

PRESIDENT'S PERSPECTIVE

DOMENICK CARMAGNOLA

Focusing on Judicial Vacancies, Pandemic Fall-Out and Recovery, and Lawyer Wellness in the Year Ahead

Editor's note: This is an excerpt of the speech Domenick Carmagnola gave at his installation during the Annual Meeting in May.



I am humbled and honored to serve as the 123rd president of the New Jersey State Bar Association. Thank you to all of you for the confidence you have placed in me to lead this terrific organization as we continue to face unprecedented challenges and times.

As I stand here tonight, reflecting on what the year ahead will bring for our world, our nation, and our profession, I am prepared to make a singular promise to you. In the days ahead, no one will work harder than me, my Executive Committee, our Board of Trustees, our terrific Leadership Team at the Bar Association led by Angela Scheck, and our dedicated and committed staff who together make up an incredible organization. On that, I give you my word.

The New Jersey State Bar Association has been an extraordinary leader this year. But our work is not over.

Chief among our goals to address right now is to focus our energies on the issue of judicial vacancies. Our courts are currently facing record numbers of judicial vacancies. That means too few judges at a critically vital chapter in our history. It is truly becoming a crisis.

The need is real right now. I say that as someone who is involved in court matters every day and who speaks to judges and lawyers every day. The court is at its limit in terms of what can be handled by the current complement of judges. There is a deluge of landlord/tenant cases coming—with some estimating that there will be upwards of 100,000 cases by the time the moratorium lifts. And there are thousands of people languishing in jail, waiting for their day in court to resolve criminal charges. And to make the situation more dire, it will become imperative to reassign existing judges to address those cases, which will absolutely affect the way justice is meted out in every single other area of the court.

Let me be clear about one thing: the existing bench is

working hard, but that alone is not enough, and the answer is not to have them work harder. Our courts are regarded as the finest in the nation. It is a strong, independent, co-equal branch of government. It cannot be allowed to enter the upcoming rollout and face the impending situation without sufficient resources.

It will not be just the judges who lose; these vacancies directly affect the citizens of New Jersey who rely on the courts to resolve their disputes and to address significant issues that affect their everyday lives. A bench working at full strength is the only solution and we will not stop until the Senate and Governor make that a reality.

After this past year, I know we will need to focus on rolling out of the lockdown and getting back to full speed. Hard work, unity and the strength of the NJSBA's members are what helped the profession persevere this past year and as we emerge from a once-in-a-century public health crisis, those qualities are what is going to bring us back—and bring us an improved, more resilient profession.

Know this: The NJSBA's mission in the year ahead will be to help you build back not just to where we were, but better than we were. And the NJSBA will be there every step of the way to support you.

Our Pandemic Task Force is still hard at work. Our Sections and Committees are, likewise, hard at work examining the fall-out of this pandemic and how it affects lawyers and their clients.

With the number of people being vaccinated on the rise and a semblance of normalcy returning, it would be easy to let our thoughts turn to other things. But we will not do that. We are clear-eyed about the challenges that remain ahead. And we are going to lean in harder to help our members get back to work and determine how to adapt to the changes wrought by this pandemic.

We are also continuing to develop resources to help the public navigate the myriad legal issues that have come out of the pandemic, including a guide that aims to position the NJSBA as a clearinghouse of information for individuals seeking legal assistance; we are also discussing ways to address the overwhelming landlord/tenant backlog; providing resources

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ANGELA FOSTER, PHD, is the immediate past chair of the editorial board of *New Jersey Lawyers* and principal of the Law Office of Angela Foster, located in North Brunswick. The firm provides a full range of legal service for intellectual property matters and facilitates alternative dispute resolution for various complex commercial litigation and transactional matters. Foster is past chair of the ABA Section of Litigation Trial Evidence Committee.



MICHAEL JAY PLATA is the founder of Plata Law Group LLC. His practice is focused on complex business and commercial litigation in federal and state courts. He also provides general counsel services to businesses, corporations, and nonprofits on various legal and corporate matters, including human resource and regulatory compliance, privacy and data protection, intellectual property, and corporate transactions. Michael previously served as a Practitioner-in-Residence at Rutgers Law School with the Community and Transactional Lawyering Clinic and is a former President of the Hispanic Bar Association of New Jersey.



RICARDO SOLANO JR. is a member of Friedman Kaplan Seiler & Adelman LLP, where he represents individuals and corporations in the healthcare, financial, and other industries in matters involving allegations of fraud, bribery, false claims, FDA violations, and tax evasion. He previously served as First Assistant Attorney General of the State of New Jersey and as an Assistant United States Attorney in the District of New Jersey.

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available through the NJSBA, including Free Legal Answers, the NJSBA's online resource tool for individuals who have legal questions relating to the pandemic, the Military Legal Assistance Program, and LegalEdge, a program that will be able match those in need of legal assistance with attorneys willing to provide assistance at reduced fees.

Another issue this pandemic has laid bare is the fragile grasp our profession has on our well-being. A few years ago, the American Bar Association and Hazelden Betty Ford Foundation released a study that put cold hard statistics into the struggles our colleagues were having with depression, problematic drinking and even suicidal thoughts.

Too many of us have heard stories, known friends, or experienced these challenges ourselves. And this past year has only exacerbated feelings of stress, burnout and uncertainty

We are today at a crossroads and I am here to say that the NJSBA will take an active role in helping the legal community come to terms with this challenge and set out a better path ahead. Well-

ness must be something we all focus on.

Research has proven out that when our workplaces foster and support well-being, we are better able to make the choices that allow us to thrive and serve our clients. And supportive workplaces are not just more productive, but also able to attract and retain attorneys and other employees.

In the year ahead, we will seek to address the stigma associated with asking for assistance; we will emphasize that well-being is an essential part of being a competent attorney; and we will expand our educational outreach on these important issues all in the name of changing the tone and improving the culture of the profession around every aspect of an attorney's health.

One thing I know to be true—and has been reaffirmed over and over again during these months in conversations with lawmakers, jurists, and bar leaders around the country—and that is the NJSBA has gone to new heights to help its members navigate a successful path ahead—and has ascended to new heights.

We have gone to work for our clients, for our colleagues, for our courts, and for the residents of this great state. We are able to achieve these goals because

we worked—and will continue to work—together. Because together we are greater than any single one of us.

Today, possibly more than ever before, the organized bar is strong and relevant; it is a resource and voice for every lawyer. The NJSBA has been and will continue to be here for you.

None of what we are looking to do will be easy to achieve. It will take resources, time, and effort. We are prepared to do that for you, our colleagues, and to support this great profession.

As the legendary Vince Lombardi once said: "The price of success is hard work, dedication to the job at hand, and the determination that whether we win or lose, we have applied the best of ourselves to the task at hand."

And tonight, I promise this: the NJSBA is dedicated to serving you and determined to apply our very best to the task at hand.

Thank you to all of you who have reached out already and offered to help and those who have already agreed to help. It is truly appreciated. We will get through this next phase together. Stay safe and be well. And thank you for the faith you have shown to me and our team. We will not let you down. 🙏