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GOVERNMENT

Williams to step down as chief justice



TO THE PEOPLE of Rhode Island “I owe everything, as they never failed to sustain me,” R.I. Chief Justice Frank J. Williams, 68, wrote in his resignation letter to the governor. A noted Lincoln scholar and author (<http://search.barnesandnoble.com/Judging-Lincoln/Frank-J-Williams/e/9780809323913>) as well as a jurist, he is shown in his office with a bust of the late president. COURTESY R.I. SUPREME COURT

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PROVIDENCE – In a surprise move, R.I. Supreme Court Justice Frank J. Williams this afternoon announced his intention to retire effective Dec. 30.

Williams, 68, was named chief justice of the state’s highest court by then-Gov. Lincoln Almond – and his appointment unanimously confirmed by the R.I. General Assembly – in January 2001. He previously had served on the court for five years as an associate justice.

It has been a “deep and abiding honor to serve the people of our beloved state,” the chief justice said in his resignation letter this afternoon to Gov. Donald L. Carcieri.

“To them I owe everything, as they never failed to sustain me, and our citizens fully understood what I was attempting to do—enhance access to justice and make our courts more user-friendly,” Williams wrote.

He cited ongoing family health issues, and the completion of all the major goals laid out in his inaugural address in 2001, among factors contributing to the timing of his decision.

Maureen McKenna Goldberg, the senior associate justice on the state Supreme Court, will serve as interim chief justice after Dec. 30, the R.I. Administrative Office of State Courts said in its 4:30 p.m. statement. Williams indicated he will continue to serve the court, as a retired justice, “in whatever capacity is requested of him,” the office added.

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Williams’ achievements, according to the R.I. Administrative Office of State Courts, have included shepherding the judiciary through seven consecutive years of operating within its budget, “as appropriated by the General Assembly, and never requesting a supplemental budget appropriation.”

Meanwhile, he also oversaw major improvements to courthouse facilities, including the construction of the new Kent County Courthouse and R.I. Traffic Tribunal; security enhancements in all state courthouses, as well as other health and safety improvements for staff and visitors; and technology upgrades including the conversion from the judiciary’s antiquated Wang computer system to the ACS system in use today.

Other highlights of his tenure have included:

- The creation of the Supreme Court Office of Alternative Dispute Resolution, which has achieved a disposition rate through mediation exceeding 60 percent.
- The creation of the Office of Community Outreach and Public Relations, designed to educate the media and the public about the courts and to deliver services in a more user-friendly environment. Its accomplishments have included the establishment of the “Justice Rules” program, aimed at educating the state’s schoolchildren and teachers about the judicial and democratic processes, while promoting positive attitudes and career opportunities within the judiciary.

- The creation of the R.I. Judiciary's Office of Court Interpreters, which currently staffs six full-time interpreters for non-English speaking litigants appearing in Rhode Island's courts.
- The initiation of a traveling court program, in which the Supreme Court "rides the circuit" twice a year hears oral arguments at different venues throughout the state, and the public is invited to attend.
- Under his leadership, "the court has continuously reviewed trial and appellate court performance standards for promotion of increased civility within the bar," the Office of State Courts said. "In addition, the court has revised the rules of professional conduct for lawyers, redesigned bar applications, changed rules for the Board of Bar Examiners and begun a review of the Code of Judicial Conduct."
- The high court also has heard numerous high-profile cases, including the state's lead-paint case (2008); *State v. Matthew Thomas et al* (2007), in which the court refused to compel the governor to testify in the criminal case; and *Chambers v. Ormiston* (2007), the same-sex marriage case. And it issued casino advisory opinions to both the governor (2004) and the House of Representatives (2005).
- The chief justice authored an average of 41 decisions per term, helping the court to stay current with caseloads filed and publish most of its decisions each year by the Fourth of July.

This accomplishment came despite untimely deaths and resignation of colleagues that often compounded the court's jurisprudential challenges, leaving Williams to preside over seven different courts in his first four and a half years in office, the Office of State Courts noted.

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"We congratulate Chief Justice Williams and wish him well," Justice Goldberg said in a statement. The R.I. Judiciary has reaped great benefits under Williams' leadership, including such tangible changes as new, user-friendly facilities and enhanced use of technology, she said. But, she added, his "true legacy lies in his efforts toward judicial outreach to the citizens of Rhode Island and his determination to preserve judicial independence."

"He will be greatly missed," said Justice Paul A. Suttell. "His will be tremendous shoes to fill. The amount of responsibility is enormous."

Moreover, Suttell said, “He has been a tireless advocate and supporter of the Judiciary. I don’t think any chief justice that I can recall has approached the administrative responsibilities with as much enthusiasm as he did.”

“The man is a giant, a truly great Rhode Islander,” said Justice William P. Robinson III. “The people of this state should be deeply grateful for all that he has done in their service. ... He is bright; he is hard-working; he loves his state and country; he is fair; he genuinely seeks justice in all that he does; he is a kind human being. I am glad he is still going to be in our midst.”

R.I. Attorney General Patrick C. Lynch also praised the chief justice, in a statement this evening.

“Whether in his capacity as a probate judge or solicitor in many Rhode Island communities; as a captain in the U.S. Army; or, of course, as the Chief Judge of the State of Rhode Island for the past eight years, Chief Justice Williams has served with fairness, with honor and with distinction throughout his exemplary career,” Lynch wrote. “I have thought highly of him both as a person and as a judge since he presided at one of my jury trials more than 10 years ago.

“I am heartened to know that – as has been the case with his distinguished predecessor, Chief Justice Weisberger – Chief Judge Williams will continue to be a vital presence in our courthouses, especially in his much-valued role as a mediator, which he has fulfilled with great enthusiasm,” the attorney general added.

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“Chief Justice Frank Williams served the people of the State of Rhode Island with passion and commitment,” the governor said in a separate statement this evening.

“The legal community was enriched by his fair and practical approach to jurisprudence,” Carcieri said, adding: “His dedication for the judicial process was matched only by his thirst for scholarship, particularly his admiration for and knowledge of the great President Lincoln.”

A noted Lincoln scholar, Williams is the author of the essay collection *Judging Lincoln*; co-author of *The Emancipation Proclamation: Three Views* and *Lincoln’s Ladies: The Women in the Life of the Sixteenth President*, among others; and an editor of works including *Lincoln Lessons* and *Franklin D. Roosevelt and Abraham Lincoln*:

Competing Perspectives on Two Great Presidencies. He also has served on the U.S. Abraham Lincoln Bicentennial Commission, chaired the The Lincoln Forum and served as president of The Ulysses S. Grant and Abraham Lincoln Associations.

“During his tenure,” Carcieri continued, “Rhode Island saw the modernization of the court system and the strengthening of the identity of the judicial branch. He has left an indelible mark on the Rhode Island judicial system and the larger civic community, and will be greatly missed on the bench.”

Information about the R.I. Supreme Court is available from the R.I. Administrative Office of State Courts at www.courts.ri.gov/supreme/ (<http://www.courts.ri.gov/supreme/defaultnew-supreme.htm>).