



SUPREME COURT OF ILLINOIS

**CHAMBERS OF
JUSTICE MARY JANE THEIS**

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January 12, 2026

To my Supreme Court Colleagues:

I will retire from my position as Supreme Court Justice at the end of business, January 29, 2026.

I became a judge on July 1, 1983. A few weeks later the Greylord scandal broke where 17 Illinois judges were convicted of bribery. The judiciary of Illinois was a national disgrace. Over the years, Illinois judges have committed themselves to repair this terrible breach of trust. In the current moment when confidence in the courts and ultimately the rule of law has been eroded, it may be helpful to reflect on some of the lessons learned and some actions taken.

People will respect judicial decisions if they believe the court was fair. Judges are accountable for their actions. The Illinois Code of Judicial Conduct is written in clear language with definitions and explanations so that judges and importantly the public understand what is demanded of judges. Our Constitution created an independent Courts Commission with the authority to impose discipline on judges, including removal, without interference by the Supreme Court. Today the Courts Commission is fully funded by the legislature with an easily accessible website. Additionally, the Illinois Judicial Ethics Committee has been providing public advisory opinions on judicial ethics for over 30 years. Judicial independence and judicial ethics are either side of the same coin.

Judges must be competent and committed to the highest ethical standards. The goal of judicial education in Illinois is to provide opportunities for transformative learning experiences grounded in these ethical values. Judicial education has grown from regional seminars to the biannual Education Conference, where this year over 100 programs will be presented. The Illinois Judicial College was created 10 years ago to provide a high-quality curriculum for judges and also our justice partners. We know that being a judge is not just another job – it is an awesome responsibility.

Courts must not only be fair, they must also have the appearance of fairness. This concept of procedural fairness is a core principle of the Illinois Judicial College. The Supreme Court and the Appellate Court have conducted oral arguments in venues all across the state so that members of the public can experience Illinois' justice system. Cameras in the courtroom and live-streaming

of court events have brought the courts closer to the public. The Illinois Judges Association has been a leader, connecting judges with communities to demystify the justice system. Improvements in public-facing data allow the public to better understand the work of the courts. We are proud of what we do.

Courts have a responsibility to meet the needs of the community. The rise of self-represented litigants has dramatically changed the civil justice system. In response, the Illinois Supreme Court in 2012 created the Access to Justice Commission to promote equal access to justice, particularly for the poor and vulnerable. Throughout the years, the Commission has proposed initiatives to help members of the community identify their legal issues and gain an understanding of court processes.. For one example, court users can contact Illinois Court Help to get help navigating the court system. Supreme Court Rule 756(f) was adopted to be an annual reminder to Illinois lawyers that providing *pro bono* legal services is part of their professional responsibilities. Recently, the Illinois Supreme Court approved the concept of non-lawyer community justice workers. Illinois also faces a crisis in indigent criminal defense. The passage of the FAIR Act is an effort to find statewide solutions. The Covid pandemic forced the courts to adopt new ideas about access to justice. Many litigants today can have their legal issues resolved in remote proceedings. Courts are not a place, they are a service.

Courts must respond to real people with real people problems. Ours courts serve some of the most vulnerable people in our communities – people with severe mental illness, abused children, victims of domestic violence, people struggling with addiction, people with dementia who can no longer care for themselves, children in detention. Our courts have been addressing these problems in new and innovative ways, and Illinois has become a national leader, especially in the area of mental health. Problem solving courts have been shown to be highly effective. Actually, all courts are problem solving courts.

These are just some of the ways Illinois judges have worked to restore public trust. Canon 1, Rule 1.2 of the Code of Judicial Conduct says: “A judge shall act at all times in a manner that promotes public confidence in the independence, integrity, and impartiality of the judiciary.” Illinois judges work every day to earn the People’s trust.

I am deeply grateful that I have had the opportunity to serve.

Very truly yours,



MARY JANE THEIS
Justice, Illinois Supreme Court
First District