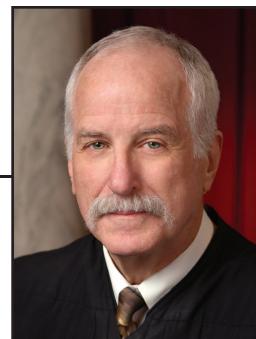


## FROM THE CHIEF

John A. Hutchison

Chief Justice  
The West Virginia Supreme Court



## DELIVERING ON PROMISES DURING A BUSY YEAR

My parents taught me that hard work and following through is important. As my year as Chief Justice draws to a close, I am proud to report that the West Virginia judicial system has largely returned to normal after the COVID-19 pandemic and has made significant progress in many areas to improve access to justice.

COVID-19 is still with us, but courts are now holding in-person proceedings and only occasionally requiring masks and social distancing as local levels require. The Supreme Court has returned to in-person argument dockets, conferences for our judicial officers and staff and civic education programs.

The Supreme Court held a LAWS (Legal Advancement for West Virginia Students) argument docket in front of an audience of high school students in both Braxton and Raleigh counties.

When West Virginia shut down in 2020, the Supreme Court had planned to go to Braxton County the following week. When we finally made it there two years later — on May 3 of this year — we were joined by Justice C. Haley Bunn for her first day on the bench.

COVID-19 made us all more comfortable with video communications, and technology allows for continued expansion to state courts. A 2022 initiative provided new video conferencing units to regional jails and juvenile facilities to provide reliable, direct connections to courts, reducing the need for extensive travel between detention facilities and courthouses. The Supreme Court received a Justice Assistance Grant from West Virginia Justice and Community Services for this project.

We also expanded a 2021 pilot project that allows victims of

domestic violence and sexual assault to seek protective orders and personal safety orders without going to a courthouse. The 2022 phase focuses on improving virtual access in rural counties.

The judiciary continued to provide more LiveScan devices in courthouses. Ohio, Pleasants and Ritchie counties all had LiveScans installed in 2022.<sup>1</sup> The inkless biometric system transmits demographics, photos, prints and an electronic signature to the state criminal record repository so court dispositions of each charge can be matched to an existing arrest. The real-time submission of criminal arrests to official record systems improves the availability of criminal record data at the local, state and national levels.

In September, the Supreme Court launched a new online payment portal that allows the public to remit payment for magistrate court

costs, fines and fees from any location with internet access. The portal, which was developed by the Administrative Office and West Virginia Interactive, is accessible from a link on the West Virginia Judiciary website: <https://apps.wv.gov/Courts/MFP>. Magistrate court fines, costs and fees fund community corrections, law enforcement training, court security, courthouse improvements and the per diem regional jail fee.

One of our biggest accomplishments this year was the successful opening of the Intermediate Court of Appeals (ICA) on July 1. The Justices, Supreme Court Clerk's Office and Administrative Office all had a hand in creating the new appellate court from scratch. We issued new Rules of Appellate Procedure and court forms that incorporate the ICA, bought a building to house the ICA and other court offices and built a main ICA courtroom and five satellite courtrooms. The video technology in the satellite courtrooms ensure that litigants do not have to drive more than 90 minutes to appear in an appellate argument about their case.

I have visited several of the remote sites. While the rooms are not large, they are perfect for holding remote proceedings. The Supreme Court is very grateful to the county commissions in Grant, Lewis, Morgan, Raleigh and Wetzel counties for their help in opening these courtrooms and improving access to the new appellate court.

ICA Chief Judge Dan Greear and Judges Tom Scarr and Charles Lorensen launched a public education video series to help West Virginians understand how the ICA works. Because the ICA hears family court appeals, we expect many litigants to be self-represented. The

video series is designed to make the appeals process as transparent and understandable as possible.

Both the ICA and the Supreme Court launched e-filing on July 1. All attorneys are required to use the e-filing system, while self-represented litigants have the option of filing paper documents. We offered numerous free training sessions on how to use the File & ServeXpress system. E-filing increases access to the appellate courts and eliminates the cost of making copies and mailing or driving them to Charleston to file.

Finally, earlier this year, the Supreme Court issued the first full-length West Virginia judicial system annual report since 2013. The 2021 report, which was designed in-house and published online,<sup>2</sup> includes photos and descriptions of events that occurred throughout the state judiciary during 2021, as well as budget information and case statistics. Re-establishing the annual report is part of the Supreme Court's effort to improve transparency and fiscal accountability. Our 1,500 judicial employees are proud of the work we do, and we hope this document gives the public a sense of the depth and breadth of the ways we serve West Virginians every day.

It has been a great honor to lead the West Virginia judicial system this year. Together, court staff have accomplished a lot. I look forward to working with Justice Beth Walker as Chief Justice in 2023 as the state judiciary continues to deliver on its promises. **WVJ**

## Endnotes

1. The West Virginia State Police provides LiveScans to correctional facilities across the state.
2. Available at [www.courtswv.gov/public-resources/press/Publications/2021AnnualReport6-24.pdf](http://www.courtswv.gov/public-resources/press/Publications/2021AnnualReport6-24.pdf).