

# AOPC CONNECTED



Issue 2, 2024

## In this issue

In this issue, read about the swearing-in of the newest Supreme Court justice, as well as recent leadership transitions at both the appellate and county court levels, ongoing AOPC/IT initiatives and more.



Justice Daniel McCaffery (l) at his swearing-in ceremony with brother, former Supreme Court Justice Seamus McCaffery (r).

## The Honorable Daniel McCaffery Sworn in as Newest Justice of the Supreme Court of Pennsylvania

Chief Justice of Pennsylvania **Debra Todd** officially welcomed Justice **Daniel D. McCaffery** as a member of the Supreme Court of Pennsylvania following his ceremonial swearing-in ceremony on Jan. 11, 2024.

Surrounded by his children, McCaffery took the oath of office administered by his brother, retired Supreme Court Justice **Seamus McCaffery**.

"This is a joyous and momentous occasion," said Chief Justice Todd. "Justice McCaffery is eminently qualified to assume his position on the oldest Supreme Court in America. No one has worked harder to join our ranks and I have every confidence he will be a tremendous addition to the Court."

Born and raised in Philadelphia, McCaffery enlisted in the U.S. Army after high school and served with the First Cavalry

Division. From active duty, Justice McCaffery was one of a select few chosen to attend the U.S. Military Academy at West Point Prep School before being honorably discharged and continuing his service with the Army Reserve, 304th Civil Affairs Unit.

McCaffery's dedication to the practice of law and public service spans more than three decades, beginning with his time in the Philadelphia District Attorney's Office serving as an assistant district attorney in the Major Trials Unit.

Following his service in the DA's office, McCaffery entered private practice with Jaffe, Friedman, Schuman, Nemeroff and Applebaum PC where he became partner and chair of the commercial litigation department.

Focused on returning to his roots in public service, McCaffery was



McCaffery and his brother are the only two siblings to have served on the Court in its 302-year history.

elected to the Philadelphia Court of Common Pleas in 2013 and assigned to one of the busiest trial divisions in the state.

McCaffery was elected to the Superior Court in 2019 – where he served until his installation on the high court. In addition to his time on the intermediate appellate bench, he was selected by the Supreme Court to serve on the Court of Judicial Discipline.

# Pa. Appellate Courts Welcome New Judges



Judge Timika Lane



Judge Jill Beck



Judge Matt Wolf

## Superior Court

In January, Judge **Timika Lane** and Judge **Jill Beck** took their ceremonial oaths of office as they assumed their elected positions on the Superior Court.

"My colleagues and I are thrilled to welcome Judges Lane and Beck to the Superior Court," said President Judge **Anne Lazarus**. "Each of them brings a wealth of unique experience and expertise to the judiciary that will now become a critical part of the fabric of this esteemed Court.

"From the earliest years of both of their careers, each of these exceptional women was defined by their commitment to community and public service. We look forward to each of them bringing that same focus and dedication to the Superior Court."

Judge Lane, a native of West Philadelphia, joins the Court after a career dedicated to public service as a middle school educator and chief legal counsel for State Senator Anthony Williams and finally as a judge on the Philadelphia Court of Common Pleas, where she was assigned to the Major Trials program and the Complex Litigation Jury Trial program.

Judge Beck of Allegheny County comes to the Court following a career as a tireless advocate for those in need, including children through her work at KidsVoice representing abused and neglected children in court proceedings. Following her work in the advocacy community, Judge Beck served as a judicial clerk for then Superior Court Judge and eventually Supreme Court Justice **Christine Donohue**.

## Commonwealth Court

The Commonwealth Court recently welcomed its newest member, **Judge Matt Wolf**, who previously served as a supervising judge in the Philadelphia Municipal Court.

Before becoming a judge, he spent 24 years as a trial lawyer for civil rights cases in the Delaware Valley.

Prior to becoming a lawyer, Judge Wolf was a highly decorated US Army veteran, earning the Bronze Star. He served in Iraq and Afghanistan as part of the U.S. Army Judge Advocate General's Corps, and still serves with the Pennsylvania National Guard.

## Have a photo or story idea?

We are always looking for story ideas or photos of staff and judges out and about in the community. Send us an email with the scoop!  
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# County Court Leadership Transitions

Several leadership transitions have taken place in courts across Pennsylvania, with the following counties welcoming new president judges and district court administrators so far in 2024.

## Washington County

Judge **Gary Gilman** recently took over as the county's president judge following the resignation of President Judge **John DiSalle**, who served in the role since January 2021.

## Venango County

Judge **Matthew Kirtland** replaced former President Judge **Marie Veon** upon his swearing-in as a common pleas judge. He previously served as an MDJ since 2016.

## Mifflin County

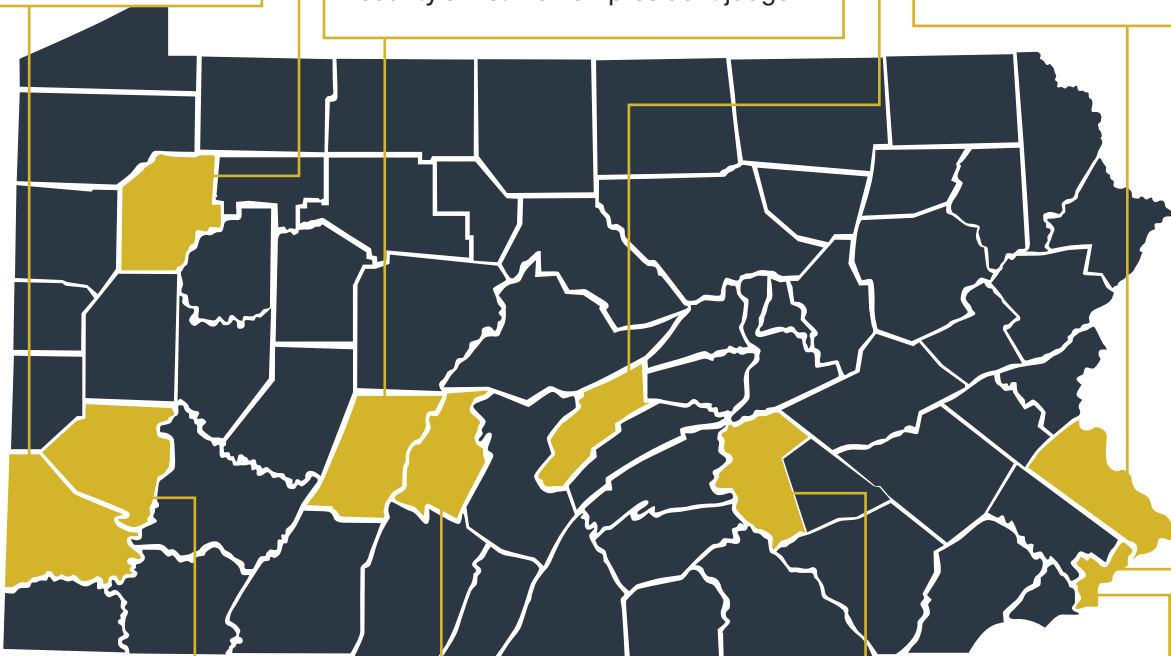
Judge **Aaron Gingrich** became the county's new president judge following the retirement of former President Judge **David Barron** at the end of 2023.

## Cambria County

Following the retirement of President Judge **Norman Krumenacker**, Judge **Linda R. Fleming** took over as the county's first woman president judge.

## Bucks County

Judge **Raymond McHugh** assumed the role of president judge succeeding President Judge **Wallace Bateman**, who held the role since 2019.



## Philadelphia County

Judge **Nina Wright Padilla** became president judge of the First Judicial District, taking over for Judge **Idee Fox** who retired at the end of 2023 after more than 25 years on the bench.

## Allegheny County

Judge **Susan Evashavik DiLucente** succeeded former President Judge **Kim Berkeley Clark**, who served in the role since 2018.

## Blair County

Judge **Wade Kagarise**, an Army veteran who has served on the bench since 2014, took over as president judge succeeding former President Judge **Elizabeth Doyle**.

**Samuel Dunkle** became the county's new district court administrator.

## Dauphin County

Judge **Scott Evans** became the county's president judge following the retirement of former President Judge **John Cherry**, who served in that role since 2020.

## Philadelphia Municipal Court

Judge **T. Francis Shields** succeeded former President Judge **Patrick Dugan** as the court's next president judge, who had held the position since 2019.

# Superior Court Elects New President Judge

By unanimous vote, the judges of the Pennsylvania Superior Court elected Judge **Anne Lazarus** to be the new president judge effective Jan. 7, 2024.

Judge Lazarus has served on the Court for more than a decade and succeeds President Judge **Jack Panella**.

"I am honored and humbled by the trust and confidence my colleagues have placed in me as president-judge, affording me the opportunity to serve the Court and the citizens of Pennsylvania in this important role," Judge Lazarus said.

*"I am grateful for the commitment and dedication to the Court by President Judge Jack Panella, who has served in this role for the past five years with distinction."*

"I look forward to working with my colleagues to build upon the firm foundation of access to justice and commitment to the people of Pennsylvania which was a foundation of Judge Panella's tenure."

Judge Lazarus was elected to the Superior Court in November 2009 and sworn-in as a member of the Court in January 2010. Notably, she is the first woman from Philadelphia to be elected to any statewide office.

Prior to being elected to the Superior Court, Judge Lazarus served as legal counsel to the Philadelphia Orphans' Court and was later appointed to the Court of Common Pleas of Philadelphia County in 1991. During her time as a trial court judge, Lazarus served in the criminal, civil and orphans' court divisions.



*President Judge Anne Lazarus*

Focused on preparing the next generation of legal practitioners, she has also served as an adjunct professor at Widener University School of Law, Temple University Beasley School of Law, the National Institute of Trial Advocacy and the National Judicial College.

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# IT Director Elected to CITOC Executive Board

**Russel Montchal**, director of AOPC/IT, was recently elected to the Court Information Technology Officers Consortium (CITOC) Executive Board, for a 3-year term beginning Jan. 1st, 2024.

CITOC is an organization that is comprised of senior level information technologists that come from both the state and trial level of courts.

CITOC is an official partner with the National Center for State Courts (NCSC) and assists judicial branch leaders in resolving business and technology challenges.

Russel has been a CITOC member for many years and has always recognized the immense value that the CITOC organization provides to IT leaders in the judiciary at the state and local levels across the nation.

"Technology and best practices change constantly, and CITOC is a valuable forum for members to exchange information and help each other," Russel explained.

The Executive Board consists of eight members that meet regularly to organize events and activities of its various workgroups and committees.

"I am excited and honored to serve in this capacity," he said.

Please join the AOPC in congratulating Russel!



*Russel Montchal*



Senior Judge Paula Francisco Ott speaks at the press conference on Jan. 25 announcing the pilot program.

## New Pilot Project Provides Free Legal Representation to Older Adults in Guardianship Cases

The Pennsylvania Courts through its Office of Elder Justice in the Courts (OEJC) recently announced a new, grant-funded pilot project with MidPenn Legal Services and the Dauphin County Orphans' Court to provide free legal representation in all guardianship cases in Dauphin County for adults aged 60 and older.

"Guardianship is sometimes necessary for persons with diminished capacity or persons with a disability in managing their affairs," said Senior Judge **Paula Francisco Ott**. "The appointment of counsel through this partnership is a tremendous benefit to all older Pennsylvanians, further ensuring that their concerns, wishes and rights are respected and protected at every step of the legal process."

This initiative aims to increase the appointment of counsel for - and the frequency of attendance of - the alleged incapacitated person at guardianship proceedings, both key factors in ensuring due process and the preservation of their rights.

Working with MidPenn Legal Services, Dauphin County's Orphans' Court, under the leadership of Judge **John McNally**, will appoint counsel for all alleged incapacitated persons aged 60 and older unless they decline representation, elect to hire private counsel or have counsel who was appointed by the court prior to the start of the pilot project. The Court and MidPenn Legal Services will also provide case data to the OEJC for analysis of grant goals and outcomes.

### ***The Elder Justice Innovation Grant***

*In September 2022, the OEJC was awarded a three-year, nearly \$3 million federal Elder Justice Innovation Grant to further support its work to protect older Pennsylvanians and implement improvements in the handling of adult guardianships cases.*

*The overarching goals of the grant are to:*

- *Assure due process for alleged incapacitated or incapacitated persons*
- *Improve guardianship monitoring capabilities to prevent abuse and exploitation*
- *Promote alternatives to guardianships.*

*Pennsylvania was one of three states to be awarded a grant from the federal Administration for Community Living (ACL) and all grant work is overseen by the OEJC. The grants provide assistance to states in their efforts to assess and implement improvements in the handling of adult guardianship cases.*

*"This article is supported by the Administration for Community Living (ACL), U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) as part of a financial assistance award totaling \$1,827,313 with 75% funded by ACL/HHS and \$631,644 amount and 25% funded by non-government source(s). The contents are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily represent the official views of, nor an endorsement, by ACL/HHS, or the U.S. Government."*

# UJS Budget Request FY 2024-25

The 2024-25 UJS budget request highlights three critical components:

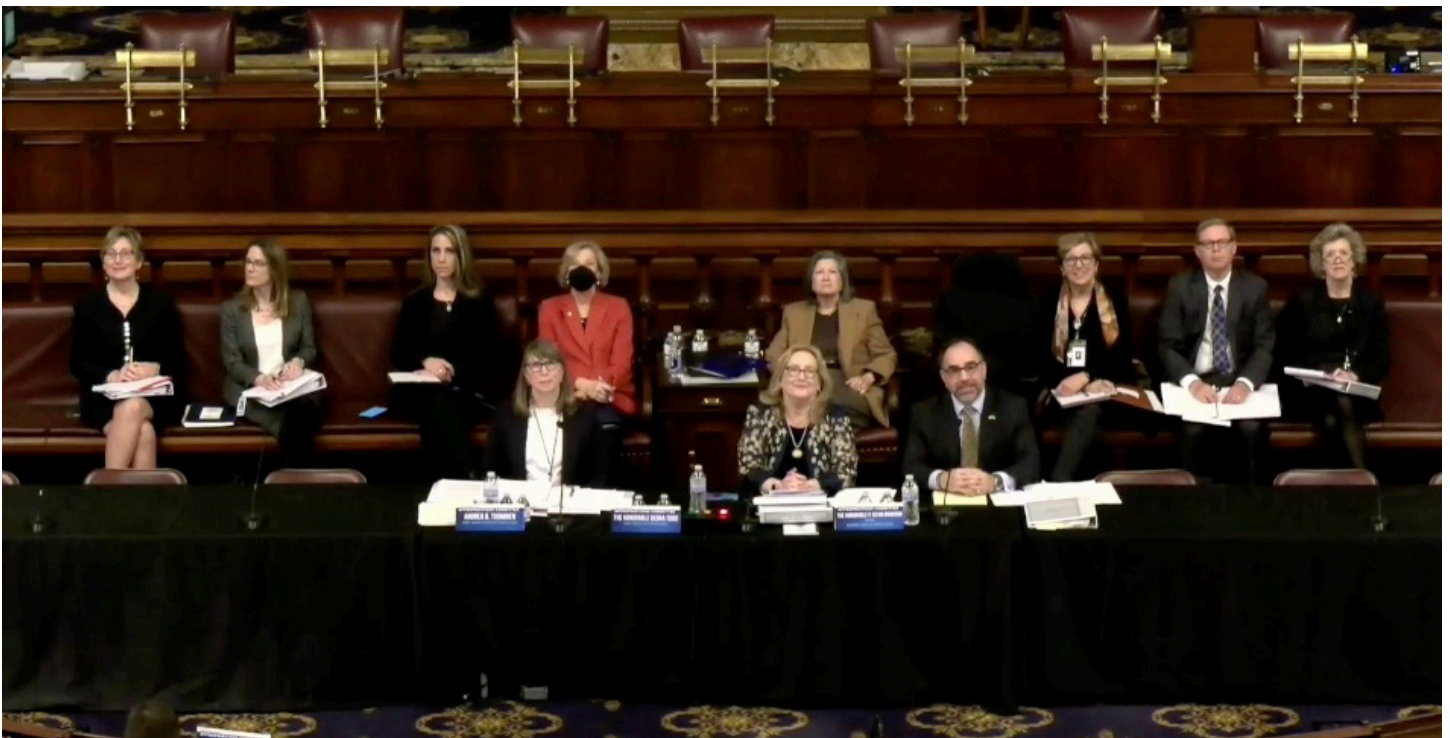
**1** Supplemental funding in the current fiscal year

**2** The need for a substantial increase in the General Fund appropriation

**3** Changes in Judicial Computer System funding to account for steadily declining revenue

This budget request, and the reality it reflects, is an unfortunate and inevitable consequence of funding a substantial portion of the Judiciary's budget through fees. Given that almost 90 percent of the UJS budget is personnel costs, and the vast majority of that goes to judicial salaries and benefits, there is little more the UJS can do to cut costs, and nothing it can do to reverse the decline in Act 49 collections. As a result, appropriate funding for the judicial branch will require either further increases in statutory court-related fees, which raises serious access-to-justice issues, or the significant increase in the General Fund appropriation contained in this request.

View the complete [2024 UJS Budget Handout](#).



On Feb. 29, 2024, Chief Justice **Debra Todd**, Justice **P. Kevin Brobson** and Court Administrator **Andrea Tuominen** appeared before the House Appropriations Committee to present, and answer questions on, the Pennsylvania Judiciary's 2024-25 budget.

# Five New Counties Join Pennsylvania's Family Engagement Initiative

On Jan. 2, 2024, five new counties began an initiative to increase family involvement, reduce trauma and decrease the time children are separated from those who love and care about them.

Erie, Juniata, Luzerne, Potter and Warren Counties join 17 other counties participating in the Pennsylvania State Roundtable's Family Engagement Initiative (FEI).

"I am thrilled that Luzerne County is participating in Phase Five of the FEI," said Judge **Jennifer L. Rogers**. "The opportunity to implement enhanced methods to prevent placements, link children with lifelong connections and ensure that families and children receive quality advocacy in court all contribute to reducing the number of adverse childhood experiences in the life of a child."

*"We, as dependency court judges, now understand the lasting impact of adverse childhood experiences, and the work of the FEI enables us to change the trajectory of a child's life," Judge Rogers said.*

The selected counties participated in a rigorous education roll-out to prepare for the initiative, including a virtual FEI overview and in-person education sessions for all judges, juvenile court hearing officers, dependency attorneys and child welfare professionals.

Each county's FEI Implementation Team, led by the dependency judge and child welfare administrator, attended a two-day planning session in Harrisburg in December led by Supreme Court Justice **Kevin Dougherty**, Department of Human Services' (DHS) Office of Children, Youth, and Families Deputy Secretary Laval Miller Wilson, and the Office of Children and Families in the Courts (OCFC).



*"We have seen incredible outcomes from the FEI counties. Collectively, the FEI counties have higher percentages of children reaching timely permanency, higher use of kinship care and fewer children entering the court system when Crisis Rapid Response Family Meetings are used. I'm confident that these phase five counties have the leadership, dedication and commitment to continue these types of outcomes for children and families," Justice Dougherty said.*

The Family Engagement Initiative was developed by the Pennsylvania State Roundtable and is supported by the OCFC and the federal Court Improvement Program in partnership with the Supreme Court of Pennsylvania and DHS' Office of Children, Youth, and Families.



# Lancaster County MDJ Extends Office Hours

In an effort to enhance access to justice within the community, Lancaster County Magisterial District Judge **Andrew Lefever** (District 02-2-04) recently announced an initiative that aims to make court services more accessible to those whose work commitments often clash with traditional office hours.

Extended office hours are held on the last Wednesday of every month until 7 p.m., offering residents who have business with the court the opportunity to access the vital court services they require without compromising their work commitments.

The initiative allows court access to users after hours to:

- Resolve any outstanding warrants
- Facilitate payments pertaining to their cases
- Submit pleas and resolve legal matters.



"With this initiative, we're reshaping the perception of local government from bureaucracy to accessibility by sending the message that we stand ready to assist you when you need us most," said Judge Lefever. "After all, an MDJ is your neighborhood judge."

The AOPC recently produced a short video promoting the initiative, available to watch [here](#).

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# Pennsylvania Courts Certify First Pennsylvania Dutch Interpreters

By Gabriela Martínez

*Reprinted with permission from WITF.*

For the first time, Pennsylvania Dutch-speaking communities in the state will have access to interpreters in court.

The Administrative Office of Pennsylvania Courts added eight state-certified Pennsylvania Dutch speakers to its interpreter roster.

The effort to recruit native speakers from Amish and Mennonite communities came out of a partnership between the court system's Interpreters Certification Program (ICP) and Safe Communities, a Lancaster-based nonprofit that works to prevent sexual abuse and help survivors. It was spurred, in part, by a need for culturally responsive language support for women and children who testify in cases that involve abuse.



Members of Amish and Mennonite communities and ICP staff at an outreach event last spring.

Read the full WITF story [here](#).

# Centre County Courthouse Opens New Children's Room



The new children's room at the Centre County Courthouse. Photo credit: Centre Daily Times

In a move towards creating a more positive and less intimidating legal environment, Centre County Courthouse has recently unveiled a room specially designed for children awaiting or participating in court proceedings.

The goal of the new room is to provide a supportive and comforting space that helps alleviate the stress and anxiety that children may experience when coming to court.

"Trial judges in family law cases are tasked with making decisions to serve children's best interests,

and that usually involves having those children come to court," Centre County Judge **Katherine Oliver** said.

"Having a dedicated child-friendly space is a great way to lessen stress for those children and hopefully pave the way for more meaningful communication with them. We are grateful to the community partners that made that possible in Centre County."

Adorned with pastel colors and stocked with toys, books and craft supplies, the new space was funded with a grant awarded

by the Centre County United Way's Women United group to a nonprofit community art studio.

The studio owner, inspired by a conversation with two girls at a group home expressing worries about the stress of court hearings and the uncertainty of their waiting space, approached Centre County's judges with the idea.

The local community has signaled their strong support for the project with over 100 individuals donating items to help furnish the space.

## Recognizing a County Hero

In Centre County, there has been a noticeable decrease in removal requests of court-supervised children from alternative schools and placement facilities. At the heart of this success is the county's Child and Youth Services Supervisor **Jaclyn Conway**, bringing over 20 years of expertise and a profound dedication to supporting children.

Ms. Conway's unique ability to connect with families and children, combined with her proactive approach, has been instrumental. Recognizing the

critical importance of tailored placement settings and services, she diligently forms partnerships with essential providers.

She goes above and beyond to ensure necessary services for children entering the care system, exemplified by her bi-weekly meetings that have preserved placements and supported youths with cognitive challenges.

Beyond her direct contributions, Ms. Conway plays a pivotal role in guiding youths toward successful futures.



Jaclyn Conway

The AOPC joins the county's courts and local Children's Leadership Roundtable in recognizing Ms. Conway as a devoted advocate for the well-being of children in their care and custody.

# Court Tech Systems Update

## Philly Municipal Court - Traffic Division Joins MDJS

The AOPC recently began a new project to integrate the Philadelphia Municipal Court's Traffic Division system into the existing statewide Magisterial District Judge System (MDJS) to docket, process and manage these traffic cases.

Looking for options to replace the aging eTIMS system, Philadelphia court leadership approached the AOPC in fall of 2023 to inquire about the possibility of incorporating the traffic division docket into one of the statewide case management systems.

Following a thorough demonstration of the MDJS, AOPC/IT and Philadelphia court leadership received approvals and began developing a detailed project plan.

"The integration of the Philadelphia Municipal Court's Traffic Division into the MDJS presents a perfect opportunity to expand access via the statewide case management system and assist the court in gaining efficiencies through the robust features in the MDJS," said AOPC Court Administrator **Andrea Tuominen**.

Despite alignment with the court's needs, specific configuration changes and enhancements are required before MDJS can be used. The project will also include the migration of some of the data and documents from eTIMS into the MDJS.

Collaboration with external entities, such as Philadelphia law enforcement, for electronic filing of traffic citations into the MDJS will be necessary.

"Philadelphia court leadership and AOPC/IT are excited about this endeavor and expect to work on this new project throughout the 2024 calendar year," said AOPC IT Director **Russel Montchal**.

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## Statewide Civil E-filing System

In 2022, the Pennsylvania Bar Association established a Task Force on Statewide Electronic Filing and Retrieval to explore the implementation of a statewide civil e-filing and document retrieval system in Pennsylvania.

Following county surveys and research that revealed the potential for integration with existing county civil case management systems, the AOPC agreed to study feasibility, cost and challenges related to a statewide civil e-filing project. After the Request For Information phase involving the vendor community, the AOPC was able to confirm that viable software may exist for a statewide system.

Five county regional workshops and a virtual workshop are planned in March and April to engage stakeholders, providing an opportunity for county court leadership and local bar members to share information, discuss benefits and challenges and gather input.

The AOPC will then prepare a comprehensive statewide civil e-filing study report with options and recommendations for the Supreme Court's consideration.

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### Supreme Court of Pennsylvania

*Debra Todd*

Chief Justice of Pennsylvania

*Christine Donohue*

Justice

*Kevin M. Dougherty*

Justice

*David N. Wecht*

Justice

*Sallie Updyke Mundy*

Justice

*P. Kevin Brobson*

Justice

*Daniel D. McCaffery*

Justice

# Breaking the Cycle of Recidivism: County Courts Partner with Reentry Services

Over the last decade, many county courts have taken a proactive approach in reducing recidivism rates by partnering with a statewide reentry service organization – Geo Reentry Services.

These partnerships aim to provide effective rehabilitation services to individuals under court supervision, with a strong focus on education, vocational training and treatment for cognitive behavioral and substance use disorder issues.

Similar in structure to county treatment court programs, participants must attend group meetings, complete prescribed classes and remain drug free.

The Geo Group is contracted by the county to accept certain eligible adults on probation or parole, and pretrial defendants, into their program. Recently, juvenile reentry programs have been implemented following a similar model. As part of these programs, participants must regularly report to the county's Reentry Service Center.

The Geo Group currently operates six non-residential centers in the state, located in the following counties: Berks, Cambria, Dauphin, Luzerne, Lycoming and Philadelphia.

These centers provide services to parolees through partnership with the Department of Corrections, and offer a wide range of services including:

- Parenting and life skills classes
- Drug and alcohol programming
- Trauma support groups
- Domestic violence interventions
- Anger management classes
- Links to community service providers
- Adult basic education/GED prep
- Employment readiness and career development.

Following a graduation ceremony held by the Geo Group in October, former Dauphin County President Judge **John Cherry** expressed his support for the partnership.

*"We have been glad to work with the Geo Group to enhance our efforts in supporting individuals during their reentry journey. Their mission and expertise align with our goal of reducing recidivism and promoting rehabilitation, and it extends critical supports to those who are trying to rebuild their lives."*

"The group really holds the people they work with to account," he explained. "They're empathetic and understanding, but with a strong backbone and no-nonsense approach, which can be very effective!"

By providing individuals with the necessary tools and resources to successfully reintegrate into society, partnerships like these continue to make a positive impact on our communities.



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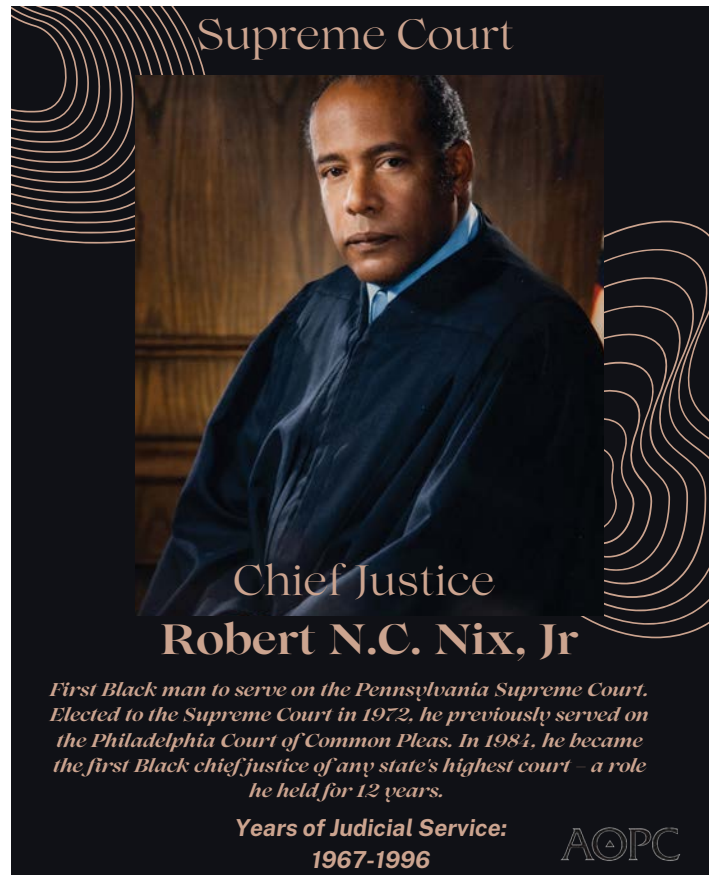
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# PA Courts Recognize Black History Month

In recognition of February as Black History Month, the Pennsylvania Courts celebrated and honored the Black voices at every level of the bench while reflecting on the importance of a diverse judiciary.

This year, the Courts ran a social media campaign throughout the month primarily highlighting past and present Black jurists who have served on the appellate courts, recognizing their unique place in our state's history.

To view the full campaign, visit PA Courts' social media pages on [Twitter](#), [Facebook](#) or [Instagram](#).



## New Data Exchange Project Manager

After 17 years with the AOPC, **Ami Levin** retired as Data Exchange Project Manager on Dec. 29.

Ami's leadership has significantly enhanced the public access request process into a reliable and timely resource for court data to thousands of requestors.

In concert with our numerous justice partners, she has helped to realize numerous valuable improvements to the JNET system through her management of the data exchanges - a source of critical timely information

for courts, police and other groups across the commonwealth.

Transitioning into her role is **Kelly McClain**, who will continue to manage his existing eCommerce, collaborative technologies and business intelligence teams.

Please join us in congratulating both of them!

*Ami Levin and Kelly McClain recently attended the semi-annual JNET and Pennsylvania Chiefs of Police conference in State College representing AOPC, where they met with their justice partners from across the Commonwealth.*



# Recent AOPC Trainings

By: **Jamie Pizzi**, Esq., AOPC STOP Grant Consultant

## Post-Conviction Relief for Human-Trafficking Survivors

January was Human-Trafficking Prevention Month. While awareness about this crime has improved immensely since Pennsylvania codified its first comprehensive anti-trafficking law in 2014, the judiciary's educational efforts continue.

On Jan. 24, the AOPC's STOP Violence Against Women Grant Program hosted a hybrid training at the Pennsylvania Judicial Center featuring attorneys Shea Rhodes and Joanne Curley from The Villanova University School of Law Institute to Address Commercial Sexual Exploitation ("CSE Institute") and survivor-leader, Tammy McDonnell.

The training aimed to familiarize justice system stakeholders with the under-utilized post-conviction relief remedy for criminalized trafficking survivors known as "vacatur."

Pennsylvania's human-trafficking law includes a special provision in 18 PA C.S.A. § 3019 (d) that allows human-trafficking survivors to petition the court to vacate certain misdemeanor convictions sustained as a result of their victimization, yet the remedy has only been utilized in a handful of counties.

During the training, the CSE Institute explained that Pennsylvania is the only state with a vacatur provision that requires a district attorney to provide consent for the motion to be filed, leaving no room for judicial discretion. This requirement continues to prevent criminalized survivors from having their day in court.

Further, many court actors are still unaware that vacatur exists. In fact, 67 percent of the approximately 130 registered justice system stakeholders, including district attorneys, judges, court administration and other aligned professionals, reported being unfamiliar with vacatur prior to the training.

To spread more awareness, all registered attendees were provided with a digital vacatur bench card and the CSE Institute's Legal Guide to Vacatur Motions in Pennsylvania.

Be on the look-out for additional STOP Violence Against Women Grant programming this spring.

## Webinar Introduces New Virtual Training Series to Pennsylvania Courts

In late 2022, the AOPC STOP Violence Against Women Grant Program and Interpreter Services collaborated to create the Culturally Responsive Courts – Regional Justice Systems Training Series.

The novel 6-location training series afforded managerial level court staff, judges, court administration and other aligned professionals the opportunity to learn about the various cultures that call the Keystone State home, while highlighting intersections between language, culture and interpersonal violence.

The 2022 trainings featured panelists representing some of the most commonly requested languages for court interpretation in Allegheny, Centre, Lancaster, Philadelphia, Northampton, Lehigh and Lackawanna counties.



Since then, footage from the trainings has been converted into an 8-part virtual training series that is now available on the [PA Courts Vimeo page](#).

On Feb. 1, the AOPC STOP Violence Against Women Grant Program and **Natalia Petrova**, Interpreter Program administrator, hosted a kick-off webinar with the Center for Justice Innovation to introduce the series to the field.

Nearly 300 people logged on to watch the live webinar, which provided a basic overview of what it means to be a culturally responsive court, updates from the 2022 trainings, tips about identifying barriers faced by victims seeking the court's assistance, as well as several strategies to address potential obstacles in a trauma-informed fashion.



Old prison



New prison

## New Fayette County Prison Opens

After years of planning and construction, Fayette County's new state-of-the-art prison has officially opened. The old prison, which was built around 1890, was the oldest operational prison in Pennsylvania.

The opening of the new facility has been more than a decade in the making.

By 2013, the old prison faced issues of severe overcrowding requiring the county to spend over \$1 million to rent cell space from neighboring counties, house female inmates in state facilities and cover substantial prisoner transport expenses.

Following lengthy discussions and various proposals, county officials began laying the groundwork for the new prison in 2016 and officially started construction in March 2021.

President Judge **Steve Leskinen**, who served as the judicial representative on the Prison Board of

Inspectors, was very active throughout the planning process and during litigation with the ACLU concerning conditions at the old prison.

"We have addressed the population issues by renting cell space, speeding dispositions, utilizing house arrest, and speeding up and improving bail bond processes. Even with those measures, we were facing new challenges every week," Judge Leskinen said.

Located at the former Army Reserve Training Center in Uniontown, the new prison is equipped to house 330 inmates.

"Beyond providing a modern and secure environment, the facility includes significant space dedicated to programs and treatment aimed at inmate rehabilitation – something that was not previously possible in an antiquated and overcrowded prison," Judge Leskinen said.

## Director of Office of Elder Justice in the Courts Announces Retirement

After nearly 24 years with the AOPC, **Cherstin Hamel** recently announced that she will be retiring at the end of April.

Cherstin began her service to the state's judiciary as the Berks County district court administrator in 1997 before joining the AOPC as the assistant director of the Judicial District Programs and Operations Department in 2001.

In 2015, she was named director of the newly created Office of Elder Justice in the Courts (OEJC) after serving as the principal staff liaison to the Elder Law

Task Force, whose seminal work laid the foundation for significant improvements in the way that the courts interact with elders and provided a blueprint for addressing challenges faced by our state's aging population.

"Overseeing OEJC's work under the guidance of the Elder Law Advisory Council, Cherstin has demonstrated her commitment and exceptional leadership on initiatives to enhance the quality of life for older Pennsylvanians," said Court Administrator **Andrea Tuominen**.



Cherstin Hamel

"As we begin recruitment for her successor, please join us in thanking Cherstin for her many years of dedicated service and congratulating her on a well-deserved retirement!"

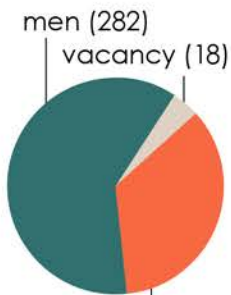
# Women on the Bench in Pennsylvania



As of February 2024 . . .

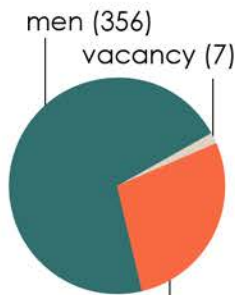
## 39% of Pennsylvania's active judges are women.

### Common Pleas Courts



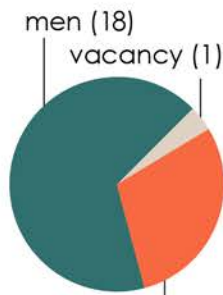
**36%**  
women (162)

### Magisterial District Courts



**28%**  
women (140)

### Philadelphia Municipal Court



**31%**  
women (8)



**17 women** serve as president judges in Courts of Common Pleas.

There are three women serving on the seven-member Pennsylvania Supreme Court:



**Chief Justice Debra Todd**  
**Justice Christine Donohue**  
**Justice Sallie Updyke Mundy**

Chief Justice Debra Todd is the first woman in the Pa Supreme Court's 302 year history to serve as chief justice.

The majority of Superior and Commonwealth Court judges are women:

#### Superior Court

The president judge of Superior Court is **Anne Lazarus**.



#### Commonwealth Court

The president judge of Commonwealth Court is **Renée Cohn Jubelirer**.



## Women Trailblazers of the Pa. Courts

In 1930, **Hon. Sara M. Soffel** became the first woman appointed as a judge in Pennsylvania (Allegheny County).

Appointed in 1961, **Hon. Anne X. Alpern** was the first female justice to serve on the Pennsylvania Supreme Court.

**Hon. Juanita Kidd Stout** was the first elected African American female judge to serve on any state supreme court.

Appointed in 1981, **Hon. Phyllis Beck** was the first woman to serve on the Pennsylvania Superior Court.

**Hon. Sandra Schultz Newman** was the first female justice elected to serve on the Pennsylvania Supreme Court.

**Hon. Genevieve Blatt** was the first woman judge appointed to the Commonwealth Court.

**Hon. Cheryl Allen** was the first African American woman elected to serve on the Pennsylvania Superior Court.

**Hon. Doris Smith-Ribner** was the first African American woman elected to serve on the Commonwealth Court.

**Hon. Debra Todd** is the first woman to serve as chief justice of Pennsylvania.

Appointed by the Pennsylvania Supreme Court in 2023, **Andrea Tuominen** became the first woman attorney to hold the position of state court administrator.