment. In order to allow the Judiciary to continue to serve as a model for other court systems, we must look to the legislative and executive branches to provide a vehicle to accomplish this goal.
The importance of the Judiciary's development of its enhanced information technology systems is not just related to the work of the Judiciary. You should be aware of the fact that the Judiciary data collection and information systems are also relied upon by other executive branch agencies that utilize such information in order to do their jobs well.

From the perspective of law enforcement, the New Jersey State Police, county and local police departments and executive branch criminal justice agencies are able to utilize electronic information housed and maintained by the Judiciary.

Law enforcement officers are able to electronically file complaints, prosecutors are able to decide the nature of the charges, final records are now being accomplished electronically and such information is shared by the department of corrections and other county correctional facilities. Similarly, we are in partnership with the Department of Human Services, with respect to the exchange of child support information and the Motor Vehicle Commission for exchange of information related to the ownership and operation of motor vehicles in our state. All of these information systems rely upon the Judiciary and other governmental partners in an effort to keep our community safe and ensure the well-being of our residents.

When we talk about the need for resources for Judiciary IT projects, we are concerned with more than the needs or wants of the Judiciary. We are concerned with an interrelated system across the branches that cannot be separated and must remain connected and viable for the good of the entire state.

Lastly, and most importantly we are continuously focusing on our core mission. Our Judiciary remains dedicated to our larger society through our role as the arbitrator of disputes that occur within our communities and as a forum for the just prosecution of crimes and other offenses. In this role we ensure that justice is done each and every day in the hundreds of courtrooms throughout our state. In this role by and through the rule of law we are able to ensure that the foundation and principles that have made this country great are accomplished daily. Our judges, our hearing officers, our staff are committed to ensuring that the citizens of this state are afforded fair and efficient justice in our courtrooms.
Over a number of decades we have been dedicated to removing barriers to justice and ensuring equality and fairness for consumers of court services. Some examples of how the Judiciary has addressed these issues include removing obstacles for people with disabilities, providing interpreting assistance for people who speak little or no English and developing forms and other educational tools for litigants who are not represented by lawyers. We have also sought to expand the representation of women and minorities in our court system.

Building upon this foundation Chief Justice Stuart Rabner has formed a Supreme Court Advisory Committee on Access and Fairness. Central to this campaign is the focus on four key elements that impact one’s courthouse experience: Respect, Voice, Neutrality and Trust. These concepts have already been embodied in the Judiciary’s existing core values and serve as the foundation of our efforts to ensure justice is accomplished.

I am proud of our work and pleased to answer any questions that you may have.