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**Report of President Richard Lewis to the  
House of Delegates of the New York State Bar Association  
April 6, 2024**

Dear Colleagues:

During my term, we have taken significant steps toward addressing the practical concerns of our members and our profession. It has been a collaborative effort made possible by the unmatched professionalism and dedication of my colleagues, many of whom are here today, and for that, I thank you.

Our primary objective has been - as always - to support our members so they are better prepared to perform their jobs in the most efficient manner possible and better serve their clients.

We have been presented with challenges and crises ranging from war to economic distress to the rising tide of cynicism that seems to have engulfed our society. However, we have transformed these challenges into opportunities.

The scope of our efforts is vast and spans many of the issues that confront us every day.

Our task forces on Advancing Diversity, Combating Antisemitism and Anti-Asian Hate, Artificial Intelligence, and Homelessness and the Law have worked tirelessly to develop recommendations that have caught the attention of the legislature and the governor's office.

We have addressed numerous legislative initiatives including the fight for the Right to Counsel for noncitizens. We signed an agreement to work on areas of mutual interest with the Israel Bar Association and have examined the impact of A.I. on our profession and society.

In January, this body approved the report from our Task Force on Combating Antisemitism and Anti-Asian Hate. The task force recommended an update to the Hate Crimes Modernization Act that would expand the list of hate-crime-eligible offenses. The act also calls for an increased emphasis on improving the reporting and prosecution of hate crimes.

Later this morning, Chair Vivian Wesson will present the report from the Task Force on Artificial Intelligence. A.I. tools have developed at a rate unlike any technological breakthrough we have seen in our lifetimes and while they offer us the ability to focus more on creative and practical endeavors, they present a comprehensive set of ethical challenges that we are just beginning to fully comprehend.

Our Task Force on Homelessness and the Law --- chaired by William (Bill) Russell -- is examining how the government can humanely tackle this crisis, which involves more than 74,000 New Yorkers - many of whom are veterans, victims of domestic violence and/or have mental illness. It is also exploring how the justice and

healthcare systems impact the lives of homeless people and is examining the role that the lack of affordable housing and low wages play in homelessness.

I look forward to hearing the task force's report when it is presented in June.

And that is only the beginning.

In February, Executive Director Pam McDevitt, Immediate Past President Sherry Levin Wallach, General Counsel David Miranda and our incoming President-Elect Kathleen Sweet joined me at the ABA Mid-Year Meeting where we successfully presented the findings of our Advancing Diversity report. The ABA followed our lead and adopted the report. The report provides a blueprint for how diversity, equity and inclusion can be protected at universities, law firms, corporations, and the courts.

The support we received at the ABA is indicative of how relevant our Association is to the national conversation.

We also voted to support a resolution at the ABA's Annual Meeting in August that calls for forgiveness of student loans for graduates (of ABA accredited law schools) who commit seven years to working in-person in rural areas, including in Upstate New York.

We have continued to engage our top legislators and members of the judiciary - including Chief Judge Rowan Wilson - about improving the operation of the state's family and housing courts. I recently joined state Sen. Brad Hoylman-Sigal and Assembly Members Charles Levine, Jabari Brisport and Andrew Hevesi at a press conference to call for an increase in funding for the state's family courts. I have also met with Chief Administrative Judge Joseph Zayas about the court rules, training for court employees and e-filing. Domenick and I met with Judge Zayas and Judge St. George recently to discuss Court rules and issues involving Housing Court and Family Court.

We recently succeeded in encouraging the governor to reverse her decision to transfer \$100 million from the IOLA Fund to the General Fund. The IOLA Fund is a critical tool for low-income New Yorkers to receive civil legal services - often when they are facing life-altering circumstances such as needing life-saving medical treatment or are trying to recover from seemingly insurmountable debt.

We were also successful in getting the governor to sign into law a bill that allows litigants in a civil case to file affidavits and other sworn documents without getting them notarized.

Our Annual Meeting was extremely successful. We were able to listen to and interact with experts from inside and outside of our organization on matters ranging from the challenges the IRS is facing to the influence of money in college sports to the regulation of short-term rentals.

We were able to recognize many people who are having an enormous impact on our profession including former Secretary of Homeland Security Jeh Johnson who co-chaired our Task Force on Advancing Diversity. He was presented with the Gold Medal at our gala dinner at the Museum of Modern Art.

It is fitting to celebrate our accomplishments.

However, we must always be ready to protect individuals who are most in need of the guaranteed protections our laws afford them.

The governor's plan to remove \$234 million from the Indigent Legal Services Fund and transfer \$120 million of it into the General Fund is still in play. We have voiced our opposition to this because these funds are earmarked and designed to enhance the quality of the state's public defense system. I recently wrote an op-ed piece in the New York Law Journal on this matter.

The New York State Bar Association will continue to speak out against this transfer while urging that the fund be used only for its intended purpose.

We will also continue to speak clearly on matters that impact the rule of law and our profession internationally.

Last month, we signed an agreement to work on areas of mutual interest with the 80,000-member Israel Bar Association. We forged this critical alliance to elevate our efforts to combat hate crimes and uphold judicial independence. Our agreement to develop joint programming is like previous ones we have signed with bar associations around the world. Each one has amplified our voice and presented us with different views that have made our policy recommendations even more discerning.

I have also met with the president of the Law Society of Hong Kong, representatives from the Georgia Bar Association, a former president of the Rosario Bar Association in Argentina and the President of the Law Society of England and Scotland as well as with law school deans and presidents to strengthen our partnerships.

We have reached out to our members throughout the state. President-Elect Domenick Napoletano and I have gathered with leaders of affinity, local, and national bar associations to discover how we can serve them better and more importantly, to explore how we may strengthen our partnerships and therefore magnify our collective voice.

In addition, we have continued to assert our position that New York's judiciary sets the standard for others throughout the country.

As recently as last week we spoke out about the sanctity of our judiciary and condemned disparagement of our Courts and threats to the safety of Court personnel and their families.

Looking ahead, we will continue to campaign for appropriate fees for 18-B attorneys who were granted a raise to \$158 an hour last year. We are aware that the continuing state funding is not guaranteed beyond this year, and we are continuing to advocate that the state ensures renewed funding going forward.

We are also continuing our support for the Right to Counsel for noncitizens who may not understand the grave consequences of representing themselves or pleading guilty. The status quo negatively impacts communities by separating families and disproportionately impacts Black immigrants and others of color who are arrested, convicted, and sentenced more harshly.

When looking ahead, we must also turn our attention to the next generation of leaders to ensure they have a clear understanding of how our democratic processes function.

We are at a crisis point when it comes to civic education and our interest in this matter will not wane.

These are some of the reasons why I am looking forward to our Civics Convocation next month. It will address how we can better instruct our country's youth about how the American government works and the significance of historical events.

As you know, Supreme Court Associate Justice Sonia Sotomayor has graciously agreed to speak and take questions from students. Justice Sotomayor is among the many luminaries who have accepted our invitation to explore the troubling lack of basic knowledge among young people and adults about civics and more importantly about thinking critically.

In addition, Chief Judge Rowan Wilson has kindly agreed to deliver the keynote address.

I want to thank the chairs of our Civics Convocation Task Force: Gail Ehrlich, Jay Worona and Christopher Riano for planning this event and for their work preparing a fact-finding report that will outline how civic education may be improved.

This is my last meeting of the House as President. It has been an honor to serve you. One thing we all understand is that our work is never finished.

The New York State Bar Association is the largest voluntary state bar association in the country. We have an enormous impact on our members because of our selflessness and professionalism. It is imperative that we uphold the high standards we have set for ourselves so that we may continue to ensure that everyone has equal access to the protections our laws provide.

I will confidently hand the gavel to Domenick Napoletano who will take over as President on June 1 knowing that you'll be in good hands under his leadership. As for myself – Domenick – thank you for your collegiality throughout the past year and I look forward to our ongoing work.

I would also like to thank the Executive Committee and the entire House of Delegates for supporting my presidency. And while we have accomplished so much throughout the past year, I appreciate that our continued partnership serving our members and strengthening the legal profession and justice system involves an enduring commitment.

I would like to acknowledge my wife Lori and daughters Emily and Anna for their unwavering support. Especially Lori who endured many long nights when I was away on bar association business, and the even longer nights when she was forced to join me.

Above all, I want to thank the staff. Pam, David, Melissa, Susan, Kathy and so many others who I dealt with daily, including weekends. Without them this Association would not be what it is.

Thank you!

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Richard C. Lewis". The signature is written in dark ink and is positioned to the left of the typed name and title.

Richard C. Lewis, Esq.  
President