

2026 State of the Judiciary Address
Delivered By
The Honorable Katherine A. Maraman
Chief Justice of Guam
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Introductory Thoughts

Håfa Adai, Acting Governor Tenorio, Speaker Blas, my fellow justices of the Supreme Court, judicial officers of the Superior Court, distinguished guests, our hardworking Judiciary staff, members of the Guam bar, community partners, and my dear people of Guam. Happy Law Day!

Before I begin, I want to take a moment to recognize this year’s recipient of the prestigious Hostisia Award – an annual award presented to an individual or entity who has made a significant contribution to improving the administration of justice and good government. The 2026 Hostisia awardee is Harvest House. Harvest House plays a critical role in strengthening the work of justice through the heroic role they play in the foster care system in Guam. They recruit safe foster families and respite care providers, equip them with trauma-informed training, and support them throughout their journey. Harvest House has been an invaluable partner to the Judiciary – particularly our Family Court judges and referee, who often have the difficult duty of removing children from unsafe homes.

Through its Emergency Triage Center, the organization provides immediate care and stability to children entering the foster care system during times of crisis. I ask the Harvest House representatives to please stand. Please join me in thanking Harvest House for the profoundly meaningful work they do, day in and day out, to help meet the physical, emotional, and spiritual needs of our most vulnerable community members. Their work exemplifies the spirit of the Hostisia Award.

We stand together at a threshold — a place where tradition meets necessity, where the measured cadence of the law meets the quickening pulse of modern life. Yet even amidst the flux of these times, our courts of justice continue to stand as a steadfast pillar of democracy — a check on power, a protector of rights, and a forum where disputes are resolved fairly and peacefully. The work we do is indispensable, yet it is undertaken on a landscape that is rapidly changing – a landscape of new social crises, new threats, new challenges, but also new opportunity.

This morning, I wish to speak plainly and with a hopeful urgency about how our courts of justice must strengthen and stretch to meet the demands of the day. With that said, I report to you that the State of the Judiciary is resilient, accountable, and ready to face the challenges of our time.

At the forefront of our justice system is a simple mission: to provide equal, impartial, and timely justice. That mission requires three essential ingredients: public confidence, operational integrity, and physical and virtual safety for everyone who works in and uses our courts.

Justice, at its best, is both compass and shelter. It tells us where we must aim and keeps us safe while we do the work. But a compass without a course is futile, and shelter without doors leaves people wondering how to enter. Our work, therefore, is not merely the adjudication of disputes; it is the shaping of a system that invites participation, provides clarity, and delivers outcomes with a respect for human dignity.

Access to Justice

Ensuring that everyone – regardless of financial means and personal resources – can come before our courts and receive a fair resolution of disputes remains our enduring priority. Making good on that promise is the cornerstone of ensuring public confidence.

Over the past year, we have redoubled our focus on reducing avoidable delay and have reexamined case flow management. Every case has a life of its own — a trajectory that can be short-circuited by inefficiencies or preserved by timely triage. In March, we proudly launched eCourt and eSupervision – an integrated case management system designed to knit together the many threads of judicial work into a single, secure platform. Both systems streamline case management, case tracking, client supervision, and financial processes. Though every new system brings with it some growing pains, our employees have diligently committed to optimizing eCourt and eSupervision and their many benefits. I thank them for the hard work they put in as we built the system and the patience and persistence they continue to exhibit as we utilize it.

Built with scalability and security in mind, the system will soon expand to include public access portals, making records more navigable for the public and increasing transparency while protecting sensitive information. In short, our new integrated system is a technological foundation for more timely, efficient, and accessible justice.

Also, where appropriate, our trial and appellate courts continue to provide for the option of remote hearings to ensure presence is not betrayed by distance, illness, or caregiving responsibilities. We have sought to align resources with need – diverting appropriate matters to problem-solving or treatment courts, reserving contested trials for instances that truly require them, and ensuring that those who must proceed to trial are not left waiting in a queue of administrative delay.

But timeliness alone is not enough if access is unequal. Access is not merely the ability to enter the courthouse; it is the capacity to be heard and understood. Many who come to our doorstep do so without counsel, without literacy in court procedure, and sometimes without the basic information to navigate an often-complex maze of forms and deadlines. They are our neighbors, parents, elders, veterans, survivors. To honor them, we must make the system intelligible.

Technology offers us a chance to translate complexity into clarity. Our technology-based expansions — such as the self-represented litigant kiosks, enhanced e-filing capabilities, and secure remote hearing platforms — have been guided by one question: Does this make the court more usable for the person who needs it most? We have sought to develop interfaces that are intuitive, that provide guidance in plain language, and that safeguard privacy while increasing transparency.

The Judiciary has also been working dutifully to meet the goals of our 2024-2027 Strategic Plan, entitled Pillars of Justice. The four pillars of the Strategic Plan are improving court operations and services, increasing public trust and confidence, embracing and enhancing technology, and promoting a wellness driven court culture and workforce. As we near the end of the current Strategic Plan, I am proud to report that the work of the committees comprising each pillar has made much progress in setting goals, designing an action plan, and seeing that plan to fruition.

In furtherance of our strategic initiatives, we will soon adopt revised child support modification forms and name change forms. Similar to our adoption of the revised protective order forms and rules last year, these new forms will make the court process more accessible and understandable for all parties and stakeholders.

Another big development is in the area of bar admissions and attorney licensure. This July, Guam will be among 10 jurisdictions to launch the NextGen UBE bar examination, which is a completely new iteration of the attorney licensure exam with an increased focus on foundational lawyering skills. With the new bar exam, the Supreme Court has also adopted a host of rule changes. Of most significance, we now allow for score portability among other NextGen and UBE jurisdictions and have created a pathway for foreign-educated lawyers to sit for the Guam bar exam, where previously they were prohibited. We are also finalizing a reciprocity agreement with the CNMI, so that lawyers licensed in either jurisdiction may be admitted to the other without examination.

The overriding goal of these changes is to make Guam a more realistic and attractive option for competent lawyers who wish to practice here. The dwindling number of lawyers in Guam – and the higher fees that naturally result when demand is high and supply is thin – has made it difficult, if not impossible, for many in our community to obtain the services of a lawyer. We hope to see the benefits of these changes in the very near future – where there are enough lawyers to meet the legal needs of our community, at fees that the average citizen can afford. This is yet another step toward increasing access to justice.

Website Redesign, Court Navigator Pilot Program, Expansion of NCS Services

Today – May 1, we unveiled a redesigned court website — a simpler, cleaner doorway into the Judiciary. It is more than aesthetic refinement. It is a deliberate effort to lower the threshold of entry: clear instructions for filings, accessible explanations of processes, and links to forms and rules with step-by-step guidance. The website is the first welcome many will receive. It should orient, inform, and direct — and when it cannot answer, it should point to a human who can.

That human touch is the aim of our first Court Navigator Program. This grant funded program serves to enhance access to the court and provide for improved, thorough, and responsive service for patrons.

Too often, the gulf between a litigant and the law is not lack of will but lack of guidance. A self-represented litigant who navigates the legal system without a lawyer, whether by choice or financial necessity, faces forms written in legalese, timelines that feel arbitrary, and the isolation of facing the system alone. The navigator is not an attorney and does not provide legal advice. Instead, the navigator is a guide – explaining processes, helping identify appropriate forms, assisting with basic procedural tasks, and connecting individuals to community resources — legal

aid where appropriate, social services, counseling, or victim assistance. The navigator program is designed to reduce errors, shorten the time to resolution, and restore dignity to those who might otherwise be overwhelmed.

Geography is another reality that shapes access. Guam's northern communities have borne the burden of distance. For too long, logistical hurdles have been a silent form of exclusion. To address this, we are expanding our Northern Court Satellite, or NCS — not just as a place to hold hearings or pay citations, but as a hub of services. Beginning this year, NCS facility will provide targeted probation services and host group counseling programs for individuals on supervision or those engaged in court-ordered services. This expansion recognizes that supervision and rehabilitation are most effective when they are within reach. Group counseling conducted in Guam's most populous region will not only offer convenience, but will hopefully increase the likelihood of compliance and success.

Treatment Courts

Investing in our treatment courts is another critical component of ensuring a justice system that not only holds individuals responsible for their conduct but also gives them their best shot at turning their lives around for the better. Over the past three decades, our Judiciary has evolved from traditional punitive models of justice to treatment models in appropriate cases – combining accountability with structured support, supervision, and access to services.

I have long espoused the belief that courts must be both anchor and bridge – an anchor to hold our shared commitments to fairness and the rule of law, but also a bridge to carry people across moments of crisis to places of resolution and reentry.

One critically important treatment court is our Mental Health Court. One only needs to look outside the doors of this Congress Building to glimpse the troubling reality of mental health problems going unaddressed. But the mental health crisis in Guam extends far beyond the unhoused population; indeed, scarcely a single family in Guam has been spared the effects of seeing a loved one struggle with some form of mental health issues.

Last year, as part of the Justice and Mental Health Collaboration Program funded by the Bureau of Justice Assistance, the Judiciary entered into an agreement with CIT International to train up to 20 individuals from various agencies to become crisis intervention coordinators; these 20 will then become trainers themselves, training others who have interactions with persons dealing with mental illness. Also in 2025, the Supreme Court promulgated the Mental Health Court Rules, giving clear procedural guidance to judges, lawyers, and individuals navigating a case through this treatment court.

All our treatment courts are time-intensive and resource-intensive, and I am very proud that the Judiciary continues to commit to these important, life-changing programs. I am beyond grateful for our government leaders and community partners who support and help us sustain these programs for the good of the hundreds of individuals and families who benefit from them. I wish to especially thank our partners in our Juvenile Drug Court – the Guam Chamber of Commerce and the Guam National Guard's Counter Drug Program.

Safety and Security

Safety, too, is a stewardship we cannot neglect. A courthouse must be simultaneously open and secure. And judicial independence must never be undermined by threats against judicial officers. Judges make difficult and sometimes unpopular decisions. That is the nature of independent adjudication. But the personal safety of judges and their families should never be in doubt.

We know that judicial officers increasingly face a volatile threat landscape—ranging from targeted physical attacks and courthouse disruptions to doxxing, online harassment, and coordinated intimidation outside their workplaces. But the reality is that these threats extend beyond those who wear black robes. Recently, for example, a witness in an ongoing trial was physically threatened because of his testimony, requiring the court to take extra measures to ensure the witness's safety. The protection of all who work in and utilize the courts is, and will remain, a top priority.

But we know we cannot rely solely on our security staff to keep us safe; we all play a part. This is why we require training for all staff on de-escalation and threat recognition. Each year, all court personnel – regardless of their years in service or the position they hold – undergo mandatory refresher training, which in large part consists of safety and security updates.

All these measures have been implemented with care to strike a balance between ensuring that we all do our part to safeguard our workspace while still preserving the dignity and openness that are the hallmarks of a democratic forum.

In the same breath, we must address threats that are invisible but no less pernicious – cyber threats. Courts are custodians of deeply sensitive information — criminal records, family matters, financial data. The rise of digital filings, online databases, and remote proceedings increases convenience but also increases vulnerability. In years past, my predecessors and I have all stood before this body and the people of Guam and addressed the very serious concern about threats to court security nationwide – indeed, worldwide. We have spoken to you about the need to reinforce not only the safety and security of our buildings but our digital security as well, recounting tragic and crippling examples from other jurisdictions where judges and court staff have come under attack and where court systems were effectively shut down because of a cyber strike.

We always knew that it was very likely a question of “when” and not “if.” Earlier this year, as I’m sure you all read in the news, our Judiciary was among the entities whose financial systems were infiltrated by nefarious cyber criminals using email spoofing. The matter remains under investigation by law enforcement. This was a jolting reminder that we are all vulnerable.

That reality demands a determined response. Our IT Division has devoted significant efforts toward establishing stronger encryption, multifactor authentication, and continuous monitoring systems. We have adopted incident response protocols, so that if a breach is attempted or accomplished, we respond swiftly to contain damage. Our IT team has worked painstakingly in the past year to implement enterprise-level security tools, aligning our protocols with FBI compliance standards.

Equally important, we are instituting focused training for judges and staff so that everyone understands the role they play in cybersecurity: recognizing phishing attempts, safeguarding credentials, and reporting anomalies without hesitation. Keeping pace with criminals who are getting more sophisticated by the minute is no small feat, but we are committed to doing everything we can to protect our resources, our data, and most importantly, our staff and patrons.

More Aggressive Use of Electronic Monitoring

This focus on safety and technology ties directly into another pressing issue: overcrowding at our Department of Corrections. This is not merely a capacity problem; it is a crisis that affects rehabilitation, health, and safety. It undermines the ability of corrections staff to manage populations humanely and to reduce recidivism. We must confront this with compassion and pragmatism. The court cannot, and should not, abdicate appropriate custodial orders when public safety demands them. But we also cannot ignore evidence-based alternatives that reduce overcrowding while maintaining oversight and community safety.

In line with that, the Judiciary is moving to a more aggressive and thoughtful use of electronic monitoring. EM — when used with clear eligibility criteria, reliable supervision, and supportive services — can allow low- and medium-risk individuals to remain in community settings, maintain employment, and attend treatment or counseling while under court-ordered supervision. Ankle monitors and GPS technology are not punitive novelties; they are tools that, when properly used, keep liberty where justified and detention where necessary. Our policies emphasize careful screening, proportionality, and continuous evaluation. To help streamline the eligibility assessments, I have directed our Probation Services Division to initiate the screening interviews at the outset, rather than relying on defense counsel.

But please rest assured that we will not pursue monitoring as a simple cost-saving measure. Our commitment is to public safety and humane treatment. Electronic monitoring, in partnership with probation, corrections, and community providers, will be used to alleviate overcrowding in a manner consistent with rehabilitation, accountability, and public welfare.

Operational Resilience and Employee Welfare

In addition to enhancing access to justice and securing against physical and cyber threats, another critical aspect of ensuring that the wheels of justice continue to turn – well-oiled and steady – is by investing in our personnel, establishing appropriate succession plans, and ensuring we stand ready to continue delivering justice services under any condition that Mother Nature or political policy doles out. That plan was put to the test as recently as a couple of weeks ago with Typhoon Sinlaku, and it once again served us well.

Operational resilience is a product of planning, redundancy, secure systems, and coordinated leadership. We at the Judiciary are proactively ensuring that the administrative and physical infrastructure that supports justice is robust against shocks – be they cyber, physical, or human resource related.

We regularly revisit and update our continuity of operations plan (or COOP), which sequences critical functions, identifies delegations of authority, and sets recovery time objectives for core services. And throughout the year, we invest and re-invest in continuous training — not only

technical skills but also trauma-informed practices, cultural competency, and leadership development — to create pathways for advancement and institutional resilience.

We know full well that our court personnel are our most important asset. Their expertise, judgment, and daily commitment keep our institution functioning. A healthy workforce is essential for accurate, timely decisions and for maintaining public confidence. Wellbeing, therefore, is not a nicety — it is an operational necessity. To our employees, you have my commitment that we will continue to invest in you.

Budget

All of these initiatives require resources — not extravagance, but stability. The court has just submitted its budget request for the next fiscal year. We ask for only modest increases tied to organic growth: routine personnel step increases, recurring technology maintenance, inflationary adjustments, and the minimal resources necessary to sustain the new services I have described. In practical terms, it is essentially a status quo budget, not a wish list of grand expansions. We have balanced prudence with responsibility, asking only for what is required to maintain operations, keep systems secure, and continue to deliver the services the people of Guam expect and deserve of their justice system.

In order for us to implement and sustain these efforts, we look to the support of our Legislative and Executive counterparts for the Judiciary’s modest but essential budget request. The work of the Judicial Branch is challenging and regularly involves issues which plague our society. Support from both the Executive and Legislative Branches is necessary to ensure that we continue to achieve our shared goals.

Enhancing access. Improving technology. Expanding services. Reinforcing physical and cyber security. Streamlining user experience. Exercising continued fiscal stewardship. Each of these initiatives and commitments is a critical component of creating and maintaining a justice system that our laws demand and our times require.

None of these initiatives will succeed without collaboration. And no court operates in isolation. We depend on a delicate ecosystem of government agencies, non-profit organizations, defense and prosecution, law enforcement, corrections, mental health providers, and most of all, the public we serve.

I’d like to take this time to thank the Executive Branch for its partnership with the Judiciary in the critical area of juvenile justice reform. The Juvenile Justice Reform Collaborative, or JJRC, that was originally launched in 2014, was reconvened in January 2024 by then-Chief Justice Robert J. Torres and Lieutenant Governor Joshua Tenorio to address new challenges in Guam stemming from the pandemic, including the need for improved data collection and sharing, statutory reform, greater probation involvement, and stronger partnerships with service providers.

Last December, the JJRC completed its Report and Recommendations, reflecting a full year of coordinated, cross-agency effort. In the same month, the Judiciary finalized a partnership with the National Council of Juvenile and Family Court Judges, working alongside the Robert F. Kennedy

Community Alliance’s National Resource Center for the Transformation of Youth Justice. This collaboration provides national expertise to review the JJRC’s work and establish key priorities for 2026, focusing on targeted strategies to address systemic gaps, the young adult population, strengthen coordinated services, and promote a more effective, youth-centered juvenile justice system for the island.

To our sister branches, I ask for continued partnership – for funding that recognizes the long-term savings of early intervention, treatment courts, and community-based programs; for training that enables our courts and partners to use technology safely and effectively; for community organizations that will lend their expertise in counseling and support; and for the bar to continue its tradition of service, pro bono engagement, and thoughtful advocacy. To all our Judiciary partners and stakeholders, you have my sincere appreciation for the role you play in helping our courts of justice better serve the community we all call home.

I also want to acknowledge the quiet, consistent labor of our court staff. They are the people who translate policy into practice – the clerks who manage filings, the marshals who ensure safety, the IT staff who keep systems running through nights and weekends, the facilities workers who always stand ready for anything and everything, and the personnel who welcome and guide patrons and litigants. Their work is often unseen, but it is indispensable.

Concluding Thoughts

In conclusion, the justice system is not an abstract institution but a reflection of our values— fairness, accountability, and respect for human dignity. We have set in motion a series of steps — practical, humane, and forward-looking — to ensure timely justice, broadened access, stronger security, and innovative responses to critical realities of our day.

This is not a moment for small thinking. The challenges before us are serious, and the stakes are high. But Guam is a place defined by resilience, by community, and by an abiding sense that we are strongest when we care for one another. It is that spirit that made Guam feel like home to a young lawyer from New Mexico half a century ago, and it is that same spirit that keeps me motivated and impassioned to work for the cause of justice in Guam to this day.

If the judiciary can be a model of purposeful change — seeking efficiency without sacrificing fairness, embracing technology without losing humanity, protecting safety without closing doors — then we serve our island well.

Thank you for your attention, your collaboration, and your commitment to a justice system that is timely, accessible, secure, and compassionate. Together, with the support of our Legislative, Executive, and community partners, we will continue to shape an institution that honors the dignity of every person who comes through our doors and that keeps faith with the deep promise of justice for all.

Thank you and Si Yu’os Ma’åse’.