



CHAMBERS OF VERMONT CHIEF JUSTICE PAUL L. REIBER

The [Vermont Constitution](#) entrusts the Vermont Judiciary with the responsibility to protect the rights of all Vermonters and visitors to our great State through access to the courts and equal justice under law. Specifically, the Constitution requires that “[e]very person within this state ought to find a certain remedy, by having recourse to the laws,” and that justice must be “impartially administered, without corruption or unnecessary delay” to all Vermonters. With these constitutional requirements in mind, the Judiciary continually strives to identify, evaluate, and address bias, racism, and prejudice of any kind within the justice system. While this is the Judiciary’s constitutional responsibility, ensuring access to the courts and equal justice under law is a responsibility that all Vermonters share. All Vermonters can play a role in addressing these issues, and all are invited to special upcoming community-feedback meetings to do this very thing, beginning next month. More information on these meetings can be found on the [Judiciary website](#) and below.

In 2021, a [study](#) by the Council of State Governments found that, in Vermont in 2019, black people were over three times more likely to be defendants in a misdemeanor case and almost six times more likely to be defendants in a felony case than white people. This was true even though 94% of the total number of defendants were white people. The study found that this disparity was particularly stark for felony drug cases, where black people were over fourteen times more likely to be defendants than white people. Moreover, black people were over six times more likely to be incarcerated in Vermont than white people.

The Judiciary has taken these findings very seriously, establishing a [Commission on Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion](#), which I co-chair with Associate Justice Nancy Waples and on which we are joined by Associate Justice William Cohen, in January of this year. To further its mission, the Commission on Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion has established [three Committees](#). One of these committees, called the Community Engagement Committee, will host a series of public meetings starting in December to hear feedback on how the Vermont courts are doing with regard to diversity, equity, and inclusion, and how the courts may be improved.

This work is vital to the health of our justice system, and all can play a part in improving it. I invite all to join us on December 6 at the Fletcher Free Library in Burlington from 6:00pm – 7:00pm for the first of several public-feedback meetings, which will be held across the State in the coming months. Together, we can work to ensure that, as the Vermont Constitution requires, justice is “impartially administered, without corruption or unnecessary delay” to all Vermonters.