

October 2, 2023

The Honorable Jonathan D. Gerber, Chairman
Judicial Circuit Assessment Committee

Dear Judge Gerber,

The Palm Beach County Criminal Justice Commission (CJC) serves as an advisory board to the Board of County Commissioners and was created to study all aspects of the criminal justice and crime prevention systems within the federal, state, county, municipal and private agencies within Palm Beach County, including the study of the health and human services and educational systems, among others, as they pertain to criminal justice or crime prevention.

The CJC consists of 32 members of public and private sector members representing heads of law enforcement, courts, corrections departments, businesses and community organizations. The CJC is a longstanding institution of criminal justice leadership, spanning 35 years of collaboration and community building across all aspects of the criminal justice system.

The CJC has carefully considered the proposal for Circuit Consolidation and potential impacts on the Fifteenth Judicial Circuit should it be consolidated with 17th and/or 19th Circuits. The CJC that consolidation of the Fifteenth Judicial Circuit with any other circuit, whether north or south, would undermine the efforts that Palm Beach County has made over many years improving the partnerships within the criminal justice system and the community. Rather than improving efficiencies and effectiveness, we believe consolidation would create enormous inefficiencies, and financial constraints upon our circuit and its citizens. WE also believe it would undermine the effectiveness of our criminal justice system.

The Fifteenth Circuit, like many other circuits, is grappling with funding constraints, staffing and workload shortages, changing technological requirements, the need for facility updates, and continuous population growth, all of which are considerable issues for a standalone circuit. Having to merge with another circuit would severely compound these issues.

The CJC requests the Judicial Circuit Assessment Committee to consider the possible impacts or implications a consolidation would create, particularly during any “transition” to a consolidated circuitry with the 19th and 17th Circuits:

- Technology costs for the County would increase substantially in order to integrate multi-county and circuit systems. Any efficiencies that might be realized from Circuit Consolidation would take years if not decades to offset the costs of implementation.

- A backlog of cases for the judiciary, prosecution, defense and other court-related cases and system stakeholders resulting in workload, stressors and financial shortfall
- Delays in jurisprudence due to the impending staffing and case processing impediments for all system users and stakeholders;
- The potential upsurge in the cost to counties for increased bed days due to related case processing inefficiencies, delays and shortfalls;
- The possible disparate impacts on low-income communities already facing economic hardships having to face increased travel, pretrial and other associated courts costs;
- The detrimental impacts on our specialty courts, which rely on our local service providers to address the unique populations such as veterans, mental health, homelessness and other disorders that need and require a rehabilitative and problem-solving approach; and
- Lastly, but perhaps most importantly, consolidation would undermine the of collaborative relationships and trust developed and maintained over the last 35 years by the CJC with law enforcement, courts, corrections departments, businesses and communities across the criminal justice and other intersecting systems, including education, human services and healthcare. In so doing, it would undermine the community's confidence in our justice system, a necessary component to an effective justice system.

The CJC strongly opposes the consolidation of the Fifteenth Judicial Circuit (Palm Beach County) with any other circuit.. Palm Beach County is the third largest county in Florida, and consolidation would drastically erode and diminish the long-standing progress to reduce costs and improve efficiencies, outcomes and relationships across our criminal justice system and other intersecting systems.

We appreciate your time and consideration and trust that an objective and comprehensive assessment will result in keeping the current boundaries of Florida's judicial circuits.

Respectfully,

Rev. Kevin Jones, Chair

Dr. Rachel Docekal, Vice-Chair

Marsha Andrews, Secretary

Matthew Pawlowski, Treasurer