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## *Municipal Court Judges and Staff Are Integral to Success of Criminal Justice Reform in NJ*



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Criminal justice reform has shifted into high gear with the kickoff meeting and launch of the initial pilot in Passaic Vicinage, with the Morris/Sussex and Camden Vicinages to follow shortly. The pilot counties, working closely with the Administrative Office of the Courts, have an integral role to play in developing and testing the operational components of criminal justice reform, such as the automated risk assessment tool.

The other 12 vicinages, while not part of the pilot, are every bit as active in designing how those operational components will be structured in those counties.

As part of that process, all 15 vicinages and 21 counties are scheduling and conducting many outreach meetings for stakeholders and the public to explain what criminal justice reform is and how it will affect them. Kickoff events are being scheduled throughout 2016 leading up to the Jan. 1, 2017 statewide implementation date.

All of this is a collaborative and synergistic effort, involving the AOC, the Superior Courts, and the municipal courts, with everyone working diligently toward our mandated deadline for statewide implementation.

The overall project has been termed a sea change. Perhaps more accurately though it can be described as a series of sea changes, with each building upon the other.

One such change is to ensure that all defendants are positively identified as early in the process as possible in order to be able to accurately assess that individual's risk level, which is the fundamental principle of the reform.

To accomplish this, we have worked closely with the state police to develop and implement a real-time LiveScan interface that will send the newly entered arrest fingerprint record directly from the State Police to the Judiciary for criminal complaint entry. This process ensures that the defendant's State Bureau of Identification (SBI) number and other data are available in the complaint entry process as well as for the risk tool.

Combining the current arrest information and the defendant's criminal history allows the risk assessment tool to provide the numerical scores to assist municipal court judges and authorized municipal court administrators and deputy municipal court administrators in determining whether to issue a warrant or summons.

This also allows the first appearance judge to determine any conditions of release for the defendant.

Integrating the LiveScan fingerprinting process, which is operational in virtually every law enforcement agency throughout the state, with our Electronic Court Disposition Reporting (eCDR) system not only allows for the positive identification of the defendant but also improves the accuracy of the data and the speed by which law enforcement officers can complete the complaint entry process.

This new integrated eCDR LiveScan system will be rolled out across the state ahead of criminal justice reform implementation and should be completed by the end of July.

To date, Passaic, Morris/Sussex and Camden vicinages have completed comprehensive training sessions for Municipal Court judges, court staff, and local law enforcement agencies.

In addition to the eCDR LiveScan upgrade, we have built and rolled out a new unified master statute table.

We now have one comprehensive charging table that will be used by the criminal, municipal, family and probation divisions and by law enforcement.

We have coordinated with the state police for them to use the table for their Computerized Criminal History (CCH) records and for all the LiveScan devices across the state. This enhancement is foundational to the success of criminal justice reform by ensuring that historical data and new charges are scored correctly.

The assignment judges and trial court administrators are filling the Judiciary leadership role in the counties in this effort.

In the municipalities that leadership role must be played by the municipal court judges and municipal court administrators, with oversight by and assistance from the vicinage presiding judge and division manager.

The municipal court judges and administrators must ensure that the municipal governing body is aware of this sea change that is in progress, that the local police department understands the importance of having a functioning and up-to-date LiveScan system, that the local court staff have been trained on the details and impact of criminal justice reform, and that information is provided to the public through numerous outreach opportunities.

While significant outreach on the details and impact of criminal justice reform has already occurred at the municipal court level, with more than 500 municipal courts, much more remains to be done.

The outreach to judges and court staff therefore necessarily will continue throughout the year to ensure that all fully understand their critical roles in implementing criminal justice reform.

And the need for outreach by judges and court managers – municipal court and Superior Court – to the public will continue and in fact will increase the closer we get to Jan. 1, 2017.

I want to thank everyone involved in that outreach and for helping to inform and educate the public on what this criminal justice reform is all about.