



COMMITTEE ON RACIAL AND ETHNIC FAIRNESS IN THE RHODE ISLAND COURTS

Fourth Quarterly Report: December 31, 2024

On October 20, 2020, Chief Justice Paul A. Suttell issued Executive Order No. 2020-15 establishing the Committee on Racial and Ethnic Fairness in the Rhode Island Courts. The Committee is charged with identifying and confronting areas where racism, inequality and discrimination may exist in our judicial system and being the driving force of change within the Rhode Island Judiciary. Executive Order No. 2020-15 further provides that “the committee shall seek to identify and remediate bias and prejudice, both conscious and unconscious, in the administration of justice in this State. It should also work to develop programs and protocols for education and training with respect to racial justice, unconscious bias, and fairness, and make recommendations regarding the impact of race on various court processes.”

The following mission statement has guided the Committee’s work since it was established in 2020:

To enhance public confidence in the independence, integrity, and impartiality of the Rhode Island Judiciary, and to promote a fair and bias-free justice system by: 1) engaging in self-examination, education, and public outreach; and 2) identifying areas of systemic racism, unconscious bias, disparate impact, and socioeconomic and other inequities; and 3) taking affirmative steps to self-monitor and combat inequities, so as to ensure a system that is accessible to all and treats all persons equally.

In accordance with Executive Order [2020-15](#) and Administrative Order [2024-12](#) the following judicial officers were reappointed for a second term, alongside the appointment of new selected members. This order reflects the Judiciary’s commitment to ensuring the continued service of experienced judicial officers while welcoming fresh perspectives to the Committee.

Hon. Paul A. Suttell, Chief Justice (ex Officio), R.I. Supreme Court

Hon. Melissa A. Long, Associate Justice (Chair), R.I. Supreme Court,
(Term expiring October 20, 2025)

Hon. Luis M. Matos, Associate Justice, R.I. Superior Court
(Term expiring October 20, 2025)

Hon. Christopher Smith, Associate Justice, R.I. Superior Court
(Term expiring October 20, 2027)

Hon. Lia N. Stuhlsatz, Associate Justice, R.I. Family Court
(Term expiring October 20, 2025)

Hon. Edward H. Newman, Magistrate, R.I. Family Court
(Term expiring October 20, 2026)

Hon. Alberto Aponte-Cardona, Magistrate, R.I. Family Court
(Term expiring October 19, 2027)

Hon. Pamela Woodcock Pfeiffer, Associate Judge, R.I. District Court
(Term expiring October 20, 2027)

Hon. Colleen M. Hastings, Associate Judge, R.I. District Court
(Term expiring October 20, 2027)

Hon. Melissa DuBose, Associate Judge, R.I. District Court
(Term expiring October 20, 2025)

Hon. Susan Pepin-Fay, Associate Judge, R.I. Workers' Compensation Court
(Term expiring October 20, 2026)

Hon. Keith A. Cardoza, Jr., Associate Judge, R.I. Workers' Compensation Court
(Term expiring October 20, 2027)

Hon. Alan Goulart, Magistrate, R.I. Traffic Tribunal
(Term expiring October 20, 2027)

*Hon. John J. McConnell, Jr., Chief Judge, U.S. District Court, District of R.I.
(Term expiring October 20, 2026)

*Hon. Mary S. McElroy, District Judge, U.S. District Court, District of R.I.
(Term expiring October 20, 2027)

*Hon. Patricia A. Sullivan, Magistrate Judge, U.S. District Court, District of R.I.
(Term expiring October 20, 2025)

** On November 16, 2023, the Chief Judge of the U.S. District Court for the District of Rhode Island issued a [General Order](#) Regarding Appointment to the Committee on Racial and Ethnic Fairness in the Rhode Island Courts and subsequently appointed three judicial officers to serve as full members of the Committee for staggered three-year renewable terms.*

Further, the following judicial officers continue to engage in the work of the Committee.

Hon. Edward C. Clifton (Ret.)
Hon. Shilpa Naik, Associate Justice, R.I. Family Court
Hon. Amanda Leigh Valentino, Magistrate, R.I. Superior Court

The Committee continues to invite the engagement and input of all judicial officers in its important work, including by attending Committee meetings.

Executive Order No. 2020-15 authorizes invitations to members outside of the Committee to participate in its work; accordingly, the Committee holds joint meetings, on quarterly basis, with the Committee on Diversity, Equity and Inclusion (DEI) of the Rhode Island Bar Association. The

two Committees collaborate on projects aimed at addressing areas of disparate impact and inequities in our legal system.

The following Rhode Island Judiciary staff work with the Committee:

Julie P. Hamil, State Court Administrator

Kathleen Kelly, General Counsel

Alexandra (Lexi) Kriss, Asst. State Court Administrator, Community Outreach & Public Relations

Sara Gilkenson, Diversity Coordinator

Committee Activities

Lunch & Learn Series Celebrates Hispanic Heritage Month – A Conversation with Rhode Island General Treasurer, James A. Diossa

The Committee, in collaboration with the Judiciary’s Diversity Office, and the Community Outreach and Public Relations Office, co-hosted its annual Lunch & Learn event in celebration of National Hispanic Heritage Month on October 8, 2024. This year’s event featured an engaging conversation with R.I. General Treasurer, James A. Diossa, who shared insights about his journey and the impact of Latino leadership in the state. The program began with opening remarks by Family Court Judge Elizabeth Ortiz, who underscored the importance of celebrating diversity and fostering community connections. This event provided an opportunity to honor Hispanic heritage while encouraging dialogue about representation and contributions within R.I.’s vibrant Latino community.

Justice Riders 2024

On October 24-27, 2024, several members of the Committee on Racial & Ethnic Fairness, accompanied by 100 state and federal judges from Massachusetts, Rhode Island, and elsewhere embarked on an impactful journey to Montgomery, Alabama, to explore the nation’s history related to slavery, Jim Crow, and the struggle for civil rights. The itinerary included a visit to the courtroom of Judge Frank M. Johnson Jr., known for his landmark rulings that advanced civil rights, and time spent at the three Equal Justice Initiative sites, beginning with a welcome address by Bryan Stevenson, Esq. The group also had the privilege of dining with Fred Gray, Esq., the renowned attorney and civil rights champion; and visited historic sites in Selma, Alabama, with JoAnne Bland, a civil rights foot soldier who witnessed the events of Bloody Sunday, March 7, 1965. The visit to Selma culminated with judges crossing the historic Edmund Pettus Bridge.

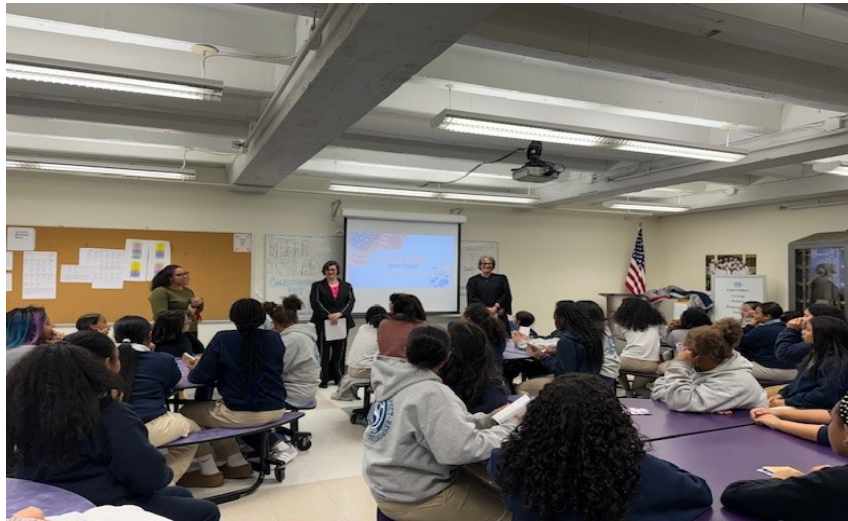
Upon their return, Committee members and other participants of Justice Riders 2024 have shared reflections of the journey.

- Justice Long and Chief Judge McConnell spoke at a Lunch & Learn CLE hosted by the Federal Bar Association on November 21, 2024 (“Experiences & Insights from the Judicial Education Trip to Alabama”).
- *The Atlanta Lawyer*, [the Bar Journal of the Atlanta Bar Association](#), published “100 Yankee Judges Visit Historic Judge Frank M. Johnson’s Alabama Court.”

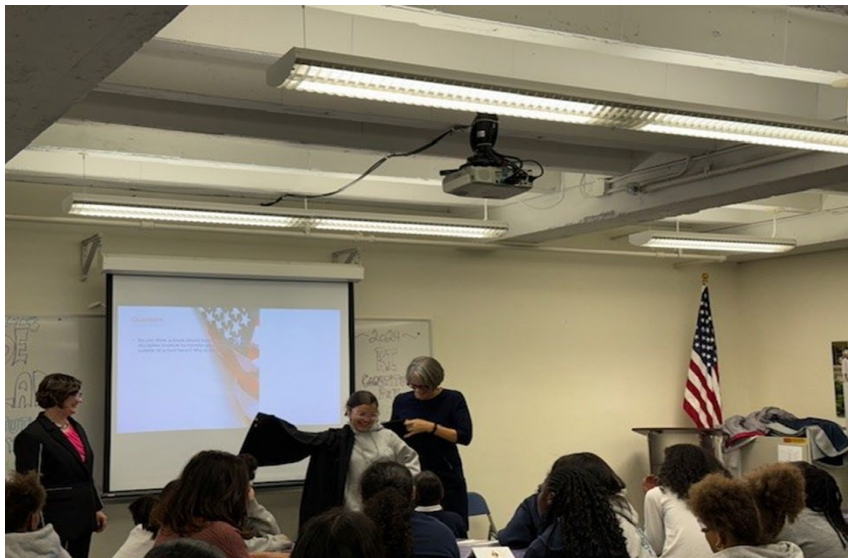
Constitution Day Program

On October 29, 2024, members of the Committee worked with the Committee on DEI and staff of the Rhode Island Bar Association to hold the second annual Constitution Day program aimed at educating Rhode Island students about law and civics.

This year's program focused on the theme "First Amendment Rights of Students in the Digital Age: Navigating Social Media, AI, and the Dangers of Information Overload." Through this theme, students explored the role of First Amendment rights in today's digital landscape with a focus on the complexities of social media, artificial intelligence, and the challenges posed by information overload.



Twelve schools across Rhode Island participated in this year's program: Barrington High School, Central Falls High School, Classical High School, Roger Williams Middle School, Segue Institute for Learning, Sophia Academy, Westerly High School, and Woonsocket High School Career and Technical Center. Secretary of State Gregg Amore joined the program, presenting at Barrington High School.



National Center for State Courts – Webinar: Jury Service and Financial Fairness – A Conversation on Juror Compensation Reform

On October 30, 2024, Committee members participated in a webinar hosted by the National Center for State Courts (NCSC) titled *Jury Service and Financial Fairness*, that featured a preview screening of a documentary, *Judging Juries* directed by Abby Ginzberg; followed by a panel discussion with state court leaders and business community experts. The panel explored various approaches to increasing juror compensation and examined the practical implications of implementing these methods, aiming to address financial barriers to jury service and promote broader civic participation.

Jury Community Listening Session – Ministers Alliance of Rhode Island

On November 2, 2024, members of the Committee, in continued collaboration with the Ministers Alliance of Rhode Island (MARI), held a follow-up listening session at Unity Chapel, hosted by MARI President, Pastor George Farley and community members. The two-hour session focused on fostering increased participation and amplifying the value of diverse perspectives in the court system, particularly from the Black community.

In collaboration with the Committee’s General Counsel, the Committee is assessing how best to incorporate assistance from MARI into a comprehensive plan to increase jury diversity. Ideas include possible public promotion events and information campaigns to encourage participation, as well as ways to increase juror pay. Counsel will research information regarding the percentage of cases that go to trial and whether jurors qualify for transit passes in addition to free parking.

Lunch & Learn Series Native American History Month, Lunch & Learn – Language, Revitalization, and Governance

On November 20, 2024, the Committee, in collaboration with the Judiciary’s Diversity Office, and the Community Outreach and Public Relations Office, co-hosted its annual Lunch & Learn series in recognition of Native American History Month, offering an enlightening program that celebrated Indigenous heritage and traditions. The event featured a unique presentation by Dr. Joseph Dupris, Visiting Assistant Professor with Brown University’s Native American and Indigenous Studies Initiative. Professor Dupris, an anthropologist and linguist, shared his expertise on language revitalization and governance, providing an in-depth exploration of their significance within Indigenous communities. This engaging session underscored the importance of preserving Native languages and cultural practices while fostering greater understanding of Indigenous perspectives.

Blueprint for Racial Justice – Northeast Region Workgroup for Racial Justice Education

The three-person team from Connecticut continues to spearhead monthly meetings with representatives from Delaware, the District of Columbia, Massachusetts, New Jersey, Pennsylvania, Rhode Island, and Vermont to share thoughts, resources and best practices related to racial justice education in the courts. Participating teams from the various Northeast region states have been making virtual presentations about efforts and programs underway in different jurisdictions. On November 26, 2024, Justice Long, Judge Karen Lynch Bernard, Sara Gilkenson, and Tamera Rocha of the Access to Justice Office presented a PowerPoint and discussed efforts of the Rhode Island Judiciary regarding various initiatives related to racial justice education.

Rhode Island Bar Association Committee on DEI

The Committee continues to work collaboratively with the Bar Association's Committee on DEI. The Committees held a joint meeting on December 3, 2024.

LEOBOR

Pursuant to the recently-enacted amendments to the Law Enforcement Officers' Bill of Rights (LEOBOR) statute, the General Counsel has convened a subcommittee[‡] to evaluate attorney-applicants who seek to participate in future LEOBOR hearing panels to evaluate alleged misconduct of law enforcement officers.

The DEI Committee of the Rhode Island Bar Association reviewed attorney-applicants and the Bar Association submitted recommendations to the Committee. The subcommittee (made up of Judges Luis Matos, Christopher Smith, Lia Stuhlsatz and Magistrate Alan Goulart) reviewed the applications and concurred with the Bar Association recommendations. The full Committee will meet in early January to vote on the subcommittee recommendations. Once the full Committee votes, the Committee will present final recommendations to Chief Justice Suttell.

‡Justice Long did not participate.

Public Inquiries

The Committee continues to monitor an e-mail address where members of the public are welcome to send their thoughts, suggestions, stories and any other input that they wish to be considered in connection with the Committee's mission: CREF@courts.ri.gov. During the fourth quarter of 2024, the Committee received one e-mail regarding a request for a meeting. The Committee is working with court administration regarding follow up in the first quarter of 2025.

A Look Ahead

- Continuing collaboration with the Committee on DEI in pursuit of projects aimed at addressing areas of disparate impact and inequities in our legal system, including the expansion of civics outreach and education to foster better understanding of civic rights and responsibilities and encourage greater civic participation.
- The Rhode Island Judiciary in collaboration with the National Consortium on Racial & Ethnic Fairness in the Courts will host its annual meeting this spring in the Ocean State: April 13-16, 2025. The theme is *Resilience Through History: Reflecting on 150 Years of Progress and Setbacks in Racial and Ethnic Fairness*.



- *Turning Pages*: The third season kicks off on January 17, 2025, with a discussion of The Warmth of Other Suns – The Epic Story of America’s Great Migration, by Isabel Wilkerson. Judicial officers will also read, view and discuss additional works that illuminate the struggles of historically excluded groups for inclusion and fair treatment, including Small Mercies, by Dennis Lehane and the Jubilee Singers: Sacrifice and Glory, an American Masters film.
- Rhode Island Ministers Alliance Annual Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., Scholarship Breakfast on January 20, 2025.
- *Justice Riders 2024* – post-trip reflection, education, and outreach:
 - BBQ dinner hosted by Flaschner Judicial Institute.
 - Planning meeting for R.I. Bar Association Annual meeting workshop.
- Continuing collaboration with the Ministers’ Alliance of Rhode Island on future outreach and community participation in the Jury Community Listening Sessions.
- Continuing collaboration with Community Outreach Public Relations on future outreach and lunch and learn initiatives.

Conclusion

The Committee wishes to thank the Chief Justice for identifying the need for this important work and his commitment to ensuring that the Committee will succeed in its mission. The Committee looks forward to reporting its progress in the next quarterly report, due on March 31, 2025.

Respectfully submitted,

The Committee on Racial and Ethnic Fairness in the Rhode Island Courts

December 31, 2024.