



## ADMINISTRATIVE OFFICE of PENNSYLVANIA COURTS

### NEWS FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

April 17, 2024

#### **Pa Supreme Court Autism in the Courts Initiative Expands into the Pennsylvania Parole Board**

**HARRISBURG** – Focused on the importance of partnerships in making permanent system change, Pennsylvania Supreme Court Justice Kevin Dougherty today joined forces with the Pennsylvania Parole Board to offer autism education and awareness training to its board and staff.

Joined by the Autism in the Courts team of experts, Dougherty welcomed more than more 50 staff from the Pennsylvania Parole Board, the Department of Corrections as well as the Commission on Sentencing who gathered to learn about autism and how to provide support to those with an Autism Spectrum Disorder.

“These partnerships are critical to the foundation of our Autism in the Courts initiative,” Dougherty said. “The willingness of our system partners to join us in furthering our mission to ensure that training and education remain a key priority as we continue working toward judicial reform for people with an ASD is invaluable.

As the first state in the nation to focus on identifying and supporting the needs of neurodiverse families within the court system, the Autism in the Courts initiative is bringing about judicial reform for those with an ASD coming through the court system, including related boards and commissions.

Parole Board Chairman C. James Fox echoed Justice Dougherty, noting that it is incumbent upon the Board to recognize and comprehend the impact of neurodevelopmental conditions like autism in the parole decision-making process.

“Understanding the unique perspectives and challenges faced by individuals with autism is not only essential for ensuring fairness but also for upholding the principles of compassion and equity within our justice system. Ignoring or misunderstanding these factors can lead to unjust outcomes.

“By fostering a deeper understanding of autism and prioritizing education and awareness, we can strive towards more informed and just parole decisions that promote rehabilitation and reintegration into society.”

During the training, participants were guided through discussions and informational sessions about autism including:

- Autism 101 led by the ASERT Collaborative -- basics of autism, as well as tips and strategies justice professionals who may interact with individuals on the spectrum in the course of their work;
- Autism from the Key Perspective – a panel of self-advocates, providing critical voice and perspective to the initiative; and
- Innovation at the Department of Corrections, SCI – Albion – informational session about the Neurodevelopmental Residential Treatment Unit at the facility, designed for individuals on the autism spectrum.

According to the latest numbers from the U.S. Centers for Disease Control, one in 36 Pennsylvania children and more than five million adults nationwide are diagnosed with autism,” said Dougherty. “As the number continues to grow, so does our commitment to ensuring Pennsylvania’s courts are prepared to recognize, accept and meet the needs of all court users and their families.

In 2020, the Supreme Court signaled its commitment to Pennsylvanians with autism by forming a first-of-its-kind partnership with the Department of Human Services (DHS) to heighten the focus on helping judges better understand the necessary evaluations required for diagnosis, treatment and services for individuals with an ASD. More than 200 judges attended the first in-person training session held that year, indicating the interest and the need for the courts to focus on ASD.

Committed to moving the initiative forward, Dougherty and DHS developed a statewide virtual listening tour to hear first-hand about challenges faced in the system from medical professionals, service providers and individuals with autism alike as they sought access to justice. More than 1,200 individuals attended the virtual tour and heard from more than 60 justice system professional, self-advocates, parents and service providers statewide.

Since that time, Justice Dougherty has partnered with the Pennsylvania Courts’ Office of Children and Families in the Courts to create a taskforce known as the Autism in the Courts Taskforce. The taskforce is focused on providing increased training opportunities for judges, helping further identify gaps in the system for individuals with autism and intellectual disabilities and creating a local roadmap to resources and services.

To highlight the initiative, throughout the month, the courts will be sharing information about autism and resources, services and support available statewide through its social media channels (Twitter [@PaCourts](#), Facebook [@Pennsylvaniacourts](#)) and [website](#).

For more information about the Autism and the Courts effort visit <https://www.pacourts.us/learn/autism-and-the-courts>.

###

**Media contact:** [Stacey Witalec](#), 717-877-2997