

# PRESIDENT'S PERSPECTIVE

KIMBERLY A. YONTA

## The NJSBA is a Beacon to Light, Guide, Unite and Champion New Jersey's Legal Community in the Year Ahead

*Editor's note: The 2020 NJSBA Annual Meeting was held virtually May 13–15 for the first time, due to the coronavirus pandemic. What follows is an excerpt of the speech NJSBA 2020–2021 President Kimberly A. Yonta gave when she was installed for her term on May 14.*



**I**t is truly an honor and a privilege to speak before you today as I am sworn in as the 122nd president of the Association.

This is neither the speech I thought I would be giving nor the place or manner in which I thought I'd be delivering it. But we must acknowledge we are living in unusual, historic and challenging times. The pandemic and economic crisis are testing our strength, resolve and resilience as individuals, as a society and as a profession, in ways we never imagined.

You are not alone. The New Jersey State Bar Association is the guiding force that advocates for and unites the legal community during this turbulent time.

As proud members of the legal profession, we are the foot soldiers for justice, for the rule of law, for the Constitution on which this nation was built. Together, we are a unified family. You are the dedicated, hard-working women and men I have had the privilege of meeting and working with to create a more fair, just and equitable society.

I could not ask for a greater honor than to be serving as your president at this time. I have always believed—and it is true now more than ever—that what we do as lawyers is essential to this great nation. And it will be ever more so in the months ahead as we rebuild society and adapt how we practice law.

The New Jersey State Bar Association is your advocate. That is why the Association has been a national leader in the fight against the proliferation of non-lawyer legal service providers and non-lawyer-owned law firms.

You will often hear specious claims that loosening rules on who can do legal work would open the doors of the courthouse to more people. But make no mistake about it: this is a money-making ploy by corporations; an attack on the legal profession—and in particular, the solo and small-firm attorneys who form the core of our communities; and a danger to the public, who will not save money and will be left with guidance that isn't backed by the knowledge, expertise and ethical safeguards that only an attorney can provide.

This Association recognizes that access to justice is a problem for many people, not only for our poorest residents, but also many middle-income people. That is why the Association is developing a technology platform called Legal Edge, that matches attorneys who are willing to work at reduced rates with members of the bar. We will be working with county and affinity bar groups to connect lawyers with clients with clients in need.

The access to justice issue is a reminder that a career in law is important, that it is meaningful to many. You know, in many ways I grew up in the bar Association and it helped shaped who I am today, personally and professionally. As a young lawyer just starting out, the Young Lawyers Division was an invaluable resource to me. It provided the opportunity to be among my peers and to learn from them during our shared experience—yet be part of the larger Association.

During my term as president, we will renew focus on new and young lawyers. They will surely need the support of the Association during this challenging chapter. Just as the state Supreme Court stepped in during this pandemic to allow new law school graduates, who have not yet taken the bar exam, to temporarily practice law under the supervision of experienced attorneys, the Association will be there for them. We will create ways for these recent graduates to connect with firms and mentors and craft a new trial skills series to help all new lawyers around the state—together with county bar associations—to connect on a regional basis in new and meaningful ways.

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The legal community is one community. We will continue to build the important bond between the State Bar Association and county and affinity bar associations, which makes all of us stronger.

In addition to these efforts, I plan to make attorney well-being an important part of my tenure, because learning to be a healthy lawyer is part of being a good lawyer. Last week was Lawyer Well-Being Week around the country. In cooperation with New Jersey Lawyers Assistance Program and the Young Lawyers Division, the Association's Committee on Lawyer Well-Being presented a week of daily webinars. Managing the stresses of life, law practice,

clients and family is challenging. In addition to the regular webinars sponsored the Committee, in the winter of 2021, the Association will sponsor a half-day conference on lawyer well-being. The Association is here to help create healthy ways to alleviate that stress before it is too late.

The Association will also continue to celebrate the centennial of the 19th Amendment, another remarkable chapter in our nation's history. Recognizing those who fought for equal rights, like New Jersey's own Alice Paul, helps us acknowledge that there is still more work to be done for diversity and inclusion. In that same spirit, it is worth noting that today marks the first time in the history of the New Jersey State Bar Association, our executive committee has a majority of women as officers. So, it is truly an extraordinary day!

Ultimately, the pandemic will continue to have a profound change on our society and the law, for years to come. These challenges will show our character and what we're made of. This year we will be called upon to be our best selves, to operate with patience, understanding, and compassion like we always do in New Jersey.

As Patrick Henry said in his 1775 speech, "I have but one lamp by which my feet are guided and that is the lamp of experience." The Association with its experience will be here as the beacon of light, to guide, unite, and champion New Jersey's legal community, and lead us boldly into the future. ☪

**NJSBA PRESIDENT KIMBERLY A. YONTA** is a New Brunswick practitioner who concentrates in criminal trial advocacy and municipal criminal matters.

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