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Mock court summer camp in Hartford gives students an introduction to the world of law

By Steven Goode, Staff Writer

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Students from across the state participate in a mock trial during the Honorable Warren W. Eginton Justice Institute at the Ribicoff Federal Building in Hartford on Friday, July 18, 2025.

HARTFORD — This is not your typical face-painting, merit badge-hunting, musical-performing summer camp.

Instead, you'll find young men and women dressed in office attire, attending trials, talking to judges, lawyers, and investigators, and competing against each other at mock trial.

Welcome to the third annual Honorable Warren W. Eginton Justice Institute at the Ribicoff Federal Building in Hartford.

The camp is designed to give young people an introduction into world of the judicial system and related careers and also help attendees bring back a better understanding of how to courts work to their friends and families.

This year, 24 students from 16 high schools and 18 towns participated in the five-day camp.

"It's important that the judiciary connects with the people it serves," District Court Judge Sarala Nagala said Friday as she, court staff, trained attorneys, and two dozen campers from around the state prepared for the mock trials that would culminate a week of learning about the U.S. justice system.

Nagala said the camp is modeled after one that started in a court on Long Island and is named in honor of a civic-minded judge who spent four decades on the bench.

For Nagala, whose parents emigrated from India, the most moving event of the camp is witnessing a naturalization ceremony, which the campers do each year.

"Had they not been naturalized, I wouldn't be here," she said of her parents.

Other aspects of the camp include panels about civil and criminal litigation, public speaking, and professionalism. The campers also visit a U.S. Marshals Service cell block, observe real court proceedings, meet federal probation officers, visit the Connecticut Supreme Court, and visit with a police K-9 unit and the Connecticut bomb squad.

Alia Wilper, an incoming sophomore at Rockville High School, was among the campers preparing for Friday's mock trial, which pitted six teams — three prosecution and three defense — against each other.

Wilper said she has known since the fifth grade that she wanted to be a lawyer, so when she learned about the camp, she applied to it.

"I like to argue and I'm pretty nosy," she said.

Wilper, 14, said she enjoyed the hands-on aspect of the camp — watching trials, the access to federal judges, and the introduction to other law enforcement careers — that it provides.

"It gives you a little taste of the field," she said.

During the mock trial sessions, the prosecution and defense teams sit in actual courtrooms and battle each other. They make opening statements, take testimony from witnesses, introduce exhibits, conduct cross examinations and redirects, and raise objections in an effort to convince a judge to see it their way.

Asked about what the camp could use that it doesn't already have, Nagala said more room and more openings to serve the growing number of students from around the state who have expressed interest in attending and learning about judicial careers.

"I'd love to expand it to include more students," she said.