



## ADMINISTRATIVE OFFICE of PENNSYLVANIA COURTS

### News for Immediate Release

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### Allegheny County Celebrates Opening of Trauma-Informed Courthouse

**HARRISBURG** — The Allegheny County Courts today celebrated the conversion of their Family Law Center into a fully trauma-informed courthouse that will ease the burden of going to court, particularly on children and those who have experienced trauma or are navigating the court system for the first time.

“This project has touched upon virtually every facet of our courthouse – elevating its accessibility and comfort, incorporating diverse technological enhancements, providing extensive accommodations and essential support services to court users, all while equipping court staff with comprehensive training,” said Judge Jennifer McCrady.

The Courts partnered with Allegheny County Department of Human Services and Carnegie Mellon University’s human-centered design graduate class to revamp the space and ultimately improve the family court experience following initial input from stakeholders, youth and families in 2016. After securing funding from numerous foundations and gaining grants and private donations, they were able to implement a wide range of the recommended changes.

“The transformation of the Allegheny County Family Law Center into a fully trauma-informed courthouse is a remarkable testament to our commitment to justice,” said Chief Justice of Pennsylvania Debra Todd. “By prioritizing accessibility, compassion and the well-being of court users, we are not only building a more inclusive legal system, but also fostering a place where healing, trust and fairness can flourish. This innovative approach exemplifies the essence of our justice system – to remove barriers, embrace empathy and empower every individual in their pursuit of justice.”

Among the most notable changes, the building now offers a wide range of support services to alleviate the challenges faced by court users and address their critical needs.

A Wellness Clinic, staffed by providers and nurses from Children's Hospital of Pittsburgh, opened inside the Family Law Center and offers physicals, basic medical care, prescription services, care coordination and family planning. The Court has also partnered with external agencies to provide on-site behavioral health assessments, service coordination assistance, drug and alcohol evaluations and crisis response services.

Various supports for individuals with language barriers and hearing impairments have also been implemented. These include “I speak” cards at entrances, translated forms, on-demand translation services throughout the building and advanced interpreter equipment in courtrooms.

Furthermore, an application was developed and implemented in the Protection from Abuse (PFA) department that allows petitioners to more easily complete the required paperwork and streamlines the behind-the-scenes process to allow litigants to come before a judge more quickly.

“By creating a supportive and empathetic environment, we are aiming to promote healing, trust, fairness and empowerment within the legal system,” said Judge Kim Eaton. “In our efforts to lead to better mental and emotional outcomes for court users, we are also helping remove barriers that may deter individuals from seeking justice or participating in legal proceedings.”

To address the common barrier of childcare, a childcare center, operated by the National Council of Jewish Women, is now available within the courthouse. The secure environment allows adults to leave their children while attending to matters within the courthouse. For other children, the Family Law Center houses a dedicated children’s area with books and toys, along with a new playground installed in the courtyard to provide an opportunity for families to be together in a more natural environment and reduce their stress while waiting for their court case.

Within the children’s area, a sensory room was created to serve those with autism by offering a dedicated space for sensory integration and emotional regulation. The room – equipped with white noise, a projector, weighted blankets and vests, I-Pads with neurodiverse apps and more – provides solace for individuals with sensory processing differences and autism. Additionally, each courtroom offers fidget toys, noise-canceling headphones, sunglasses and coloring packets for use during hearings.

“The strides in Allegheny County exemplify a profound commitment to administering justice that is inclusive and accessible, and I am gratified to see the efforts of our Autism and the Courts initiative manifested in such a creative and inspiring way,” said Pennsylvania Supreme Court Justice Kevin Dougherty.

Beyond the new sensory room and children’s areas, some of the other key physical improvements include the following:

- Waiting rooms and courtrooms were repainted in soothing colors, featuring new, more comfortable furniture and improved flooring for ease of navigation.
- A new wayfinding system was introduced – all rooms were renumbered for consistency, equipped with ADA-accessible fonts and Braille, and augmented with additional signage.
- Large electronic directories providing room numbers and courtroom assignments are now present on every floor and in waiting rooms. Future phases will see screens offering case tracking, allowing court users to monitor the status of their hearings.
- Kiosks at the building's entrances have been installed to ease navigation, with plans to expand to offer check-in functionality integrated with case tracking boards.
- Charging tables, USB outlets and a reliable Guest Wi-Fi network have been incorporated.
- The revamped facility includes new conference rooms for consultations with caseworkers, probation officers and attorneys.
- The Fifth Judicial District's website underwent a comprehensive overhaul to better serve litigants in Allegheny County.

The final aspect of the Courts’ trauma-informed approach was to ensure that everyone entering the Family Law Center is treated with dignity and respect and can access the aid they need as individuals. To

this end, staff throughout the building have received training on trauma-informed responses from the Center for Victims, and judges, hearing officers and other staff have undergone training on topics such as motivational interviewing, Mental Health First Aid and Language Access to support non-English speakers effectively.

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