

CHIEF JUSTICE MAUREEN O'CONNOR

DIVERSITY EFFORTS AT THE SUPREME COURT OF OHIO

At her swearing-in as the first female chief justice of the Supreme Court of Ohio, Chief Justice Maureen O'Connor discussed the need for the bench and bar in Ohio to focus on supporting diversity in the legal profession. She noted that less than 25% of the judges in Ohio are women even though Ohio's population is more than 50% female. She observed that African Americans make up about 12 percent of the Ohio population, but that less than 7 percent of judges in Ohio are African-American. And she recognized that in the attorney registration process, less than one percent of attorneys completing attorney registration forms self-identify as Hispanic or Latino. In light of these numbers, Chief Justice O'Connor stated: "We can do better. Until we have a bench and a bar in Ohio that is truly representative of our diverse population, we have much more work to do in this area."

Chief Justice O'Connor's work on diversity builds on projects started by Chief Justice Thomas Moyer. The court will continue to support the Law and Leadership program that prepares the next generation of urban students to consider a career in the law. The court is also active on many fronts that will improve all people's access to the fair administration of justice: implementing a new education component to train judges to recognize and eliminate bias in the courtroom, continuing existing efforts to make more court forms accessible in many languages, and enacting a rule requiring that court foreign language interpreters become certified. But Chief Justice O'Connor she hopes to do much more. Her efforts will include the selection and hiring of an attorney employed by the Supreme Court to focus specifically on access and fairness issues, the development of a diversity curriculum for judges, and supporting initiatives and collaborations between local courts and the affinity bar associations to further diversity throughout the profession.

Chief Justice O'Connor also leads by example. Since ascending to the Supreme Court bench in 2003, Chief Justice O'Connor has provided externships to more than 70 law students from schools around Ohio. Those students are selected from the rich mosaic that reflects contemporary American society: more than 42% are women, almost 14% (13.8%) are African-American, over 8% (8.3%) are LGBT, 7% (6.9%) are Latino/Hispanic, and 5.5% are Asian-American. And her professional staff is even more diverse. Currently, her current team is 80% female, 20% African-American, and 40% LGBT –the most diverse staff in the history of any justice of the court.