

Superior Court of California County of Santa Clara

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From Declaration to Democracy: Upholding the Rule of Law at 250

Nearly 250 years ago, a group of colonists asserted their right to self-governance in the Declaration of Independence. In 1776, the decision to separate from Great Britain was a bold act undertaken by individuals who recognized that fundamental principles were at stake. At the heart of the Declaration lies the assertion that all people are endowed with inherent rights – specifically, life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. The Declaration introduced the revolutionary concept that legitimate government exists only with the consent of the governed.

The Declaration has its limitations. The rights it named were not applied equally, and large segments of the population – enslaved individuals, Indigenous peoples, and women among them – were excluded in practice from the freedoms the Declaration described. Recognizing these omissions reminds us that the nation has long relied on individuals and movements to push the country toward the ideals first articulated in 1776. Despite its imperfections, the Declaration is the foundation of our country's democratic form of government, in which responsibilities are distributed across the three branches – legislative, executive, and judicial.

The role of the judiciary in a democracy is to form the backbone of the rule of law. At their core, courts exist to ensure that the law applies equally to all people. This is not a mere aspiration; it is the work we do daily. Whether resolving disputes large or small, judges must apply the law fairly, without favoritism and without fear. In moments of great social tension, the courtroom remains one of the few places where facts, procedure, and reason guide outcomes.

Courts also serve as a vital check within our constitutional structure. The framers of our system understood that democracy is strongest when power is balanced. Judicial review – our authority to interpret and apply the law – ensures that no branch exceeds its lawful limits. This safeguard is exercised for the protection of the people. The court's responsibility extends beyond deciding cases. Here in Santa Clara County, we continually examine how our court system can better serve the public through innovation and partnership. We have expanded remote appearance options to reduce barriers related to transportation, childcare, and work schedules; increased access to self-help resources; and modernized digital systems to make interacting with the court– even for non-English speaking court users – more accessible and

efficient. The court's efforts reflect the understanding that preserving democracy also requires removing obstacles that prevent people from participating in it.

Equally important is the court's role in safeguarding individual rights. Democracy cannot rest solely on majority rule. It must also protect the rights of those who may not have political power or may face prejudice or misunderstanding. In many instances, individuals come before the court seeking nothing more than to have their voices heard. In Santa Clara County, that commitment is reflected every day as judicial officers and court staff work to ensure meaningful access to justice for nearly two million residents who live in one of the most diverse communities in the nation. Whether someone is appearing remotely for a hearing, accessing self-help services, receiving language assistance, or navigating a complex legal matter without an attorney, our responsibility is to ensure that constitutional principles are not abstract ideals, but meaningful realities for the people we serve.

The courts also play an important role in strengthening communities. Programs such as CARE Court seek to connect eligible individuals experiencing serious behavioral health challenges with treatment, housing support, and community services through collaboration with local partners. Family and juvenile courts work to support family stability and reunification when appropriate, while collaborative courts focus on addressing underlying issues that can contribute to repeated involvement in the justice system. These efforts demonstrate that courts are not simply places where disputes are resolved but institutions that help communities heal, stabilize, and move forward.

We do not ask the public to trust us blindly. Rather, we invite them to see how justice is administered, understand the values that guide us, and hold us accountable to the highest standards of fairness and service. Public trust must be earned every day, particularly in Santa Clara County, the heart of Silicon Valley, a globally influential center of innovation that helps shape the world. In such a dynamic and rapidly evolving community, maintaining confidence in the rule of law is essential. Transparency, accessibility, and responsiveness are not optional; they are fundamental to preserving confidence in democratic institutions.

As the nation continues to evolve, the Declaration of Independence invites ongoing reflection. Its promises require continual effort, thoughtful leadership, and a commitment to fairness. The work of democracy did not end in 1776, nor does it exist solely in Washington, D.C. It happens every day in communities like Santa Clara County, where judicial officers and court staff work to ensure that constitutional values remain alive for the people we serve.

As Presiding Judge of the Santa Clara County Superior Court, I am honored to serve alongside the dedicated judicial officers and court staff who work each day to uphold the rule of law while

continually seeking new ways to expand access to justice, strengthen public trust, and ensure that the ideals first articulated nearly 250 years ago remain meaningful for generations to come.