

COURTS

Courts call on Rhode Islanders to contemplate what justice looks like in new campaign



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PROVIDENCE — The state judiciary is inviting Rhode Islanders to ponder what justice looks like to them in a new campaign aimed at sparking what promise to be difficult conversations about the role courts have played in systemic racism.

“Our goal is to make sure our house is in order,” Supreme Court Chief Justice Paul A. Suttell said Wednesday in the blazing heat outside the Rhode Island Public Transit Authority headquarters on Elmwood Avenue.

The campaign, called When Justice Works, launched with the appearance of placards emblazoned on the sides of buses encouraging Rhode Islanders to start thinking – and talking – about what justice means to their lives.

The placards feature individual judges sharing their views of what justice means in their courtrooms.

To Family Court Judge Lia A. Stuhlsatz, it means “Justice works when children can be safely returned to their parents.”

For Workers’ Compensation Court Judge Keith A. Cardoza Jr., “Justice works when an injured worker who is entitled to benefits receives them.”

“My family’s story is a story of when justice works,” Supreme Court Justice Melissa A. Long said Wednesday. Long, whose father is Black and mother is white, was born three years after Loving v. Virginia, the landmark U.S. Supreme Court decision that struck down state laws banning interracial marriage.

The campaign is the work of the Supreme Court Committee on Racial and Ethnic Fairness in the Courts in partnership with the Center for Health and Justice Transformation, a nonpartisan organization whose mission is to advance health equity in the criminal justice system.

“The state does need a reckoning about racial equity,” said Mavis Nimoh, executive director of the center at The Miriam Hospital. The center is serving as a consultant and “thought partner” with the Committee on Racial and Ethnic Fairness.

“It’s an opportunity for dialogue,” Nimoh said.

Suttell established the committee last June in the aftermath of the death of George Floyd, the Black man murdered by former Minneapolis police officer Derek Chauvin. Suttell condemned the “wanton and violent deaths of young Black lives” and vowed to take steps to ensure that equal justice is in reach of all Rhode Islanders regardless of race, ethnicity or sexual orientation. Long, who became the state's first Black Supreme Court justice in January, is leading the 12-member committee made up of judges from all the courts.

The judiciary’s approach is multi-pronged. The first phase highlights four judges and their reflections on justice, both in videos that will be posted on the courts’ website and through the RIPTA ads, a recognition of the vital role buses play in transporting many court users.

The judiciary’s data-collection system will be revamped to capture all demographic information, particularly in criminal cases.

Judges, magistrates and staff will undergo training in September on implicit bias.

The judiciary plans to engage community members through a series of public town hall meetings, with an aim of ultimately making recommendations to the courts. The first one, on fines and fees, took place this week at the United Way of Rhode Island.

Jim Vincent, president of the NAACP in Providence, hailed the judiciary for taking a proactive approach and called on all state departments to do the same.

“There is a trust deficit out there. There are disparities in sentencing. ... There are people who can’t get adequate representation, so we have equity issues throughout the system,” Vincent said.

Suttell said he intends to make the Committee on Racial and Ethnic Fairness in the Courts permanent.

“It’s a mammoth undertaking when you consider it,” Suttell said of the courts' endeavor.