

**Honorable Federico Hernández Denton
Chief Justice
Supreme Court of the Commonwealth of Puerto Rico**

**Rotary Club of San Juan
October 23, 2007**

Good Evening.

It is with great satisfaction that I accept this Rotary Club's invitation to present the Judiciary Branch's projects and achievements in the past years. As the world's first service club organization, the Rotary mission of fostering conscientious civic service and the highest ethical professional standards is a shared mission with our Branch.

Upon my induction as Chief Justice of the Puerto Supreme Court, I pledged to advance the goal of promoting a more efficient, accessible and sensible judiciary system for all citizens. This requires a

progressive change of the judiciary structure in order to modernize it and make it more responsive to a public which is increasingly demanding of its rights and has deposited its trust in the Judiciary Branch to act as the impartial and fair mediator of the people's need for individual and social justice.

In tenor with this vision, we have recently published the Strategic Plan for Judicial Administration for the period of 2007 through 2011 in which the Judiciary's goals for the next five years is delineated.

I am proud to say that this Strategic Plan is the product of the effort of an outstanding group of professionals, including an ample selection of the legal community, among them, judges and other officials of the Judiciary Branch. The Plan includes

certain core areas which have been tagged as strategic imperatives, these being: to strengthen judicial independence, to improve the judicial administration and develop the Judiciary personnel's competency, to strengthen our institutions and support networks, and to guarantee access to justice. It must be stressed that our Strategic Plan is not meant to be the mere publication of yet another document, but rather, the launching place for a dynamic process which fosters the involvement and commitment of all the different sectors of the Judicial Branch. Our Strategic Plan for Judicial Administration intends to strike the right balance between the need for the efficient administration of justice and the imperative one to

do so in a fair, sensible and impartial manner. These interests are not mutually exclusive, on the contrary, they are both essential in the effective administration of the Judiciary Branch. Our challenge therefore lies precisely in harmonizing both efficiency and fairness: the dual foundation for a modern, agile and sensible Judiciary Branch.

For purposes of this presentation, I will summarize our Branch's achievements on each different subject matter.

I. FISCAL AUTONOMY AND JUDICIAL INDEPENDENCE

One of the major recent achievements in this area has been the approval of a Special Law, signed this past 10th of July, in which it is acknowledged by the Legislature and the Executive, that the revenues of the new Sales Tax (IVU), must be calculated when determining the budget assignment for the Judiciary Branch. This automatically increases the allotted budget to our Branch from \$11 million to approximately \$24.7 million dollars; revenues, which will guarantee the Judiciary Branch's fiscal autonomy, a central issue in the constitutional concept of balance of

powers, and will allow us to continue with the projects delineated in our Strategic Plan for the next five fiscal years. The increase in the Judiciary budget, does not exempt us however, from taking measures to reduce expenses. We are very aware of the harsh economic times our country is undergoing and have taken measures which have proven to produce substantial economic savings. These savings have been shared in part with our personnel which has received already a special bonus derived from the revenues of the economy measures.

COMMUNITY PROJECTS

1. First, The Establishment of Domestic

Violence Courts. We have launched a series of projects, spear-headed by the Supreme Court, which take proactive steps to guarantee efficient access of the system to the communities and intend to preserve the Court as an active agent of social justice in our citizens' daily lives.

Domestic violence in Puerto Rico has become a critical social justice issue. It is also a delicate subject that has to be dealt with great sensibility to the rights of all parts involved.

Recognizing the urgency to attend the problem in a swift and efficient manner, the Judiciary

Branch has collaborated with the Women's Advocate Office (Oficina de la Procuradora de la Mujer) to establish Domestic Violence Courts in which such cases are treated with expediency and utmost privacy. The first of such courtrooms was inaugurated in San Juan on May of this year with the special assessment of a New York lawyer, Dr. Emily Sack, who is a domestic violence specialist. Among the pilot projects included in this plan is the effort to digitalize the system of protection orders in the judicial regions of San Juan and Bayamón in order to have faster access to orders already issued by the system.

2. Secondly, the establishment of Family and Juvenile Affairs Courts and “Drug Courts”

where the innovative concept of therapeutic justice is being applied by integrating in one same process social services, judicial intervention and professional supervision of the parties involved. The statistics already available, prove the efficacy of the “drug courts”. The rate of recidivism of those who complete this program is of only 4% compared to 62% in the general population of ex-convicts. Our programs’ success was recognized in the recent National Association of Drug Court Professionals Annual Convention held in Seattle, Washington.

3. In addition, the formation of the Consortium of Courts of Investigation. This project is another innovative judicial concept, where various Judicial Regions which are chosen by their geographic proximity are offered the services of criminal courts of investigation in one same facility which functions on extended hours, holidays and weekends. This will offer police officers, district attorneys, and lawyers a network of courts close to their residential and work areas. The first of such courts was already inaugurated in the Northeastern Region which includes the towns of Carolina, Fajardo and Humacao. Soon, the Consortium will

extend to the regions of Mayagüez-Aguadilla and Ponce-Guayama.

4. Finally, it is worth mentioning that the Judiciary Branch has formed various collaborative agreements with different community organizations and Government Branches to improve the efficiency and accessibility in diverse areas of the justice system. An example of this is the coordination of a mediation program for senior citizens and their families provided as a joint effort between the Judiciary Branch and the Government Office of the Advocate for the Elderly. At the same time that non-adversarial models of

conflict resolution among family members are fostered, the program helps alleviate an overloaded judicial system.

II. TECHNOLOGY AND INFRASTRUCTURE

The development of a modern and agile Judiciary Branch depends in great part in keeping up with the technological advancements which make access to information and justice swifter and more accessible to all. We have dedicated great effort to the improvement of the physical facilities of courthouses as well as technological advancement which will allow us to render more efficient service.

In terms of physical plant improvements, we must highlight the new building for the “Oficina de

Administración de Tribunales”, Judicial Administration Offices , which integrates various services which were previously dispersed in different sites and which incorporates modern technology now being used in judicial administration systems.

In the area of technological development, we have taken an innovative turn in the implementation of the Unified Case Management System which will allow court clerks access to a uniform and integrated data base providing judges up-to-date accounts on the ongoing caseloads. Furthermore, we count with a complete Research and Electronic Library System, a modern computerized court recording system, called “For-the Record” and are in the process of

developing the information network that will allow the electronic filing of case documents.

In sum, I have outlined for you just some of the projects of the Judiciary's Strategic Plan so you may appreciate the genuine commitment of the Branch's personnel and judges to implementing hands-on projects that have a concrete impact in the improvement of our country's access to justice and quality of life.

If the judiciary loses the confidence of the public, its job will be difficult, if not impossible. For people to believe in the justice system, to believe that it works, it is necessary to have a system which is sensitive to their problems and their necessities.

That is the common thread among all the undergoing projects: to maintain the Judiciary accessible to all segments of the society it serves, being especially mindful and protective of the access to disempowered sectors of our society.

As I said in the beginning, the Judiciary Branch shares this Rotary Club's mission of service. I strongly believe that it is through intelligent and conscientious service that our profession and all professions, gain the trust of the community they serve and in the process elevate and dignify their reason for being.

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Thank you very much.