

Meet the new Leadership of the Los Angeles Superior Court:



LACBA President Tamila C. Jensen interviews Presiding Judge-Elect Eric C. Taylor and Assistant Presiding Judge-Elect Samantha P. Jessner



President Jensen: *I understand you and Judge Brazile have been friends for a long time. How does it feel to follow in your old friend's footsteps?*

Judge Taylor: It has been a great honor and pleasure to work alongside my dear friend of 30 years. Neither of us could have foreseen what we would experience together during these two years. We went from aspirations of what could be for our Court, to realizations of what we had to do to respond decisively to the Covid-19 pandemic, social and political unrest, and deep budget cuts and economic impacts. I look forward to working alongside another dear friend, Judge Jessner, to face whatever may come as we build on the good work of these past two years.

President Jensen: *The Court faced unprecedented challenges in 2020 and there have been profound changes in how the Court operates because of Covid-19. What are some of the most important changes in your view and how do you plan to build on those changes? Is there anything that you would re-evaluate or change at this time?*

Judge Taylor: 2020 was indeed an unprecedented year. Expecting the unexpected is part of the blueprint as we close out 2020 and look forward to 2021. The most profound change in our Court has been the rapid expansion and deployment of technology in all areas of litigation. The initial rollout of LACourtConnect (LACC), the Court's remote courtroom appearance solution, was under way at the onset of the pandemic. Out of necessity, the Court accelerated the planned 18-month deployment schedule and fully implemented the platform

in just three months. Currently, LACC audio or video appearances are available in Probate; Civil; Family Law; and Traffic courtrooms. Webex is offered in Criminal; Dependency; Delinquency; and Appellate courtrooms.

Since March, the Court also designed and launched an exclusive resource for attorneys, the Attorney Portal, which offers free services and subscription-based advanced features for a \$100 cost recovery fee. More than 37,000 attorneys have registered to use LACC and nearly 1,000 attorneys have signed up for the subscription-based services of the Advanced Attorney Portal. Based on the demonstrated usage, it is clear these new services are valuable to attorneys and other court users. Attorneys are saving time and recognizing the convenience of these services tailored for them (Learn more about the Attorney Portal [here](#)).

Our very talented Executive Officer Sherri R. Carter, and her administrative team, have worked to conquer many seemingly insurmountable obstacles in their implementation of these services, including retrofitting and programming our courthouses with the needed hardware and software. This work allows court users, employees and judicial officers to work more safely through remote technology.

President Jensen: *Judge Jessner, I understand you were co-chair of the court's technology committee and instrumental in instituting the new LACourtConnect system. Now that the system has been in operation for several months, what is your assessment? Are any changes being considered? How are you taking into account the experience of users?*

Judge Jessner: We are always appreciative of positive feedback and constructive criticism from judges, staff, attorneys, and our justice partners. Based on the feedback we have received, we are diligently working to improve the user experiences with these systems that will likely endure long after the Covid-19 crisis abates. The court currently is working on improving LACC and new features to add to the Advanced Attorney Portal suite of services (more information on sign-up is available [here](#)). To enhance attorney education and communication, Presiding Judge Brazile, Sherri and I have partnered with the bar and other groups to provide frequent updates about LACC and the Attorney Portal, as well as the status of our operations during the Covid-19 pandemic. In the coming two years, as we implement additional systems in our criminal courts, we will work to improve and enhance our use of technology to provide greater access and to better serve the public.

Judge Taylor and I recognize the pandemic has taken a significant toll on vulnerable communities, and we are working with Sherri to explore ways to ensure equal access to justice during these challenging times. For example, we are excited to partner with Los Angeles County on a new online dispute resolution program for unlawful detainer and small claims cases that will enable litigants to resolve their disputes sooner rather than later and with the assistance of trained mediators in a safe environment. Look for more information later this year on this new online solution, and eventually other remote settlement programs as well, designed to help litigants resolve their cases without having to come to the

courthouse.

President Jensen: *What other challenges are you facing as you ramp up operations and resume trials?*

Judge Taylor: Another huge challenge we faced was in redesigning jury service to keep everyone involved safe. When we suddenly stopped jury trials in March, we immediately began to rethink the process, perhaps forever changing the way jurors serve. Many of our courthouses have moved to a "batch" summons system in which prospective jurors are called directly to courtrooms in smaller groups, instead of sitting in crowded jury assembly rooms for hours waiting to be called. We are currently evaluating this new system for more permanent use as we move forward beyond criminal jury trials, to resuming civil jury trials in 2021. The batch system has worked well in several criminal trials and recently in one unlawful detainer trial.

Additionally, we need to return our focus to rebuilding several of our courthouse facilities which are in dire need of renovation or replacement. Our new technology will certainly impact our construction designs moving forward. Challenges like these demand that we constantly reevaluate our court operations.

As you know, we are the largest trial court in the nation. And we take pride in being the most innovative, creative problem-solvers and stewards of access to justice. A fine example of this commitment and the way we work collaboratively with the bar, and all our justice partners in Los Angeles County, is the recent effort to relocate our Homeless Court in Redondo Beach to a safe, convenient outdoor space. As a result of the teamwork among Redondo Beach officials, law enforcement, justice partners and service providers, we were able to resume this meaningful program for people experiencing homelessness in a way that promotes safe access to the court and service providers (watch a story [here](#)).

President Jensen: *We know Covid-19 has wreaked havoc on the Court's budget. How do you plan to address this challenge and what can LACBA do to help?*

Judge Taylor: Thank you for asking this question. Aside from the pandemic itself, the effect of the resulting budget impact is staggering. We have not experienced budget cuts of this magnitude since 2008-09. Those cuts resulted in courtroom closures, layoffs, and justice delayed for many, especially in our civil courts. We are currently operationalizing a 10% judicial branch budget reduction, which when added to mandatory cost increases, equates to a \$61 million deficit to our court this fiscal year. Without federal stimulus dollars, we will face another 5% budget reduction in fiscal 2021-22, resulting in an additional \$32 million deficit, and with no remaining reserves. Our continued implementation of technological innovations, as well as hiring freezes and administrative restructuring will help to some degree. But without relief, these budget cuts will not go unnoticed by judges, staff and court users.

LACBA and our local justice and political partners have always understood the

importance of a stable and adequately funded judicial system. The laws passed in Sacramento, locally and by the electorate, have unpredictable results without a solid and fair judicial system to implement, interpret and enforce them. Our local leaders play an enormous role in making sure the Governor and Legislature hear and comprehend the impact of these deficits on the most vulnerable, as well as on the health of California's business economy. We all need to continue to work collaboratively to successfully and convincingly convey this message.

President Jensen: *Many in the community are concerned about the impact of not having jury trials. How would you address this concern to the community, lawyers, potential jurors, and others?*

Judge Taylor: We have resumed jury trials. Approximately one month ago, Judge Sam Otha, the supervising judge of the criminal division, convened a criminal jury trial with the new juror batch system and all social distancing, face covering and personal hygiene protocols in place (see more information about the Court's *Here For You | Safe For You* initiative [here](#)). A week later, other criminal trials began across the county. Criminal trials are now ramping up and will be more commonplace in the weeks to come as we acclimate to a "new normal." On October 5, certain civil preference and unlawful detainer trials resumed. On November 16, civil bench trials will resume. And jury trials in all civil matters are scheduled to begin in January 2021. Attorneys should contact their assigned civil courtrooms for scheduling.

Depending on the impact of anticipated additional waves of Covid-19, we should all expect additional delays. We've implemented ongoing protocols and retrofitted our courthouses with sneeze guards, PPE stations, ongoing sanitation services and signage to help combat future delays. But attorneys can help us most by simply staying out of the courts whenever possible. Maximizing remote appearances will help move cases along. If litigants stay out of courthouses until the date of jury trial, we will greatly reduce courthouse traffic and the risk of outbreak-related closures. There are currently an estimated 5,000-7,000 delayed criminal trials, and thousands of preference and other civil trials waiting to be heard. My priority moving forward is to move through this backlog and to keep our courthouses open. We need the bar to help us make this happen.

President Jensen: *Judge Jessner, in 1984, your mother, Patricia Phillips, became the first woman president of LACBA. She received the Shattuck Price Award in 1991 for her outstanding contribution to the administration of justice in Los Angeles. Do you feel you are following her footsteps? Did that affect your career choice?*

Judge Jessner: My mother is a force of nature. She has not only broken through many glass ceilings but also pulled many other women through the ceiling along with her. I am one of many women who has been privileged to count her as a role model and cheerleader. In addition to being a successful litigator, my mother is kind, generous with her time, and has a great sense of humor. Growing up, it was evident to my four siblings and me that my mom loved what she did for a living. She worked many long hours during the week and on weekends, but she did so

with a smile on her face and it was clear that she gained great satisfaction and meaning not only from her legal work but also from the time she spent volunteering for LACBA among many other bar associations, mentoring, and pro bono activities. Finally, she developed many long-lasting friendships with her colleagues in her practice and the bar. It is for these reasons that she greatly influenced my decision to go into the practice of law.

President Jensen: *Judge Jessner, you have been very active in training judicial officers. Are there new or different issues you feel you need to address now in your training regimen that arise because of Covid-19 and the changes it has wrought? What do you tell Judges about Covid-19 and the impact on their courtrooms?*

Judge Jessner: It is important to not only assist judicial officers in thinking about how to continue to hold courtroom proceedings in a safe manner but also to make sure that judicial officers feel confident that they have the tools they need to continue to do their jobs effectively in a safe environment. Covid-19 has fundamentally changed the way we provide access to justice, but the fact of the matter is we must continue to provide access to justice. It has been my pleasure to work with my colleagues to think about the challenges presented and develop innovative ways to continue the business of the Court during the Covid-19 pandemic. I strongly believe that we will get through this together and we will emerge stronger and better.

President Jensen: *Judge Taylor and Judge Jessner, how would you describe your management styles?*

Judge Taylor and Judge Jessner: We are currently putting together talented and dedicated supervising judges who will work collaboratively to address the Court's challenges. We will work closely with Sherri Carter and our administrative team. And we will stay in very close contact with our legislative representatives and the Governor's office, as well as the Chief Justice and our local political leaders. We have very strong relationships with our justice partners. We all share the same challenges and goals. Our doors are always open – even if they are virtual doors!

President Jensen: *Any words of wisdom you would like to give to the lawyers of Los Angeles and all those who use the court system in the LASC?*

Judge Taylor and Judge Jessner: Be positive. We will get through this. And know that we understand that the practice of law is your chosen profession, as well as your source of livelihood. We want to keep your businesses running and our bar strong and engaged. We will continue to work with you and Stan Bissey as your executive director. We have outstanding relationships with LACBA and our diverse and talented affinity bar associations. We appreciate all that you do. Thank you for this opportunity.