

✦ KNOW YOUR COURTS ✦

Rhode Island



Superior Court

Alice Bridget Gibney
Presiding Justice

May 2024

WHAT DOES THE COURT DO?

The Superior Court is the trial court of **general jurisdiction** in the Rhode Island **unified state court system**, having original jurisdiction in all felony proceedings, in civil matters where the amount in controversy exceeds \$10,000, and in matters of equity. Jurisdiction is concurrent with the District Court as to civil matters with amounts at issue from \$5,000 - \$10,000. The Superior Court also hears appeals on civil and criminal cases from the District Court. It has concurrent jurisdiction with the Supreme Court in issuing writs of habeas corpus and writs of mandamus. Any **appeal** from a decision rendered in Superior Court is taken directly to the Rhode Island Supreme Court.

Rhode Island's five counties are divided into four Superior Court jurisdictions: Kent, Washington, and Newport; with Providence/Bristol counties comprising one jurisdiction.

Rhode Island does not have a single trial court; however, the Superior Court is the forum for a trial by jury and a stenographic record of proceedings. Appeals from trials held in the District Court result in a ***trial de novo*** or entirely new trial in Superior Court.

The Superior Court also has **appellate** jurisdiction of decisions of local municipal and probate courts. Appeals from various boards and commissions, such as zoning board and Ethics Commission appeals, are heard in Superior Court as well as petitions to review disciplinary action imposed upon a state or local police officer by the chief of that department.

A special **Gun Court**, the first of its kind in the nation, heard its first gun case on September 12, 1994. This innovative program has had a dramatic impact upon the time from filing such a case in the Superior Court to disposition, a reduction from 18 months to 6 ½ months. The court is considered a great success both within Rhode Island and across the nation.

In addition to conducting trials, the Superior Court administers the highly successful **Court-Annexed Arbitration Program** which speeds the disposition of certain less complex civil cases in which there is \$100,000 or less at issue. Matters such as contract disputes, personal injury claims, and property damage suits may be certified to this alternative dispute resolution program.

During an arbitration hearing, evidence is presented in an informal setting to a court-trained attorney/arbitrator who, after considering the same, makes an award in the case usually within 10 days of the hearing. Arbitration not only speeds case resolution but also saves litigants and taxpayers millions of dollars a year by eliminating many of the costs associated with lengthy, formal trials. It also frees courtrooms and allows judges to concentrate on more serious or complex civil and criminal cases. Over the last five years, 53% of those cases designated to court-annexed arbitration have resulted in disposition.

Also administered through the Superior Court Arbitration Office is the annual “Settlement Week” which is held in Providence in December each year, during which civil cases may be resolved through **mediation**. Additional settlement weeks in the counties have been held with much

success, extending this option to cases filed outside of Providence. Over the last five years, 67% of those cases heard were settled through mediation.

In 2020, the court established a **Diversion Program** in partnership with the office of the Rhode Island Attorney General. The program is designed to offer an alternative to traditional conviction, sentencing, and incarceration by providing eligible defendants with a framework of supervision and services in lieu of incarceration and/or probation to help them make informed decisions, engage in positive behavior, and reduce the risk of recidivism.

WHO RUNS THE COURT?

The **Presiding Justice of the Superior Court** is the administrative judge of the court. As such, the Presiding Justice has responsibility for establishing calendars, assigning judges, appointing a Superior Court Administrator and other administrative staff, and making rules for the conduct of the court's business. The Presiding Justice also appoints a Jury Commissioner and all staff for various offices including but not limited to the Case Scheduling Offices, Clerk's Offices, the Arbitration Office, the Diversion Office, and the Central Registry.

The Presiding Justice of the Superior Court is assisted by 21 Associate Justices as well as five Magistrates, the Superior Court Administrator, the Superior Court Clerk's, the Jury Commissioner and various administrative staff.

Judicial appointments are made by the Governor following a recommendation of 3-5 candidates by the **Judicial Nominating Commission** to the Governor and confirmation by the Senate of the Governor's choice. Appointments are for life in the absence of judicial misconduct. Complaints about such misconduct are heard by the **Judicial Tenure and Discipline Commission**.

The Superior Court conducts its own judicial evaluation program, distributing questionnaires about judicial performance to jurors and attorneys practicing before the court.

THE SUPERIOR COURT CLERK'S OFFICE

There are four locations of the Clerk's Office throughout the state, corresponding to the four Superior Court jurisdictions: Providence/Bristol, Kent, Washington, and Newport (see last page of this booklet for addresses and telephone numbers). Rhode Island General Law § 8-4-4 establishes a County Clerk for each of these jurisdictions.

The **Clerk** is the custodian of all criminal and civil cases filed in the Superior Court. The Clerk's Office is responsible for receiving and storing all documents and other materials that make up a Superior Court case file. The Clerk is also custodian of the Superior Court seal.

All Superior Court hearings are attended by courtroom clerks from the Clerk's Office. Computer entries are made by Clerk's Office staff for all court proceedings. Fines, costs, and civil case fees are collected and

accounted for by the Clerk's Office, which also serves as a primary resource where attorneys and members of the public can gather information on Superior Court cases.

ABOUT JURY DUTY

The **petit jury** is the panel of 25-32 jurors from which 14 jurors are selected for criminal trials (12 + 2 alternates) and from which 8 are chosen for civil trials (6 + 2 alternates). Petit jurors serve for a two-day period in Providence/Bristol and Kent Counties, longer if a trial for which they are sitting extends beyond two days. Over the last five years 12,855 jurors were summoned for petit jury duty.

The Superior Court has implemented a **one-day, one-trial system** in Washington and Newport Counties to make more efficient use of jurors' time. This system of requiring jurors to serve for either **one day** or for the duration of **one trial** permits those not selected to serve on a case to be dismissed at the end of their first day. Similarly, a **two-day, one-trial system** has recently been established for Providence/Bristol and Kent Counties. This program is a cost saving measure and is also beneficial to employers, as employees can fulfill their civic obligation with a minimal amount of time away from work.

All Grand Jury **indictments** charging defendants with a crime are returned to Superior Court by the Attorney General. The **Grand Jury** consists of not more than 23 nor less than 13 individuals who decide whether sufficient evidence has been presented to return a **true bill**

against a defendant. If a true bill is returned, the Attorney General must then indict, bringing charges against that defendant in Superior Court.

As an alternative to indictment, the process of **information charging** was created through a state constitutional amendment in 1973. This allows a defendant to be charged by an affidavit brought by a police department to the Attorney General. Charges may also be brought by the Attorney General himself/herself. Since this procedure eliminates the use of the Grand Jury, it saves time for witnesses and police while providing safeguards to individuals charged with a crime. Grand Jury indictments are still required for the most serious felonies, called **capital offenses**, because they involve the possibility of life imprisonment: namely murder, rape, robbery, and burglary.

USE OF TECHNOLOGY

The Superior Court has a fully operational **video conferencing system** used to conduct video presentments during the daily criminal calendar. The video conferencing system increases safety for those who use the courthouse and provides substantial savings in inmate transportation costs from prison to court.

The Superior Court also has assistive listening devices available for the hearing impaired. These may be utilized by contacting the Administrative Office in advance.

WHERE IS THE SUPERIOR COURT?

The **Licht Judicial Complex**, formerly known as the Providence County Courthouse, is on South Main and Benefit Streets in Providence. It houses the Providence/Bristol County Superior Court as well as the Supreme Court, the State Law Library, and the Administrative Offices of the Rhode Island Superior Court.

The **Noel Judicial Complex** is on Quaker Lane in Warwick and houses the Kent County Superior Court; the **McGrath Judicial Complex** is on Tower Hill Road in Wakefield and houses the Washington County Superior Court; and the **Murray Judicial Complex** is on Washington Square in Newport and houses the Newport County Superior Court.

PRESIDING JUSTICE

Alice Bridget Gibney

ASSOCIATE JUSTICES

Robert D. Krause

Melanie Wilk Thunberg

Stephen P. Nugent

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Jeffrey A. Lanphear

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Kristin E. Rodgers

Brian P. Stern

Brian Van Couyghen

Sarah Taft-Carter

Luis M. Matos

Joseph A. Montalbano

Richard A. Licht

Maureen B. Keough

Melissa E. Darigan

Richard D. Raspallo

Linda Rekas-Sloan

R. David Cruise

Kevin F. McHugh

Christopher K. Smith

Joseph J. McBurney

MAGISTRATES

Patrick T. Burke, Special Magistrate

John F. McBurney III, Magistrate

Gina K. Lopes, General Magistrate

Amanda L. Valentino, Drug Court Magistrate

ADMINISTRATIVE OFFICE

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