

Massachusetts Supreme Judicial Court chief justice Roderick Ireland says state of courts 'much brighter'



In an annual speech, Massachusetts Supreme Judicial Court Chief Justice Roderick L. Ireland on Wednesday tells more than 100 lawyers and judges that he is optimistic about the direction of the state's court system. (*Dan Ring / The Republican*)

By [Dan Ring, The Republican](#)
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BOSTON - In an upbeat speech, the state's leading judge on Wednesday said the outlook for Massachusetts courts is "much brighter" than it was when he took the helm about three years ago.

"As I stand here today, I can report that, although we are not fully out of the woods, the picture today is much brighter than it was when I began," said Judge Roderick L. Ireland, a Springfield native and the chief justice of the state Supreme Judicial Court. "This is an exciting time for our court system, and many of you have contributed to this improvement."

Ireland, who plans to step down next year when he turns the mandatory retirement age of 70 for judges, gave his annual speech at the Massachusetts Bar Association's Bench-Bar Symposium at the John Adams Courthouse in Boston.

Ireland said he is optimistic about the direction of the courts for several reasons, citing a new leadership team of Chief Justice of the Trial Courts Paula Carey and court administrator Lewis H. "Harry" Spence.

Ireland also referred to strong ties with Gov. Deval L. Patrick and state legislators that helped result in a budget increase for the Trial Courts and a pay raise for judges.

The current budget for the Trial Courts is currently \$585.5 million, up 4 percent from \$561 million last year. The budget increase will finance about 50 new staff positions.

The Trial Court, which includes district, superior and five other court departments, currently had 6,303 employees as of August, down 17.4 percent from 7,629 in July 2007. In recent years, many jobs were not filled when people left or retired.

Now, the Trial Court is planning to hire more employees to bring the count to 6,450 this fiscal year.

Morale is also up following a pay raise for judges and clerks.

Because of a measure in the \$34 billion state budget for the fiscal year that started July 1, for example, a regular associate judge's salary would be increased by 23 percent from \$129,694 to \$159,694. The raises would come in two steps on Jan. 1 and July 1.

During the financial crisis after 2008, the Trial Courts cut back on services and hours.

As of Labor Day, Ireland said, the Trial Court has restored full hours in all the clerks' offices that were forced to close during the middle of the day because of staff reductions.

In a speech to introduce Ireland, Douglas Sheff, a Boston trial lawyer and president of the Massachusetts Bar Association, noted that the governor said Ireland was the "right man at the right time" to be appointed as chief justice.

"Man, was he right," Sheff said.

Sheff praised Ireland for his low-key, friendly approach and efforts to visit lawyers and courts. Sheff said Ireland changed the way the courts deal with legislators and paved the way for changes.

Ireland has been a judge for 36 years. Former Gov. William F. Weld named him to the state Supreme Judicial Court in 1997. In December, 2010, the Governor's Council confirmed him as chief justice of the state Supreme Judicial Court after he was nominated by the governor

He replaced Margaret H. Marshall, who became chief justice in 1999 and retired in 2010.