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**THE LEAGUE
OF WOMEN VOTERS**
of New York State

**TESTIMONY BEFORE
NEW YORK STATE ASSEMBLY AND SENATE
JUDICIARY COMMITTEES
November 21, 2019, 10:30 AM
Legislative Office Building, Hearing Room A
Albany, New York**

Good morning. My name is Laura Ladd Bierman, and I am the Executive Director of the League of Women Voters of New York State. On behalf of the League, I want to thank the Committees for this opportunity to speak about the proposed court reforms for New York State.

The League of Women Voters is a non-partisan political organization that encourages informed and active participation in government and works to increase understanding of major public policy through education and advocacy. We seek to strengthen democracy through support of a panoply of issues including protection of the right to vote, transparent and ethical management of government, equal rights and equal opportunity for all, access to resources which fulfill basic human needs, affordable, quality health care, protection and preservation of our natural resources. None of these goals can be met without a judicial system which dispenses justice equally to all, within a framework which is easily understood and navigated by those who seek the assistance of the courts. The proposal of the Chief Judge to simplify the New York Court system is long overdue and essential to meeting these goals.

The State of New York had, for a time, been lagging behind other of our sister states in many of the benchmarks which characterize a modern and dynamic government. But we have recently witnessed reforms in many essential ingredients of a dynamic and thriving democracy such as a new redistricting plan, early voting, reforms to campaign finance, and restoration of voting rights for ex-offenders. The League had advocated for each of those changes and we are appreciative of the results which have been obtained by the legislature in the recent past in enacting these laws. But it is now time to address the structure of judicial system, which is in dire need of attention and which has been long neglected. The current system is confusing to litigants and costly to everyone involved in the courts: litigants, the court system itself, and taxpayers.

The League of Women Voters is 100 years old; we have been seeking court simplification for sixty of those years. Our position, adopted and crafted by our members three generations ago, states:

Structure: There shall be an integrated, statewide court system consisting of a minimum number of trial courts of broad jurisdiction. Cases and judicial personnel shall be transferable from one court to another to the greatest extent possible.

So our goal has been simple: we have supported efforts during this half century to develop a unified, statewide court system consisting of a minimum number of trial courts of broad jurisdiction. We agreed with former Chief Judge Judith Kaye who, in 2001 stated, “Court restructuring [is] an essential foundation for a vibrant court system. . . we need systemic, comprehensive court merger.” And we agreed with and advocated a plethora of court reform proposals which have been suggested in the years before and since.

The present proposal , consolidating the current 11 separate trial courts into a three-tier model, is again a proposal which the League supports as establishing an integrated, statewide court system consisting of a minimum number of trial courts of broad jurisdiction.

Such a consolidation will provide the needed agility and flexibility to assure equal access to justice through our court system. In the past, the courts which have dealt with the issues addressing our most vulnerable and disadvantaged citizens such as Family Court and Housing Court have been most in need of extra resources, which, under our current judicial system, was awkward and difficult to provide. The consolidation of the trial courts will allow the court administrators to deftly and efficiently divert resources to the areas of greatest need so that litigants will be best served and our state court system will be able to truly provide “justice for all”.

The League of Women Voters of New York State has continually supported all proposals that make our government more efficient, user friendly, and have a maximum use of the technological advances available. Our current court system which is very antiquated, does not do this. We encourage you to support this legislation to improve and strengthen our democracy.

Thank you again for the opportunity to speak before the Committees.