



Committee for Modern Courts

Testimony

Public Hearings on the Executive Budget

before the

Joint Fiscal Committees of the

NYS Senate and Assembly

Public Protection

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My name is Denise Kronstadt, Executive Director of the Committee for Modern Courts. Modern Courts is an independent nonpartisan statewide court reform organization committed to improving the court system for all New Yorkers. We support an independent, highly qualified, and diverse judiciary that provides for the fair administration of justice and equal access to justice for all who use the courts to resolve their legal disputes. Through research, public outreach, court monitoring, education and advocacy efforts, Modern Courts seeks to advance these goals and to ensure public confidence in the judiciary.

On behalf of Modern Courts, thank you for providing us with the opportunity to submit this testimony:

- Supporting the Unified Court System's (UCS) budget request for FY 2026;
- Calling for both houses of the Legislature to support the audio-visual coverage of judicial proceedings in this year's budget in order to ensure the broadest and most robust transparency in our legal system.

Judiciary Budget

Modern Courts supports the Judiciary's FY 2026 Budget Request of \$3 billion. While this is an increase of 9.9% from Enacted FY 2025 funding, it represents an essential investment in the core operations and obligations of our courts and system of justice. This budget request will enable the courts to fulfill their mission to deliver justice in a manner that reflects the full measure of New York's commitment to an effective

judicial system and ensuring access to justice for all New York residents.

Modern Courts supports the full budget request made by the Judiciary. Below we speak to a few of the requests.

Technology Solutions

Modern Courts strongly supports the Judiciary budget request that includes \$112 million for technology needs. Technology solutions are essential to improve the security, transparency, accessibility, and efficiency of our courts. When courts function efficiently, individuals can resolve their legal issues faster and with less disruption to their lives. Investing in technology is not just about making the system more modern—it is about making it fairer, particularly for those who have historically faced the greatest challenges in accessing justice. Remote access and virtual hearings help bridge this gap, allowing more people to participate in legal proceedings without undue hardship. Online case management systems also play a crucial role by making it easier for litigants, attorneys, and self-represented individuals to submit and track cases, reducing delays and easing the administrative burden on courts. AI has potential that requires thoughtful and insightful review to harness its profound potential. Without these tools, and the resources to ensure their functionality, cases take longer to move through the system, leading to inefficiencies and growing backlogs that affect everyone. Investing in modern technology is not just a practical decision; it is a fundamental obligation to ensure that the court system serves all New Yorkers efficiently and equitably.

Family Courts

The FY2026 budget request by the Judiciary seeks to address many of the extraordinary obstacles litigants face in our Family Courts. These obstacles have unfortunately marked the Court's history. What distinguishes the Family Court is that most of the litigants are not represented by counsel, are in crisis, and are struggling to resolve complex issues profoundly impacting their children, safety, and livelihood. The Family Court Justice Initiative, spearheaded by the Hon. Richard Rivera, has focused its efforts on "solutions that use analytical data to prioritize areas for improvement, identify promising initiatives for potential scaling, and explore and test innovative ideas to reduce or prevent unnecessary system involvement. The principal goals of the Initiative are to more effectively serve individuals and families, interrupt cross-system and intergenerational cycles of trauma and system involvement, and forge a sustainable, equitable, and inclusive path forward for Family Court."¹ Funding its initiative is essential to reach these necessary goals, including, expanding on-site legal programs, and adding nonjudicial resources to family courts statewide, enhancing the CASA Program, and initiating a paid Attorney for Child mentorship program. The budget also seeks to increase the number of Support Magistrates and staff to address complex support and custody cases. Modern Courts' supports the initiatives and goals of the NYS Judiciary. The funding request is necessary and essential to meet those goals.

¹ New York State Unified Court System Budget Fiscal Year 2026

Civil Legal Services

Modern Courts supports the continued and increased funding of civil legal services. The Judiciary budget submission highlighted the increases in civil legal services funding as a priority: “The UCS is committed to meeting the critical needs of low-income and underrepresented New Yorkers. The FY 2026 Budget includes an increase of \$45.5 million, for a total budget of \$150 million.”² These programs are essential to ensure access to justice for New Yorkers in crisis, but who lack sufficient resources to hire a lawyer. For Modern Courts, this is a matter of simple justice that affects the safety and security of families and children. We ask that you support the Judiciary’s request for funding for civil legal services and the providers who provide critically needed legal representation in every county.

Audio-Visual Coverage of Judicial Proceedings

We urge both houses of the Legislature to update the draconian and inflexible rules, relics of the 1950s, that prohibit audio-visual coverage of court proceedings. The law that closes the courts to coverage (and makes broadcasts a misdemeanor), Section 52 of the Civil Rights Law, was adopted out of concern that coverage would degrade the judicial process and create misconceptions by the public. As a result of that long-outdated fear, all trial court proceedings are hidden from the public. Times have changed. Recent televised trials in other states, including *Minnesota v. Chauvin* (relating to the death of

² Id.

George Floyd), *State v. McMichael* (relating to the death of Ahmaud Arbery), and *State v. Rittenhouse*, have enhanced democracy by enabling the public to observe the reality of the courts in carrying out their most important function and generated important public awareness of the judicial system.”

As our report, [Cameras in the Courts: Enhancing Transparency in the New York State Judiciary](#), established, and as every other state in the USA except Louisiana and New York understand, audio-visual coverage of court proceedings informs, educates, and engages citizenry by providing access to unfiltered information. Audio-visual coverage of New York’s courts will create a greater understanding of how our system works. Snippets of information are not enough. And misinformation is dangerous. It is past time for New York to enter the twenty-first century and permit audio-visual coverage of judicial proceedings. A vibrant democracy requires an informed, educated, and engaged citizenry.

Respectfully Submitted,

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