



State of the Judiciary of Guam

delivered by

The Honorable Robert J. Torres

Chief Justice of Guam

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Introduction

Acting Governor Tenorio, Speaker Blas, members of the 38th Guam Legislature, my brothers and sisters on the bench, distinguished colleagues and guests, my wife Mary, family and friends, judiciary employees, and everyone gathered with us today—thank you for the opportunity to speak with you on the State of our Judiciary.

Every day, someone steps into a courtroom carrying the weight of a moment that could change everything.

A parent fighting for custody...a survivor seeking protection...a defendant hoping to be seen for more than their worst mistake.

They're not asking for more than the system can give. They're asking for what it promised all along—to be seen as human beings and treated that way.

People want justice. They want to feel it in their homes, their neighborhoods, and their daily lives.

But we are living in a time when fear too often speaks louder than facts.

When the conversations around safety lean toward being harsher, not necessarily smarter...When strength is measured by how many we confine, not by how many we reach. When your freedom depends less on what you've done, and more on what you can afford.

That might sound tough. It might even sound popular. But it's not justice. And it's not the standard our Constitution calls us to uphold.

Justice is not a headline. It's not a hammer. It's not a weapon to win arguments. Justice happens when we do the hard, unglamorous work of looking deeper. When we remember that protecting a community is not just about who we take off the streets—but **what** we're building in their place.

So the question before us isn't whether we are tough enough. It is whether we are **wise** enough—**brave** enough—to pursue a system that reaches the **root of what's broken**.

That is the task before us. That is the work underway.

Ladies and Gentlemen, the state of our Judiciary is committed to **justice that serves us all**. And it's my honor to share with you today how we're making that vision real.

Expanding Access to Our Courts

Most people won't interact with the justice system through grand speeches or landmark rulings.

They'll know it through a letter in the mail, a form they filled out, or a hearing they weren't sure how to get to.

That's where justice begins. Not as a concept, but as a daily experience. And that's why we've embraced innovation, especially where it matters most.

Later this year, we'll launch **eCourt**—an initiative many of you have heard about before. eCourt will let the **public access court documents online**, help move cases along **more efficiently**, and support **more timely** outcomes.

And with our **Mobile Protective Orders** project, we're expanding that access even further.

We know that the hardest step for many survivors is simply getting to the courthouse. Soon, they won't have to. Through a simple online platform, individuals can ask for a protective order—safely, privately—by answering a series of guided questions. No in-person visit required.

To support this, and under the leadership of Judge Iriarte, we've made the **first major revision to our protective order rules** in over a decade—streamlining both the online and paper process so it's easier for self-represented individuals to navigate.

But access is not just about bold initiatives. It's also the small things that shape how people experience our courts.

For many court users, the ability to participate remotely means not having to miss work, scramble for childcare, or travel across the island to be seen or heard. So we upgraded our audio and visual systems, boosted our bandwidth, and strengthened our courtroom platforms.

And it's not just litigants who feel the difference.

Jurors will soon receive text notifications about their service—no more calling a hotline and hoping for an update. If something changes, they'll know immediately. And for the public and the press, getting information is faster and easier. Our online case calendar now lets you search by name—without digging through an entire docket.

We're also expanding access, literally.

During my first term, we opened the **Northern Court Satellite** to better serve the most populated area of our island. That facility has become an essential part of our justice infrastructure, but demand continues to grow.

That's why we're laying the groundwork to **expand the satellite's capacity** and services in Dededo...because people shouldn't have to travel to other parts of the island to seek justice. They should be able to find it where they live, work, and raise their families.

These may not be the changes that make the front page. But they matter. They matter to the probationer who can check in up North instead of finding a ride to Hagåtña. They matter to the survivor who can seek protection from home.

And they matter because they reflect something simple and powerful: that court users are not just parties to a case. They are members of the community we are here to serve.

As we modernize, we move forward with intention—embracing innovation, but never at the expense of justice. This year, Justice Carbullido, Justice Maraman, and I adopted a policy on artificial intelligence to make sure it strengthens our system, not substitutes for it.

The use of AI by litigants, attorneys, judges, law clerks, and court staff may be expected and should not be discouraged, provided it complies with legal and ethical standards.

AI cannot be used to mislead, deepen bias, or undermine the principles of justice. And no matter how advanced the tools become, judges, attorneys, and self-represented litigants are accountable for their final work product.

Our goal is clear: to make our courts more accessible, more responsive, and better equipped to serve the people of Guam—today, and for generations to come.

Keeping Our Community Safe

We talk a lot about public safety, but we don't always talk about what it takes to build it. It isn't created by one agency or guaranteed by one action. It's built...case by case...by people doing the quiet work that doesn't make the news but keeps the system standing.

That includes the work of the **Criminal Justice Automation Commission—or CJAC**.

For decades, the Judiciary has worked with our law enforcement partners to build Guam's criminal data infrastructure. Now, thanks to legislation introduced by Senator Gumataotao, that work will be codified into law—strengthening how we share and use information across the justice system.

And that access to information matters.

Today, every individual who comes before the court undergoes a structured risk assessment—across pretrial, supervision, intake, and reentry. We've strengthened that process with a new tool: the **Ontario Domestic Assault Risk Assessment—or ODARA**.

Led by Presiding Judge Lamorena and Judge Cenzon, this initiative helps us better assess future risk in intimate partner violence cases—leading to more targeted protection and more informed decisions

It's a powerful step forward, but let me be clear: **no tool can predict human behavior with 100% accuracy**. If it could, we would have bought it a long time ago.

If we want real safety, we can't rely on risk scores alone. And we can't build policy on what makes the best headline. We need a full approach—one that's **data-driven, collaborative, and comprehensive**.

And here's what the data tells us: **93% of people released pretrial are not arrested for another crime.**

That's not spin. That's the truth. And it should shape the policies we write.

Thanks to the Legislature's support, our Electronic Monitoring program has expanded beyond pretrial under Magistrate Judge Quan, to include post-conviction and treatment court cases. And the results speak for themselves.

Since its launch, EM has helped reduce recidivism and **save over \$3 million each year in incarceration costs at DOC.** And in the entire history of the program, **only 3% of participants** have been arrested and charged with a new offense.

This is what smarter justice looks like. Fewer dollars spent on people cycling in and out of prison. More accountability and people staying on track.

And we're building on that momentum.

Last year, we applied for—and were awarded—the **national Smart Supervision** grant to strengthen probation practices and improve outcomes.

Under the leadership of Judge Barcinas and Magistrate Judge Brown, this initiative represents the next step in our commitment to public safety. And this week, we're honored to welcome **a team of national experts from the Arizona Judicial Branch** to help expand our tools and build capacity.

Judge Ron Reinstein, Judge Dan Slayton, and Probation experts Christina Ralls and Deneen Bertucci have been leading a week-long training for our judges and probation staff—focused on best practices in community supervision.

We're grateful for their partnership...and for the expertise they bring to this important work. Let's give them a warm Håfa Adai welcome.

Redeeming our Future

Just as we're rethinking how we supervise adults, we're reimagining what redemption can look like for our youth.

Originally launched in 2014, the Juvenile Justice Reform Collaborative was revived to meet a new era of need. We brought together voices from across the system—juvenile judges like Judge Terlaje and Judge Guitierrez, probation officers, educators, law enforcement, and service providers—because no one agency can do this work alone.

Together, they looked at the system not just as it is, but as it could be. And what they delivered was a set of data-driven, actionable steps to move us forward.

Thanks to this Legislature, those recommendations may soon become policy.

We look forward to working with Chair for Youth Affairs Senator Calvo, Public Safety Chair Senator Gumataotao, Education Chair Senator Borja, and our Oversight Chair Senator Taitague to translate our efforts into laws that reach kids earlier, intervene smarter, and give them a real chance at something better.

Helping Our People Recover

One of the most important things we did this past year wasn't a courtroom upgrade or a legislative reform.

It was a partnership.

In 2024, the Judiciary of Guam contracted with the Guam Behavioral Health and Wellness Center to better serve the full spectrum of those in crisis. Under this agreement, our Client Services and Family Counseling Division took on lower-need clients—giving GBHWC the capacity to focus on those in acute distress: people who need immediate, intensive support.

It was a simple shift. But a powerful one—one that made smarter use of limited resources and sent a message: the system sees you, and it's ready to help.

As Tourism Chair Senator Lujan has pointed out in addressing homelessness, real stability means connection to mental health care, housing, and support. And we're grateful to Health Chair Senator Salas Matanane for her continued commitment to improving behavioral health access for our island.

That same spirit of collaboration is fueling real momentum in our treatment courts. Participation rose nearly 10% this past year—a clear sign that more people are choosing recovery.

These are not easy programs. Ask Judge Perez, who leads our DWI Court. Or Judge Tolentino, who works every day with adults fighting their way back through treatment. They require hard choices, daily accountability, and the courage to face what brought them to the edge in the first place.

But they work, because they ask not just, "what did you do?" but "what do you need to get better?"

That's why our Fiscal Year 2026 Budget includes a contingency request to support two of our most critical programs: the Adult Drug Court and the Juvenile Drug Treatment Court. For years, these programs have been sustained in part by federal grants. But like many government agencies, we've seen those funding opportunities pulled back. And the grants we've relied on are set to end.

To be clear—if federal funding is renewed, no additional local funds will be needed. But if that support is pulled, this contingency will help us keep the doors open. Because courts like these have changed lives. And the truth is—we can't afford to lose any of them.

Now, it's not typical for me to share the podium during the State of the Judiciary. But some stories are best told by the people who lived them.

Please indulge me and allow me to welcome Valerie as she shares hers.

[Valerie Speaking]

Håfa Adai, my name is Valerie Perez. There was a time when I had no hope. No home. No future I could imagine myself living in. I was battling addiction, disconnected from my family, and struggling in silence. I felt like I was disappearing.

In a moment of despair, I tried to end my life. I was hospitalized and entered Level 3.7 care at Guam Behavioral.

That became the turning point.

I joined the court's Guam Family Recovery Program under Judge Ingles. I didn't know what to expect. I'd never been in recovery before. But session by session, step by step, something shifted. I was surrounded by people who believed I could get better—even when I didn't believe it myself.

I found the courage to return to work, enrolled in school, and got sober. And for the first time in a long time, I started to feel proud of who I was becoming. And then—something extraordinary happened. I reunited with my children and brought my family back together.

Recovery gave me a future. Treatment gave me the chance to fight for it. And today, I'm proud of who I am. I'm no longer defined by what nearly broke me—but by the strength that brought me back.

[Back to CJ Torres]

This is the justice system at its best. Not just reacting but restoring. Not just punishing but healing. And not only changing lives but saving them.

Honoring a Lifetime of Service

The belief that justice can restore is not new. It's been championed by many who came before us.

And few have done more to advance that vision than this year's Hostisia Award recipient.

For over three decades, Judge Anita A. Sukola served the people of Guam with integrity in her decisions, compassion in her courtroom, and belief in the dignity of those who stood before her.

She presided over general jurisdiction cases, led with heart in the drug courts, and in the family violence court, she brought structure and hope.

As the Attorney General once said, her most enduring legacy is her **kindness** and **compassion**.

And upon her retirement, she left us with a message we'd be wise to remember: "Jails are **not** the answer," she said. "**Treatment** is the answer... We are all God's children, and we need to help each other—to get healthier...to get better...so we can keep the family together."

At a time when it's easy to shout for harsher penalties, Judge Sukola chose something harder: to treat accountability and empathy not as opposites, but as partners.

That's the heart of our treatment courts. And it's the spirit of the Hostisia Award.

Judge Sukola isn't on island with us today—that's the benefit of being retired!— but we look forward to celebrating her award with her in person when she returns in June. For now, we honor her vision, her service, and her lifelong belief in justice that heals.

Fulfilling the Constitution's Promise

But we cannot talk about justice without talking about fairness...and fairness begins with access to a lawyer.

The right to counsel is a constitutional guarantee. It's written into the Sixth Amendment, affirmed by the Organic Act of Guam, and grounded in a simple truth: no one should face the justice system alone.

Here on Guam, that right is upheld by the Public Defender Services Corporation, the Alternate Public Defender Division, and the Judiciary's Private Attorney Panel. And when none are available, judges appoint attorneys to ensure no one stands unrepresented.

But we know the system can be stronger.

Last March, an independent review by the Sixth Amendment Center—a national, nonpartisan, nonprofit organization—confirmed what many already knew: Guam's system has come a long way, but to fulfill its promise, we must go further.

The report made clear that we need a more sustainable way to provide legal representation for people who cannot afford it. And that's what we are building.

Under the leadership of Speaker Frank Blas and Senator Telo Taitague—and supported by Vice Speaker Ada and budget chairman Senator Duenas—Guam is transitioning to a new model...one that prioritizes the funding of indigent legal services...not through fines and fees but through legislative appropriation.

To support this transition responsibly, we submitted a status quo budget today for Fiscal Year 2026, giving the Legislature room to fund these critical services. That means no new positions, reduced operational costs, and the deferral of several key initiatives...because this must come first.

We are not asking for more. We are asking to do this right...so no one is left behind in our system of justice.

Strengthening our Service

We've talked about access, about accountability, about justice that restores. But justice also depends on something often overlooked: the well-being of the people who make the system work.

At the Judiciary, that includes over 400 hardworking employees who keep our branch running—clerks, probation officers, marshals, attorneys, and more. And I thank them every day for it.

It also includes our judges.

Judges, like many in public service, are asked to make difficult decisions every day. The work is demanding, often isolating, and comes with a weight rarely seen—but deeply felt.

That's why, in March, I led a Pacific Judicial Council program focused on strengthening judicial performance and supporting wellness across our region.

We know from decades of research—much of it grounded in neuroscience—that mindfulness improves decision-making, reduces bias, supports ethical judgment, and helps with emotional regulation. And these benefits extend far beyond the judiciary.

Across the United States, and around the world, public and private institutions are embracing wellness as essential to performance. And we should too.

So today, I challenge us all—including our sister branches and other agencies across government—to make space for wellness. To treat it not as a luxury, but as a leadership priority, whether you're a teacher, a social worker, or a first responder.

Because when we support the people who serve, we strengthen the service they provide. And we honor the trust the public places in all of us.

Conclusion

The Constitution's promise was never meant to be static. It was meant to be carried by each generation, in the ways our time demands.

We carry it not in grand gestures, but in the quiet, ordinary work of showing up.

Of opening doors...of treating every case like it matters—because it does...of believing that the law when applied with courage and compassion can still make people safer, families stronger, and our community more just.

In times like these, it's easy to listen to the loudest voices—the ones that call for more punishment, more fear. But that's not what our people are asking for.

They're asking for something deeper. To feel safe...to feel seen...to know that justice doesn't just exist but that it reaches them too.

They're asking for answers that work. A system that doesn't measure strength by how many it locks away—but by how many it lifts up.

That is the work we've done. And that is the work still ahead.

Every judge. Every courtroom. Every hand that touches a case carries a piece of that promise forward.

And so do we.

We carry it forward—with conviction in the Constitution, pride in our Judiciary, and faith in the people of Guam.

And together—we will rise to meet it.

Un Dangkulo na Si Yu'os Ma'åse'. Maraming salamat po. And thank you for listening.