

2026 Condition of the Judiciary

Susan Larson Christensen

Chief Justice of the Iowa Supreme Court



Wednesday, January 14, 2026



2026 CONDITION OF THE JUDICIARY

Madame President, Mr. Speaker, Members of the General Assembly, Governor Reynolds, Lieutenant Governor Cournoyer, state officials, colleagues, family, friends and all Iowans.

Thank you for the invitation to address this joint convention of the 91st General Assembly on the condition of the judiciary.

As introduced, I am Suzy Christensen, and I am honored to stand before you today as your chief justice. I continue to live in Harlan with my husband of 44 years and the person I count on most. He is here today along with our five children.

Also joining me today for the first time is my niece, while my mom is here with perfect attendance. And once again, I'm keeping Dad with me in spirit by wearing his robe for this special day.

And for those who wait all year to get a shoutout from Grammy: all of them are here but two. One of them is old enough to have a scheduling conflict, and the other is young enough to not be trusted.

To my six colleagues on the supreme court, thank you for the confidence placed in me as chief justice. I may carry the title, but I never carry this work alone. I rely heavily on each of you for your judgment, perspective and friendship.

The strength of our judiciary does not reside in one judge or one court. It is built by judges across the state who lead every day—in our trial courts and in

our court of appeals—and whose work shapes justice where it is delivered. Let me take this opportunity to recognize leadership within our judicial branch.

In addition to writing opinions, I'd like to share just a snippet of other critical work each justice performs. Would you please stand as I call your names and remain standing:

Justice Tom Waterman, from Davenport, provides oversight of the business specialty court and co-chairs the bar conduct committee for lawyer discipline and regulation.

He is liaison for the 7th Judicial District which means he works closely with Chief Judge Henry Latham from Eldridge.

Justice Ed Mansfield, from Des Moines, chairs the task force on Fairness in Jury Selection which includes a cross-section of prosecutors, defense attorneys and trial judges who are examining possible changes to the rules governing peremptory strikes of potential jurors. He also serves as the only state supreme court justice on the Standing Committee on the Federal Rules of Procedure.

He is liaison for the 5th Judicial District, working closely with Chief Judge David Porter from Des Moines.

Justice Christopher McDonald, also from Des Moines, is leading the judicial branch's Artificial Intelligence Working Group which helps determine how AI should be used—and regulated—to ensure our courts remain both efficient and fair.

He is liaison for the Court of Appeals, working closely with Chief Judge Mary Tabor from Des Moines.

Thank you to the eight other members of the Court of Appeals who are also in attendance.

Justice McDonald is also liaison for the 1st Judicial District, working closely with Chief Judge Kellyann Lekar from Waterloo.

Justice Dana Oxley, from Swisher, most recently headed a task force to update the rules of appellate procedure to make the process more efficient in light of changes brought about by electronic filing.

She is liaison for the 6th Judicial District, working closely with Chief Judge Lars Anderson from Iowa City.

She is also joining the grandparent club on our court this year.

Justice Matt McDermott, from Des Moines, chairs the Access to Justice Commission which works to identify and remove barriers to fully accessing the civil justice system for all Iowans, regardless of income.

He is liaison for two districts, the 2nd Judicial District led by Chief Judge Amy Moore from Ames, and the 8th Judicial District, led by Chief Judge Shawn Showers from Washington.

Justice David May is from Polk City. He chairs the supreme court's committee on judicial technology.

He is liaison for the 3rd Judicial District, working closely with Chief Judge Patrick Tott from Sioux City.

He is also liaison for our state treatment courts—something near and dear to my heart.

Notice there is only one chief judge still seated? I saved the best for last.

The 4th Judicial District is home to me, and as liaison I have the honor of working closely with Chief Judge Craig Dreismeier from Council Bluffs

Thank you all for providing leadership in our branch.

Each year, I choose a theme to frame my remarks. In my first five speeches, I spoke about hope, peace, listening, building connections and commitment. This year, my theme is leadership. Not leadership as a title, but leadership as action—the willingness to make difficult decisions. And let me tell you, this past year my colleagues and I have done exactly that. I will go into detail in a few minutes, but two decisions we made in particular were not easy. I know they were hard for some of our employees and judicial officers—people who are deeply committed to this work and who we respect and care about.

As I traveled frequently between Harlan and Des Moines last summer, grappling with the weight of some of the most difficult decisions facing our judicial branch, I found myself asking hard questions. When so many people are upset, am I doing the right thing? Wouldn't it be easier to accept the status quo

and avoid the disruption that comes with change? Of course it would be easier. Much easier. But I knew, it's not the right thing to do.

And it made me wonder, how have others who have gone before me handled situations like this? Boom. I just figured out this year's theme. Leadership. I started close to home, within the judicial branch. Former Chief Justices Lou Lavorato and Marsha Ternus were kind enough to join me for lunch.

Justice Ternus served 17 years on our court and was chief from 2006 to 2010. When I began presiding in juvenile court in 2007, she spearheaded a profound shift in how we handle the juvenile justice docket in Iowa. Under her leadership, juvenile justice became a priority—not something that waited for its turn, but work that demanded timely, thoughtful attention for the sake of children and families. I am thankful for her unwavering dedication to juvenile justice which shaped this branch. It is a legacy I have been proud to continue.

Justice Lou Lavorato served as a district court judge for seven years before joining the supreme court in 1986. He served as chief from 2000 until his retirement in 2006. I am deeply honored that he is with us today. Chief, would you please stand and be recognized?

Justice Lavorato's legacy is the judicial branch building across the street. During his years as chief, he worked tirelessly to secure the funding for that building and to collaborate with its architects on design. That building—with its striking floors and imposing columns—stands as a powerful example of what can

be accomplished when all three branches of government work together. Chief, your efforts are deeply appreciated.

Because the work of leadership in Iowa does not belong to just one branch, I turned to leaders in the other two branches. From the executive branch, I spoke with Governor Reynolds, as well as former Governors Branstad, Culver and Vilsack. And from the legislative branch, I spoke with current and former leaders in both chambers and from both parties in an effort to gain insight on their experiences with leadership in Iowa.

I shared some of the recent challenges facing the judicial branch and the decisions that followed. In return, they spoke about some of the challenges they faced in office and how they worked through them as leaders.

Across every conversation, the message was unmistakable: “Do what you believe is right, even when it is not popular. And when difficult decisions must be made, explain yourself.” That is what I will do today. I want to walk through some decisions made by our court this past year and talk directly about what this branch needs from you to meet its responsibilities to the people of Iowa.

One of the key decisions our court made this past summer sent ripples throughout the branch—class and comp. By that, I mean we re-examined how every job is defined in our branch—and how we pay the 1500 people who fill them. Aside from the fact that a comprehensive class and comp hadn’t been done for nearly 40 years, we were having a heck of a time attracting and keeping qualified employees, especially in our entry level positions.

This sparked a lot of grumbling. I'm not afraid of tough conversations, and I knew that I owed it to our hardworking staff to explain not only the changes we made, but why we made them.

So, over the summer, I traveled the state for 22 meetings with at least one fellow member of the court to explain those decisions. I started every meeting by saying, "The decision to move forward with the class and comp changes wasn't made lightly, but it was made deliberately." Change can be uncomfortable, and for some it feels personal. But we could no longer ignore a long-standing pay practice that unintentionally favored some while others, often just as dedicated, were underpaid for years. That is difficult to sustain, particularly in a publicly funded system.

If we were going to change a system that affects people's livelihoods, we had to do it fairly and based on evidence. As a court, we gave this issue careful, repeated consideration and agreed that an independent review was essential. That is why the supreme court authorized state court administration to hire a consultant to review our job classifications, minimum requirements and pay grades, and then make recommendations as to how we should move forward.

We learned a lot. Overall, our total compensation was quite competitive for most positions. But we also learned that about a quarter of our staff were underpaid based on comparable government jobs. Those are called "green circles," a term of art used by human resource professionals. We also learned

that about 10 percent of our staff were paid at or above what the data supports for their particular job duties. Those are called “red circles.”

Several recommendations were made by the consultant, but we could only afford to implement some of them. For example, we reduced the number of job classifications from 140 to 82. We standardized pay grades and reduced minimum job requirements where appropriate. Most notably, we raised the floor for those left behind—the green circles. We raised them to a minimum salary competitive with similar public sector jobs.

In some cases, new hires now start at pay levels similar to long-serving employees. You can imagine that has not been appreciated by some, which is why the judicial branch’s budget request includes funding to address salary compression. We need to work on that. Experienced staff is just as important as recruiting new talent.

The changes we made for class and comp were effective July 1 and almost overnight, the number of applicants for judicial branch positions soared. It cannot be a coincidence. We are better at clearly defining the roles and responsibilities for jobs we are posting, and we are setting the starting pay at a more competitive market level.

So while a quarter of our staff was ecstatic about receiving pay increases to get them to their new minimum, others were deeply disappointed by shortened pay ranges or the loss of automatic reclassification based on years of service. I get it. If I was still a trial judge with colleagues directly affected, I might very well

say, “Stay out of our biz, Des Moines.” But in this role, as the leader of the judicial branch, I can’t say that. I have a responsibility to all Iowans to be a good steward of their hard-earned tax dollars.

Now, for the second monumental decision our court has been dealing with this past year, a decision that goes to the heart of how we operate: the modernization of our magistrate system. In a nutshell, this plan makes us more efficient and saves the judicial branch at least \$2.5 million a year.

Magistrates do incredibly important work on behalf of the judicial branch. After an arrest for something as simple as an assault or serious as murder, who is typically the first judicial officer a defendant will see? A magistrate. And the first thing that a magistrate does is to conduct an initial appearance by informing the defendant of the charges, appointing counsel if the defendant qualifies and determining whether the defendant will remain in jail or be released pending trial.

Other important duties of a magistrate include issuing arrest warrants and search warrants. They preside over civil small claims actions such as landlord/tenant disputes. They preside over traffic violations and criminal simple misdemeanors such as assault or trespass. They also preside over involuntary commitment proceedings for Iowans who are alleged to be in need of mental health or substance abuse treatment.

Given the importance of their work, it’s worth pausing to take a look at how their role is structured. In Iowa, magistrates are part-time judicial officers. They are expected to devote about 1/3 of their professional time—roughly 13

hours a week—to the judicial branch. During the other 2/3 of their work week, they are free to practice law or earn additional income in another way such as substitute teaching or running a small business. In contrast, judges must serve on the bench full time and cannot engage in the practice of law.

That structural difference matters when we talk about salary and benefits. Currently, all magistrates are paid \$46,611 a year, which is 31% of a district associate judge's salary. When adding the benefits of IPERS and health insurance, their total compensation is approximately \$65,000.

So why revisit an important role that our magistrates are performing honorably and well? Because this change strengthens the entire judicial branch. It improves efficiency, reduces costs to taxpayers and brings our structure into better alignment with the work magistrates actually do.

We cannot fix this problem ourselves. That's where you come in. Current law dictates how many magistrates we must maintain. One statute requires 206 magistrates statewide, and another requires at least one magistrate in each of our 99 counties. I've been unable to identify the origin of the 206 figure though confident it once served a purpose. Today, it no longer reflects the workload reality. In fact, we have perhaps 60 more magistrates than the work requires. That is not sustainable.

As you can imagine, our proposed bill has been applauded by some magistrates and denounced by others. So, I know this will not be an easy decision. If you haven't already, many of you may hear from a magistrate you

know and respect in your own community. I certainly have. But this cannot be decided one county at a time. It must be decided with the entire state in mind. As stewards of taxpayer dollars, we have a responsibility to make choices that serve all Iowans.

Even if our coffers were overflowing, the way we pay magistrates doesn't make sense. In one judicial election district with nine counties, current law requires that there be at least one magistrate per county. That's nine magistrates. But the combined workload of these nine counties equals 86 percent of a single full-time position. That means we are paying nearly \$600,000 each year in salary and benefit costs for work that does not equal one full-time position. In other words, taxpayers are paying over half a million dollars for work that could be done by less than three part-time magistrates, even when taking travel time into account.

The way we pay magistrates and distribute their work doesn't make sense, and more importantly, it isn't fair. All magistrates are paid exactly the same even though there's a huge disparity in workloads.

As I said, in exchange for a salary and benefits valued at about \$65,000, it is anticipated that a magistrate will devote about 13 hours a week to the judiciary. Recent data shows that some counties require only a couple hours a week throughout the year. At the other end of the continuum, there are counties that require closer to 20 hours a week throughout the year. Those numbers are

particularly concerning when you consider magistrates in 92 counties have workloads that demand less than 1/3 of their professional time.

Whether magistrates work 2 or 20 hours a week is completely out of their control. By statute, they perform the work that is necessary for their county—not their district like trial court judges. If a county has less civil disputes getting filed or less crimes being committed, this translates into less work for a magistrate. That’s generally a good problem to have. And frankly—that’s a big reason why I live in a rural community and have no intention of moving.

We need your help to address this imbalance. As set out in our proposed legislation, the judicial branch would no longer be required to employ 206 magistrates, and we would no longer be required to have at least one magistrate for every county. Instead, magistrates would be assigned to a judicial district rather than a county. Just like trial court judges. How many magistrates we need in particular districts and subdistricts would be determined by state court administration based on a county’s case filings and our recent time study. Just like trial court judges. To ensure magistrate coverage for every county in every district, a magistrate’s schedule would be created by court administration, and they would go to the county where needed. Just like trial court judges. If a magistrate is required to travel to another county within the district, mileage would be reimbursed at state rate. Just like trial court judges. We know how to do this.

Instead of expecting magistrates to devote 33% of their work week to the judicial branch, that percentage would increase to 40%, which translates to two days per week. And for the additional workload expected of magistrates, their salary would be increased from 31% to 40% of a district associate judge. They would continue the on-call rotation as established by their respective chief judges, which means no magistrate is on call 24/7/365.

Here's something the magistrates' association requested and is included in our bill. To strengthen continuity, experience and coverage within the system, a senior magistrate position would be established. Just like we do for senior judges.

This is not an effort to minimize rural counties. I've said it before, and I'll say it again: Those are fighting words to me, not to mention absolutely untrue. Let's use rural Audubon County as an example. There is no resident district court judge or district associate judge in Audubon County. If there is a will contest, a divorce, a child reportedly being abused, or God forbid a murder, does that mean they're out of luck? No judge, no court? Absolutely not. Court administration is really good at juggling district-wide schedules and dispatching judges to all 99 counties for any situation which demands the attention of our judicial system. We can do the same for magistrates.

This plan brings alignment between workload and compensation. We would be paying magistrates on the same principle as judges: equal responsibility, equal expectations. How can that be wrong?

And as we make responsible use of technology in our courts, I want to be perfectly clear with you and the people of Iowa: Magistrates will continue to appear in person in all 99 counties. When face-to-face proceedings are needed, court administration will send a magistrate where and when they are needed—just like we do with judges every single day during the week.

Change is never easy. But I am confident this is the right step for our courts. With your support, we can streamline and right-size the magistrate system, improve how the work is administered and save a minimum of \$2.5 million annually for the judicial branch.

I'm going to turn again to two issues you've heard me raise before—not because they're crowd favorites, but because they remain unresolved. Judicial pay and indigent defense. I am committed to bringing up these issues until we move beyond discussion and see meaningful progress.

I continue to worry about the decreasing number of applicants for judicial openings. You should too. When I was a young lawyer, it was common for a judicial opening to draw 20 or more experienced applicants from both private practice and government. Not anymore. In 2025, the average number of applicants was 5 for a district judge opening and 6.5 for a district associate judge.

This isn't tomorrow's problem. It's today's reality. In October, District 5C, which is made up of just Polk County, had an opening for a district court judge. Applicants are required to be a licensed attorney and live in either Polk County or a county that is contiguous to Polk County. Together, these counties are home

to about 860,000 people, and of those, roughly 3600 are licensed attorneys. That's a pretty good-sized pool from which to draw. Out of those 3600 attorneys, how many applied? Six.

The numbers are even more troubling in other districts. District 8A, which is in the southeast corner of the state, had an opening for a district court judge this past April. District 8A and its contiguous counties are home to about 540,000 people and of those, about 940 are licensed attorneys. Wanna guess how many attorneys applied from the pool of about 940? Two.

Keep in mind—the job of a judicial nominating commission is to review all applicants and send the two most qualified candidates to the governor. But when there are only two applicants, it's a guarantee both are going to the governor. Regardless of their resumes. Regardless of experience. Regardless of temperament.

Mark my words. We are a whisper away from there being a judicial opening with one applicant. At that point, how can the commission or governor meaningfully evaluate qualifications, experience or temperament? They can't.

Judicial pay is already shaping the way government agencies across Iowa compete for legal talent. Under current law, counties with populations under 200,000 are prohibited from paying their county attorneys more than a district court judge. County attorneys continue to advocate eliminating that cap. I understand why, and I don't blame them for asking. By requesting relief from

this statute, county attorneys are telling you, in big crayons, that tying their salaries to judicial pay is preventing them from attracting qualified attorneys.

The same is true at the state level. Assistant attorney generals and assistant public defenders are in pay grades that allow them to exceed the salary of a district associate judge. We have long accepted that the state cannot compete with private practice. But it should alarm us that judicial salaries can no longer compete with other government legal positions.

Here's something that truly frightens me. Just last month, an experienced district associate judge stepped down from the bench to take a position as county attorney. Her salary immediately increased by \$15,000.

For years, I've used this speech to warn about what was coming: "Who's going to apply for judgeships in the future?" I did not expect that warning to become urgent so quickly. Today, I must also ask, "Can we even hold on to the judges we have?" When experienced judges leave the bench for other public-sector jobs that pay better, we no longer have a recruitment problem—it's a retention problem. Serving as a judge in Iowa is becoming economically unsustainable.

I stand here today and say out loud: The sky is falling on judicial pay for Iowa's judges.

Last year, we asked you to consider linking a district court judge's salary to 75% of a federal judge's salary which would have amounted to an increase of about 10.2%. We recognize that would be a big step in a single year, but couldn't

we begin to close the gap? That is why we are asking for an increase of at least 4.3% in fiscal year 2027—to cover cost-of-living growth and to recover at least a portion of the purchasing power judges have lost in recent years.

This brings me to another urgent issue: the low rate of pay for contract attorneys who provide indigent defense. Low-income Iowans charged with crimes and facing the possibility of imprisonment have a constitutional right to a defense attorney at state expense. So do children in juvenile proceedings and, if they qualify, their parents or guardians.

Indigent defense is not part of the judicial branch budget. But the underfunding has a profound impact on our courts. Fewer and fewer private attorneys are willing to accept court appointments at the hourly rates paid by the state. Like any professional, they must earn enough to cover the costs of operating a practice and supporting themselves, often while burdened by crushing student loan debt.

Just like judges, Iowa's contract attorneys get paid less than their counterparts in every state that touches Iowa. Those in criminal and juvenile practice are telling me—some through tears—that they simply cannot afford to continue. These are not marginal lawyers. They are committed, highly skilled and exactly the people you would want standing beside you or someone you love in a legal pinch.

I understand that criminal defendants are not always the most sympathetic bunch. It might be easier if contract attorneys represented only our

most vulnerable children and families. But keep this in mind: If we fail to meet our constitutional obligation to provide counsel to all who qualify—including criminal defendants—we cannot keep our communities safe.

An indigent defendant cannot be prosecuted or held accountable unless counsel is appointed when required. When no attorney is available, critical deadlines are missed, leading to the dismissal of cases. Defendants can avoid prosecution altogether. I'm sure no one wants that. Except criminal defendants.

Like judicial pay, this isn't tomorrow's problem. It's today's reality. On June 1st, according to a criminal complaint, an individual was driving the wrong way on a one-way street in Davenport. The arresting officer noticed watery eyes, slurred speech, slow movements and the odor of alcohol on his breath. Inside the vehicle were open containers of beer and whiskey. The driver had a prior OWI conviction and was driving without a valid license.

After arrest, the defendant requested and qualified for court-appointed counsel. But there were no attorneys available in Scott County to represent him. After his case languished in the system for 2 ½ months, without the appointment of an attorney, his case was dismissed. The judge's order said this:

“The Court determines this case must be dismissed due to the State's failure to coordinate legal representation for this indigent defendant charged with a crime and facing the possibility of imprisonment.”

Could this happen in an OWI case that ended up killing someone? Or a sexual abuse case involving a child? Of course it could. If we cannot hold criminal defendants accountable, Iowans are at risk. We are playing with fire.

I've spilled a lot of ink on challenges within our system but now I'd like to speak to the human side of this profession. When I was a practicing attorney, I used to explain my job as "brick work." Clients would come into my office carrying bricks—fear, anger, uncertainty—and they would set them down on my desk. I could tell by the look in their eyes that they felt lighter when they walked out. Before long, I was carrying a load of bricks I didn't walk in with that morning.

That experience with my clients taught me this: If we aren't careful, those bricks don't just wear us down. They change how we practice—and, in some cases, whether we can keep practicing at all.

Data tells the same story. Studies by the American Bar Association show that 1 in 5 lawyers engage in problem drinking, the highest of all professions. And we are experiencing depression and anxiety rates higher than most other professions as well. This is a trend that demands attention and should never be accepted as normal.

The Iowa State Bar Association's Well-Being committee is doing just that—shining a light on that trend. They are offering an 8-part wellness master class focused on self-care, fitness, mindfulness, alcohol use, workplace culture and habit-building—all aimed at helping lawyers and judges thrive, not just survive. They are also taking simple, practical steps such as launching a new Wellness Club to encourage members to build healthier routines. I haven't started yet, but I enrolled because I don't think it's enough to talk about something from this podium if I'm not willing to back it up with my own actions.

This attention to wellness is also emerging in the private sector. Law firms across the state are beginning to approach this issue in meaningful ways. In West Des Moines, the law firm of Goodhue, Coleman & Owens has dedicated space for its attorneys and staff for stress relief and recovery. In Sioux City, the Crary Huff law firm has an on-site gym and offers an 8-week sabbatical each year to one shareholder, with the expectation of fully unplugging from the practice of law. Different approaches, same message: This work is demanding, and we have got to give people room to stay well while they do it.

And sometimes, taking care of ourselves means asking for help. When someone in this profession is dealing with mental health or addiction issues, they need a place to turn to without fear or shame. That is precisely what the Iowa Lawyers Assistance Program provides. We call it ILAP. At no cost, ILAP offers confidential support to judges, lawyers and law students who are struggling. Joe Quinn is the new executive director of ILAP. He is an attorney in long-term recovery himself and certainly understands the demands of this work and the courage it takes to ask for help.

Behind every program like this is a person who needed it. True story.

Once upon a time, there was a girl from Fort Madison named Emily. She had a charmed childhood, growing up in a happy, loving, secure home. After she graduated from law school, she practiced law in her hometown with her dad. She was married and had two beautiful sons. A few years later, she became a district associate judge.

Seems like a storybook life, doesn't it? You probably see it coming, but there is a plot twist. Emily is an alcoholic. Her story is difficult to hear because it portrays a woman's fall from grace and a family ravaged by her addiction. Her first marriage ended in divorce. Her two sons at times wanted nothing to do with her, one refusing to spend time with her unless she blew into a breathalyzer he bought on Amazon, and the other believing he just watched his mom die when she suffered a serious withdrawal seizure. Two different times, Emily went through 28-day in-patient programs as well as three hospital detoxes. Yet she continued to drink following each of these treatments.

One day in May of 2012, the ground gave way beneath her. Emily, rather Judge Dean, walked into the Henry County Courthouse for work. She has absolutely no memory of her court reporter driving her to work or walking into the courthouse that day. Her court reporter recognized the situation for what it was and stopped her from taking the bench. Emily conducted no official business that day when she was blacked out, thank goodness.

Emily sensed her career was ending. It came as no surprise when she received a certified letter from her chief judge, indefinitely relieving her of all judicial duties. She spent the next three days in a psychiatric ward with no phone, no shoes, no clothes, no family. All alone, except for the suicide sitter who was with her all three days. That's when it finally hit her, and she realized, "I am an alcoholic. And I can't do this alone."

Upon release, she dove headfirst into AA and worked the 12 steps of the program with her sponsor. She became good friends with a fellow AA participant, who was also an attorney in town. The friendship grew into a relationship, and they have now been married since 2018.

After serving her formal suspension by the supreme court, Emily dusted off her robe and took the bench again. That took real courage. She knew her reputation was in tatters, and she worked hard to regain her colleagues' and attorneys' trust and respect. Through this journey, Emily came to realize that her problem had become her purpose. In her own words:

I'm an alcoholic. I didn't ask for this disease, but today I take responsibility for managing it. I talk about it, because while pieces of my past are shameful, recovery is not.

Tomorrow, it will be 5000 days since Emily made the front-page news as the "drunk judge" who reported to her job in a blackout. That's about 13 ½ years ago which happens to be her sobriety date. Emily is here today with her husband. Judge Dean, would you please stand and be recognized?

Judge Dean, thank you for trusting me to tell your story. It began with "once upon a time," but it didn't end when things fell apart. You chose to keep writing. And for 14 years, you've been writing something honest, brave and hopeful.

Judge Dean has served on the ILAP Committee since 2013 and shared her compelling journey from addiction to recovery at various professional conferences. Because she speaks so openly about her recovery, attorneys and

judges see her as an initial touchpoint for people who need to know how to take that first step, either for themselves, a colleague or a loved one who is suffering.

I tell Emily's story today because we have too many lawyers and judges suffering in silence. I want everyone—not just lawyers or judges—to know that recovery is possible. Redemption is possible.

This seems like a good time to squeeze in a couple of updates that I am often asked about. During my first speech five years ago, I told you about Shawn, a success story that has become a part of my annual speech. When I met him as a judge in family treatment court, he was addicted to meth and was at risk of losing his parental rights. I honestly wasn't very optimistic, but Shawn never gave up on himself. Through grit and determination, he turned his life around and is proudly 2858 days sober (almost 8 years). Shawn, would you and your son please stand? Shawn, thank you for allowing me to once again share your story and remind people that change is not only possible but contagious.

Also attending today is Luke Guthrie, an attorney from Bremer County. You may remember that I told his story 3 years ago—how his license to practice law in the state of Iowa was revoked for 5 years due to misconduct mostly related to substance abuse issues. Through hard work and commitment to a new way of life, Luke clawed his way back to become a licensed attorney again. He continues to practice law in Waterloo and as of today, has been sober for 4,049 days (over 11 years). Luke, would you please stand and be recognized? Thank you as well—for giving me permission to tell your story of recovery and

redemption. And a big thank you for your continued work as a contract lawyer for indigent defense.

Last year, I talked about the Youth Justice Council made up of young people who have directly experienced Iowa's juvenile justice system. You may remember I focused on their Talking Wall which provides them with an opportunity to confidentially share what's in their hearts by writing on post it notes. This year, a new question was posed: "What is one thing you need that you've been quietly hoping someone would notice?" The No. 1 answer from over 500 youth from every Iowa shelter, group home and detention center was this: a hug.

We must care about the people who come before our courts, like Shawn, or youth in the juvenile justice system who yearn for a hug. We must also care about the lawyers who stand beside them, like Luke. And of course, we must care about the judges who we entrust to get it right in moments that matter most, like Emily.

This is part of how we protect the integrity of our courts, because leadership—whether judicial, executive or legislative—means supporting the people whose work carries the public's trust.

All of this brings me to my final thoughts.

Over the past year, I spent a lot of time thinking about what it means to lead an institution like ours. What I learned is this: Doing what is right for the long term is rarely easy.

At the heart of every issue I've discussed today—how we compensate our workforce, how we modernize our magistrate system, how we address judicial pay, how we ensure indigent defense, and how we care for the people who carry this work—is a choice. Not between right and wrong in the abstract, but between what is convenient and what is responsible.

I am asking for your partnership in choosing what best serves the people of Iowa, even when that path is harder.

And because that kind of partnership requires more than a single morning, I want to keep the conversation going. I will again be holding office hours every Monday from 10 am to noon beginning January 26 through March 30, in the old Supreme Court Chambers.

I hope everyone will join us shortly downstairs in the historic Supreme Court Chambers for coffee and cookies.

Thank you, my esteemed colleagues, for your dedication to our work.

And to the elected leaders in the room, thank you for inviting me to speak today. And thank you for your partnership and willingness to lead—even when the work is hard.

And to the youth who jot things down on tiny pieces of paper—keep talking. We're still listening.