



COMMITTEE ON RACIAL AND ETHNIC FAIRNESS IN THE RHODE ISLAND COURTS

Third Quarterly Report: September 30, 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.

The Chief Justice initially designated twelve (12) judicial officers, representing each court within the unified judicial system, to be the inaugural members of this important body.

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

Hon. Melissa A. Long, Associate Justice, R.I. Supreme Court*

*Chair

Term: October 20, 2020 – October 19, 2023

Hon. Edward C. Clifton, Associate Justice (ret.), R.I. Superior Court
Term: October 20, 2020 – October 19, 2023

Hon. Luis M. Matos, Associate Justice, R.I. Superior Court
Term: October 20, 2020 – October 19, 2023

Hon. Christopher K. Smith, Associate Justice, R.I. Superior Court
Term: October 20, 2020 – October 19, 2023

Hon. Lia N. Stuhlsatz, Associate Justice, R.I. Family Court
Term: October 20, 2020 – October 19, 2023

Hon. Edward H. Newman, Magistrate, R.I. Family Court
Term: October 20, 2020 – October 19, 2023

Hon. Alberto Aponte-Cardona, Magistrate, R.I. Family Court
Term: October 20, 2020 – October 19, 2023

Hon. Pamela Woodcock Pfeiffer, Associate Judge, R.I. District Court
Term: October 20, 2020 – October 19, 2023

Hon. Melissa DuBose, Associate Judge, R.I. District Court
Term: October 20, 2020 – October 19, 2023

Hon. Keith Cardoza, Jr., Associate Judge, R.I. Workers' Compensation Court
Term: October 20, 2020 – October 19, 2023

Hon. Susan Pepin-Fay, Associate Judge, R.I. Workers' Compensation Court
Term: October 20, 2020 – October 19, 2023

Hon. Alan R. Goulart, Magistrate, R.I. Traffic Tribunal
Term: October 20, 2020 – October 19, 2023

All currently active judicial officers continue to serve beyond the expiration of the first term; the Hon. Colleen M. Hastings, Associate Judge, R.I. District Court has begun serving as a member; and the Hon. Edward C. Clifton continues to engage in the work of the Committee in an informal capacity. The Committee continues to invite the engagement and input of all judicial officers in its important work, including by attending monthly meetings.

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.

Hon. John J. McConnell, Jr., Chief Judge
Hon. Mary S. McElroy, District Judge
Hon. Patricia A. Sullivan, Magistrate Judge

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 Admin., Community Outreach & Public Relations

Sara Gilkenson, Diversity Coordinator

Committee Retreat

Judicial officers convened at a retreat on September 13, 2024, to reflect on past projects and to consider priorities for the coming term. The Committee will continue to prioritize education and training; community engagement and collaborations; and data collection and analysis as a means of identifying inequities and areas of disparate impact. Additionally, the Committee will continue to focus on the importance of broadening the diversity and inclusivity of Rhode Island’s jury panels.

Committee Activities

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

The three-person team from Connecticut has spearheaded 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.

Skills for Rhode Island’s Future, PrepareRI Summer Internship 2024

The Judiciary hosted eight high school summer interns for six weeks. Committee members, including Judges Smith and DuBose, allowed the students to observe their calendars.

RWU School of Law, Mandell-Boisclair Social Justice Summer Camp

Roger Williams University School of Law hosted a first-of-its-kind program designed for middle school students who are interested in learning more about the importance of law in daily life. Held July 8-12, 2024, the camp covered social justice movements—from free speech protestors to environmental justice activists, to voting rights supporters. Several Committee members engaged with campers at various sessions throughout the week.

Rhode Island Bar Association Committee on DEI

The Committee continues to work collaboratively with the Bar Association's Committee on DEI.

- Members of the Committee on Racial & Ethnic Fairness in the Courts supported the Committee on DEI in its planning and implementation of “From Attorney to Judge: A Roadmap to the Bench,” held on September 27, 2024. A highly successful and well-attended CLE, the day-long session was a project related to the Committee on DEI's focus on Leadership Pathways. It explored the reasons why diversity on the bench is important, including how it can lead to better-informed decisions, increased public confidence in the judiciary, and a broader range of perspectives being represented. Judge Christopher Smith spoke about the Importance of Different Perspectives; Judge Keith Cardoza, Jr. participated in a panel that discussed Interviews & Selections; Judge Melissa DuBose joined a panel that reflected on Personal Challenges, Rewards & Growth; and Justice Melissa A. Long led a Fireside Chat with U.S. District Court for the District of R.I., Judge William E. Smith.
- The two Committees are collaborating again on a Constitution Day program to commemorate the signing of the United States Constitution. On October 29, 2024, judicial officers and members of the Bar will engage with students from diverse communities with the goal of fostering better understanding of civic rights and responsibilities and encouraging greater civic participation, both of which are key to a healthy democracy.

Jury Diversity

The second listening session with the Ministers Alliance of Rhode Island (MARI), previously rescheduled for July 16, 2024, was further postponed due to a change in leadership at MARI. The Committee hopes to continue to pursue the action plan identified at the April 23, 2024 outreach event.

Justice Riders

Members of the Committee on Racial & Ethnic Fairness in the Courts continue to plan a judicial education trip to Montgomery, AL, as a joint project involving state and federal judges. The itinerary includes visits to the [Legacy Sites in Montgomery](#) and the [Frank M. Johnson, Jr. Institute](#) at the U.S. District Courthouse in the Middle District of Alabama, as well as a day trip to Selma. A self-funded trip, the project is a collaborative learning opportunity for state and federal judges circuit-wide about this important aspect of American History. To-date, 100 state and federal judges from Maine, Massachusetts, New Hampshire, Puerto Rico, and Rhode Island have registered to attend the trip on October 24-27, 2024.

A Look Ahead

- Continuing collaboration with the R.I. Bar Association’s Committee on DEI in pursuit of projects aimed at addressing areas of disparate impact and inequities in our legal system.
- Hispanic Heritage Month Lunch & Learn in collaboration with the Office of Community Outreach and Public Relations
- Outreach and engagement in observance of Constitution Day 2024.
- *Turning Pages*: fourth season planning.
- Planning for the 2025 National Consortium on Racial & Ethnic Fairness in the Courts.

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 December 30, 2024.

Respectfully submitted,

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

September 30, 2024.