

AOPC CONNECTED



Issue 3, 2023

In this issue

Read about how the Pa. Courts are working to recruit Pa. Dutch interpreters, a new juvenile diversionary program in Lycoming County, the recent promotion of several AOPC administrators to directors, a department spotlight on Administrative Services, the new Supreme Court prothonotary and more.

Interpreter Program Reaches Out to Pa. Dutch Community

On April 20, **Natalia Petrova** and **Ilana Torres** of the Interpreter Certification Program (ICP) conducted a first-ever outreach event in Lancaster County, kicking off a new collaborative effort designed to bring much-needed Pennsylvania Dutch interpreter services to victims from the commonwealth's Plain communities.

"Pennsylvania Dutch is a very needed language in the courts for which we do not currently have any certified interpreters," Petrova said.

Plain communities include various sects of Amish, Mennonite and other Anabaptist denominations that reject many aspects of contemporary society. As of 2022, The Center for Amish Studies estimates there are around 86,964 members of the Amish community that call Pennsylvania home, with those numbers growing every day.

In fact, Pennsylvania is home to the largest congregation of Amish in the world. Plain people often only speak Pennsylvania Dutch in the home, a language derived from German. Children later learn to speak English while attending school.

The inaugural workshop took place at the historic Schoolhouse at Risser Mennonite Church in Elizabethtown where 20 Pennsylvania Dutch speakers from local Amish and Mennonite communities attended the event in hopes of becoming certified interpreters.



Members of Amish and Mennonite communities and Interpreter Certification Program staff at the outreach event in Elizabethtown.

This collaborative effort came to fruition after Linda Crockett, executive director of Safe Communities Pennsylvania, a nonprofit that works to stop and prevent sexual abuse, was a presenter at last year's STOP Violence Against Women grant-funded regional training series – The Culturally Responsive Court. There, Crockett provided anecdotes about how the lack of culturally-competent certified Pennsylvania Dutch interpreters was preventing minor victims of sexual abuse from making official reports with the state.

Safe Communities worked together with the ICP to engage in targeted outreach and coordination for the first workshop. Crockett recruited English language instructors from Plain communities and created a specialized curriculum to help candidates prepare for the exam.

This grassroots approach is imperative, as native Pennsylvania Dutch speakers have historically struggled to pass the interpreter certification exam for a variety of reasons. Pennsylvania Dutch is not a "written" language and lacks standardized spelling and grammar. Further, Plain persons are unfamiliar with standardized

testing and face numerous logistical and cultural challenges in completing the certification process.

"This historic project creates a culturally-appropriate and supportive pathway for Amish women and some men to become our state's first court certified interpreters so that this large and growing segment of our population finally has access to native Pa. Dutch speaking interpreters in our justice system," said Crockett.

The workshops will continue into the Fall in order to fully prepare participants for the certification exam and beyond. Lancaster YWCA is offering funding for scholarships for applicants for court certification that will cover the cost of the orientation and written exam. The court's STOP Violence Against Women Grant cover will cover the cost of creating and delivering a curriculum that will educate participants on domestic and sexual violence and the resulting trauma.

In recent years, a series of nationally-recognized publications and documentaries have highlighted a troubling pattern of sexual and domestic violence

being swept under the rug in Plain communities. In 2020, the Lancaster County Plain Communities Task Force was revived in the wake of a high-profile minor sexual abuse case involving an Amish man. Those who work with Plain communities have described the current uptick in abuse reports as an Amish #MeToo. Several program participants stated their reasoning for pursuing the workshops was "to be voice for the children who are abused."

"We are so grateful for AOPC's support for this interpreter training", said Lancaster County Common Pleas Judge **Dennis Reinaker** and member of Lancaster County's Plain Communities Task Force. "The Plain community is generally unfamiliar with navigating the court system and the lack of approved interpreters only exacerbated the problem. Now that this need has been met, it will help members of the Plain community as well as the courts in

handling any such matters in the future."

Many of the attendees of the outreach event have signed up for the upcoming orientation in July in Lancaster. "We hope that as a result of this outreach, Pa. Dutch speakers will successfully participate in the certification process and the state will fulfill this need," added Petrova.

Jamie Pizzi, STOP Grant consultant, contributed to this article.

Juvenile Diversionary Program in Lycoming County District Court Making a Difference

Prior to taking office in 2021, Lycoming County Magisterial District Judge **Denise L. Dieter** practiced law for approximately 29 years.

Living in the community where she worked, she saw first-hand the need to educate children that the law, and law enforcement, is not something to fear but rather to better understand and respect.

"After taking office, I must admit I was surprised at the number of juvenile filings in my district and the varying types of crimes," said MDJ Dieter. "I had juveniles being charged with truancy, vaping in school and disorderly conduct and harassment, with the alleged actions being very serious and extremely risky internet-related crimes.

"My concern was twofold. First, what is the cause of these acts and second, what can I do to divert the minor away from recommitting a crime and avoiding a criminal record, which could interfere with their ability to go to the military, college, play sports or even be gainfully employed?"

In response to these questions, MDJ Dieter created a Juvenile Offender Diversionary Program, which is a first-time offender program with the goal of the juvenile completing the program and not having a criminal record.

The Diversionary Program includes an application, signed by the minor, their parents and law enforcement. The components of the program are tailored to the individual minor.

"I have been creative in that regard and expect that such individual creativity will have more of an impact than a one-size fits all approach," added MDJ Dieter. "I hope the components of the program will increase the likelihood that minors will understand the risks of their behavior and serve as a deterrent for reoffending."

Some of the program components include counseling, participating in the Big Brother, Big Sister Program, online classes, charitable work and the like. If the minor completes the program, which does include a final exit interview and an essay describing what



MDJ Denise Dieter, Lycoming County

they have learned, the judge will dismiss the charges.

Though this program is in its infancy, the district court has received positive feedback from the families, law enforcement and educators in the school district.

"As I began to put this program together with input from my colleagues, it became more evident to me that my district is unique, and I would have to mold this program around the needs of the juveniles and their families," said MDJ Dieter. "With this focus, I look forward to working with the youth of my community in a positive and successful manner."

Judge Bilik-DeFazio Receives Mental Health Award

Westmoreland County Judge **Meagan Bilik-DeFazio** received the Mental Health of America Southwestern Pennsylvania Chapter's Community Advocacy Award in April.

Judge Bilik-DeFazio has been committed to supporting individuals who become involved in the criminal justice system and in trying to divert individuals who have serious mental health issues rather than incarcerating them.

Mental Health of America of Southwestern Pennsylvania CEO Laurie Barnett Levine said, "We know there are more people in prisons and jails who have mental illness than not, and so any time we can assist someone in seeking treatment that will keep them out of the prison population is a victory."

Judge Bilik-DeFazio, along with President Judge **Christopher Feliciani**, established and preside over

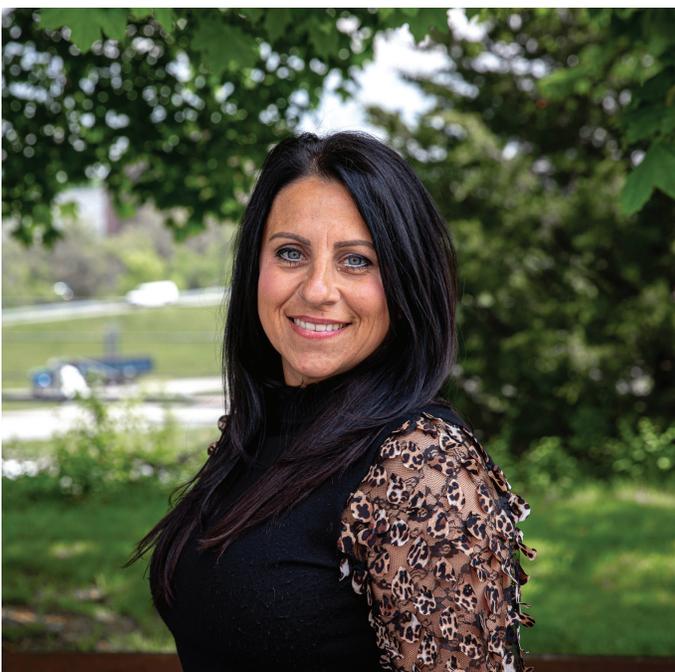


Mental Health of America of Southwestern Pennsylvania CEO Laurie Barnett Levine (l) and Judge Bilik-DeFazio (r)

Westmoreland County's Adult Drug Treatment Court, which serves high-risk participants diagnosed with substance use and mental health disorders.

The AOPC congratulates Judge Bilik-DeFazio on this well-earned recognition.

Cambria County's First Female DCA



Nicole Arrington, Cambria County district court administrator

This past February, **Nicole Arrington** became the first female district court administrator in Cambria County history.

Prior to this role, she served as deputy assistant court administrator of the criminal division since 2019.

Previously, she worked with all six judges in Cambria County as a courtroom clerk and for the Clerk of Courts for Children and Youth.

"I am truly honored to be the first female district court administrator in Cambria County," she said.

"I would love to inspire any young woman starting out, that if you have a strong work ethic, a willingness to listen and learn, and are determined to be the best person you can be, you will succeed at anything you put your mind to. I am very fortunate to learn every day from some the best role models here in Cambria County."



Justice Brobson providing remarks during the ceremony.

York County Wellness Courts Celebrate 25 Years

On May 9, York County Wellness Courts held a special ceremony to commemorate 25 years of hard work and dedication since the program was first established in 1998.

During the ceremony, 17 participants graduated from the county's DUI Court, Drug Court and Veterans Court.

York County President Judge **Maria Musti-Cook** presided over the ceremony, where special guest speaker Pa. Supreme Court Justice **P. Kevin Brobson** offered heartfelt remarks and congratulations to the treatment court team and graduates.

"You started out 25 years ago in nearly uncharted territory," said Justice Brobson. "You saw the importance in taking the risk to start something new that would hopefully change and save lives."



"There is a vision that is brought to life through our wellness courts in Pennsylvania – one that supports those at a time and place in their lives when they need it the most, even when they might not realize it or be ready to receive it," he said.

Justice Brobson concluded his remarks speaking directly to the wellness court participants saying, "Our Supreme Court joins you in celebrating your victories, stands strong with you during your struggles and is committed to doing everything we can to provide opportunities for treatment and rehabilitation through the court system – to help you on your way, as you look forward to building a new future."

To date, York County Wellness Courts have seen over 1,530 graduates walk out of the justice system and into recovery.



Legislative Roundup

by Damian J. Wachter, Esq.

The legislature is currently in the middle of the annual marathon June session, which will continue until June 30 or until the budget and applicable implementation bills are adopted. The House kicked off the process by sending a General Appropriations Act (GAA) bill to the Senate, which incorporated the governor's proposed budget plus additional funding. As passed by the House, the General Fund spend number is \$45 billion.

As with every June session, dozens of bills are being exchanged between chambers to get several positioned for final votes and adoption prior to recess. Which bills ultimately end up on the governor's desk remains to be seen and is a part of ongoing negotiations between the governor and the legislature. A sampling of some of the bills being positioned is included with this update, but many others remain in play.

2023-2024 GAA

[House Bill 611](#) is the likely legislative vehicle for the 2023-24 GAA. As passed by the House, the bill allocates \$412.8 million to the judiciary, representing a 13.9 percent increase over the current fiscal year. The legislation does not necessarily represent the final budget – the bill will be positioned in the Senate for use as the eventual agreed-to budget. The bill passed the House [102-101](#) and has been referred to the Senate Appropriations Committee.

Mental Health (MH) Funding

[House Bill 849](#) amends the Fiscal Code, appropriating \$100 million of COVID-Relief Adult Mental Health

Program funds to numerous state entities for workforce, expanding criminal justice and public safety programs and strengthening and expanding MH services and support. A total of \$31.5 million is dedicated to expanding criminal justice/public safety as follows:

- \$13.5 million to the Pennsylvania Commission on Crime and Delinquency (PCCD) for programs to award competitive grants to eligible applicants, including counties, nonprofit and community-based organizations, county reentry coalitions, MH and substance use disorder providers, housing authorities and law enforcement agencies. Grant funds may be used to provide comprehensive evidence-based MH and substance use disorder treatment and support services for incarcerated persons or services for reentrants, establish or support existing specialty courts and services, create or expand co-responder models or first responder crisis intervention training and forensic transition housing.
- \$7 million to PCCD for pre-arrest diversion programs to award competitive grants to

eligible applicants, including law enforcement agencies, crisis intervention service providers, behavioral health providers, nonprofit or community-based organizations and treatment providers partnering with peer-run organizations. Grant funds may be used to establish or support co-responder models, train first responders or law enforcement crisis and de-escalation and establish or support warm hand-off transfer programs.

- \$6 million to PCCD for programs to award one-time competitive grants to eligible applicants, including community-based organizations, law enforcement agencies, victim services or advocacy organizations and MH providers who work in trauma-informed care. Grant money may be used for gun violence prevention and MH, trauma-informed care for victims and families and community outreach education.
- \$5 million to the Department of Human Services for a one-time criminal justice and public safety payment to each county MH administration.

The bill passed the House [173-30](#) and has been referred to the Senate Health and Human Services Committee.

Clean Slate Expansion

[House Bill 689](#) amends Title 18, expanding limited access and Clean Slate limited access to certain offenses, reducing wait time frames and loosening exceptions.

- Petition for limited access:
 - Reduces the period individuals must remain conviction-free for eligible offenses to petition for limited access from 10 to seven years.
 - Adds new offenses that are eligible for limited access upon petition if the individual has remained conviction-free for a period of 10 years.
 - The new offenses, excluding 1st and 2nd degree felonies, include terroristic threats, criminal mischief, criminal trespass, theft and related offenses, forgery and fraudulent practices, violation of Section 481 of the Human Services Code, and a *qualifying offense*, i.e., "an offense under section 13 of ... The Controlled Substance, Drug, Device and Cosmetic Act, or an

attempt, conspiracy, or solicitation to commit an offense under section 13 ... unless a minimum sentence of 30 months or more of imprisonment or a maximum sentence of 60 months or more of imprisonment was imposed on the offense."

- Reduces the period individuals must remain conviction-free following convictions of two or more offenses punishable by more than two years in prison to petition our courts for limited access from 15 to 10 years.
- Deems convictions of two or more offenses charged in separate counts that are consolidated under one docket number and share the same offense tracking number (OTN) as one conviction.
- Clean Slate:
 - Reduces the period individuals must remain conviction-free for Clean Slate limited access from 10 to seven years.
 - The period applies to any misdemeanor offense that is punishable by imprisonment of no more than two years.
 - Adds a *qualifying offense* if a person has been conviction-free for a period of 10 years and has paid all court-ordered restitution.
 - Individuals granted limited access for a qualifying offense must pay the fee authorized to carry out the limited access provisions.
 - Reduces the period individuals must remain conviction-free for any summary offense to qualify for Clean Slate limited access from 10 to five years.
- Deems the conviction of two or more offenses that are charged in separate counts, are consolidated under one docket number and share the same OTN as one conviction, except it may not be deemed as such if it contains more than two felony convictions.

The bill passed the House [189-14](#) and has been referred to the Senate Judiciary Committee.

Determinate Sentence in Summary Traffic Cases

[Senate Bill 453](#) amends Titles 42 and 75, to address holdings in *Commonwealth v. Eid*, 249 A.3d 1030 (Pa. 2021), *Birchfield v. North Dakota*, 136 S.Ct. 2160 (2016)

and *Commonwealth v. Chichkin*, 232 A.3d 959 (Pa. Super. Ct. 2018). The bill allows a court to impose a determinate sentence for summary violations under Title 75 when the maximum sentence of total confinement imposed is 90 days or less. The bill passed the Senate [48-1](#) and has been referred to the House Transportation Committee.

Indigent Defense

[Senate Bill 371](#) and [House Bill 1085](#) establish the Indigent Defense Advisory Committee (Committee) within the PCCD. The makeup of the Committee includes several *ex officio*/non-voting members, as well as judicial, legislative and executive appointments. The chief justice has eight appointments, including three judges, a chief public defender and four public defenders from different classes of counties.

The duties of the Committee include proposing minimum standards for the delivery of effective indigent defense services and attorneys providing indigent defense services and developing and submitting proposed standards for consideration by the Supreme Court. Additionally, the Committee is required to develop, in partnership with the AOPC and the Juvenile Court Judges Commission, data requests regarding criminal cases involving public defenders and analyze the data to identify trends and effectiveness of indigent defense services and the impact of adopted standards.

Finally, the legislation establishes the Indigent Defense Grant Program. Funding sources include appropriations and transfers from the General Fund, special funds, federal funds and other sources made available to the program. Permitted uses of the funding include grant and training activities outlined in the bill. The Committee reviews and comments on grant applications and ensures that funding or services provided are geographically dispersed. Grants awarded must be consistent with the standards established by the Committee and those adopted by the Pennsylvania Supreme Court.

Senate Bill 371 was reported unanimously from the Senate Judiciary Committee and is pending further Senate action. House Bill 1085 passed the House [132-71](#) and is awaiting referral in the Senate.

Firearms

[House Bill 338](#) amends Title 18, requiring owners of firearms who suffer the loss or theft of a firearm to report the facts and circumstances of the loss or theft to law enforcement within 72 hours of discovery. Violations range from a summary offense to an M1. The bill was defeated in the House [100-101](#).

[House Bill 714](#) amends Title 18, requiring background checks for all firearms, regardless of barrel length, by repealing the current law provision that limits applicability to “pistols or revolvers with a barrel length of less than 15 inches, any shotgun with a barrel length of less than 18 inches, any rifle with a barrel length of less than 16 inches or any firearm with an overall length of less than 26 inches.” The legislation passed the House [109-92](#).

Extreme Risk Protection Order (ERPO)

[House Bill 1018](#) amends Titles 18 and 42, allowing law enforcement or family or household members of a person believed to present a risk of suicide or of causing death or extreme bodily injury to another to file a petition requesting that the court issue an ERPO. An ERPO is a court order prohibiting a person from possessing or controlling, purchasing or receiving a firearm, based upon a finding that the person presents such substantial risk. The bill passed the House [102-99](#).

Common Pleas Complement

[Senate Bill 361](#) amends Title 42, adding a common pleas court seat in Northumberland (8th), Chester (15th), Huntingdon (20th), Columbia/Montour (26th) and Butler (50th). The Chester and Huntingdon seats would be vacancies immediately upon enactment that *may* be filled by the governor with Senate consent to serve until Jan. 1, 2026. Northumberland, Columbia/Montour and Butler would be established on Jan. 1, 2026 and filled in the 2025 municipal election. The legislation passed the Senate unanimously and has been referred to the House Judiciary Committee.



*{Damian Wachter, Esq.
is the director of
Legislative Affairs.}*



Beaver/Fayette Counties Hold Autism and the Courts Summit



On June 2, Beaver and Fayette counties held a regional summit in Canonsburg, Pa. for court personnel and partners focusing on the basics about autism, diagnosis and community support.

Spearheaded by Supreme Court Justice **Kevin Dougherty** on behalf of the Supreme Court of Pennsylvania, the regional summit is part of the Autism and the Courts effort and expands on work being done statewide.

“Education, training and awareness are critical to ensuring we are providing for the needs of all court users, especially those with autism,” Dougherty said. “The more we learn, the more we grow as a court system and as a community, but most importantly in our ability to be part of the type of positive change that will impact Pennsylvania families.”

Attendees represented 21 different organizations, including local children and youth, courthouse personnel, law enforcement, schools and community service providers. Speakers for the summit included:

- Hon. **Linda Cordaro**, Court of Common Pleas of Fayette County
- Hon. **Mitchell Shahn**, Court of Common Pleas of Beaver County
- Dr. Tammy Hughes, Licensed School Psychologist Autism Expert, Duquesne University
- Kate Hooven, Justice Project Coordinator, Autism Services Education Resources and Training
- Scott E. Bailey, Police Officer, Fox Chapel Area School District

Editors

Stacey Witalec
Kim Bathgate

Writers

Casey Scheffler

Contributors

Olivia Antonucci
Stephen Baldwin
Patti Campbell
Rhonda Hocker

Graphic Design

Gretchen Smith

Photography

Kyle Kauffman

Court Administrator of PA

Geoff Moulton

Deputy Court Administrator of PA

Andrea B. Tuominen

All content is collected, written and edited by the AOPC Communications Office unless noted.

You may reach the office by calling: (717) 231-3300 or by emailing:

CommunicationsOffice@pacourts.us

For more information about Pennsylvania's courts, visit:

www.pacourts.us

[Twitter @PACourts](https://twitter.com/PACourts)

[Facebook @pennsylvaniacourts](https://www.facebook.com/pennsylvaniacourts)

[YouTube @PACourts](https://www.youtube.com/PACourts)

[Instagram @pennsylvaniacourts](https://www.instagram.com/pennsylvaniacourts)

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



(l to r) Cherstin Hamel, David Jones, Rob Granzow. Not pictured: Nicholene DiPasquale

New AOPC Directors

Taking effect last month, four AOPC administrators were recently promoted to directors.

With the AOPC since 1993, **Nicholene DiPasquale** has assumed the role of director of Judicial Services, where she oversees logistical planning, coordination, administration and staffing for the extensive schedule of educational conferences, seminars and meetings for judges, the Supreme Court, the AOPC and affiliated state and national groups.

With the AOPC since 2001, **Cherstin Hamel** is now director of the Office of Elder Justice in the Courts, which functions as a department within the AOPC focused on elder justice issues.

With the AOPC since 2019, **Rob Granzow** has assumed the role of director of Judicial District Security, supervising all of the statewide efforts that go into ensuring the trial and magisterial district courts are safe and secure.

David Jones had been with the AOPC since 2014 and now serves as director of Administrative Services, overseeing all operations related to AOPC office facilities.

Each of these staff have demonstrated excellent leadership and have shouldered substantial responsibilities. Please join us in congratulating them on this well-deserved achievement.

Classrooms vs. Courtrooms



On June 2, Washington County Magisterial District Judges **Kelly Stewart** and **John Bruner** gave a presentation to the 5th grade students at Trinity West Elementary School.

The curriculum covered topics such as the origins of the judiciary, the role of the county and local judges, behavior and impulse control and the legal consequences of common school infractions (truancy, vaping, underage drinking and bullying-harassment).

“The goal of the program is not only focused on civics-based education but also aims to teach the kids in their classrooms about improper school behaviors rather than presiding over an official case against them in the courtroom - it’s all about prevention, and that starts at a young age,” said MDJ Bruner.

New Supreme Court Prothonotary



Irene Bizzoso



Kaitlin Gorman

Following over 25 years of service as prothonotary for the Supreme Court of Pennsylvania, **Irene Bizzoso** will be retiring on June 30.

Irene has spent her entire adult life in public service, having worked with the Pa. Department of Labor and Industry for five years before coming to work for the Court.

“Serving under seven different chief justices and numerous changes in jurists and staff, I have had the good fortune of working with and learning from many incredibly talented and dedicated people,” Irene said.

“When I joined the Court in 1998, I asked where we were in regards to e-filing, and was met with an incredulous yet hopeful ‘someday’ as the docketing system was just bare bones. Now, some 25 years later, the Court has an integrated appellate case document and case management system, PACFile is a staple and AOPC, along with the appellate courts, is working on various projects that will continue to build public trust and confidence in the judicial system.”

As for retirement plans, Irene said she would like to spend more time traveling, assisting her parents and volunteering with her position on the Board of the YMCA.

Taking over her role on July 3 will be **Kaitlin Gorman**, chief staff attorney of Central Legal Staff for the Pennsylvania Superior Court.

Kaitlin has been with the Superior Court for nearly 11 years, starting out as staff attorney for Central Legal Staff and eventually working her way up to deputy chief staff attorney for the Western District, assistant chief staff attorney for Central Legal Staff and then as director of Diversity and Inclusion for the Court.

Her current work with the Superior Court has entailed the supervision of 25 attorneys and 5 administrative support staff in offices located in Harrisburg, Philadelphia and Pittsburgh. She communicates regularly with judges to solicit feedback to improve the work that Central Legal Staff provides while also collaborating regularly with departments to ensure appeals are efficiently progressing.

Kaitlin has a Bachelor of Arts in International Studies from Arcadia University and a Juris Doctor from Thomas R. Kline School of Law at Duquesne University.

“I am honored to have the opportunity to serve the Court as prothonotary,” Kaitlin said. “I am grateful to Irene for working with me to ensure a smooth transition and I am excited to work with the dedicated staff. I look forward to guiding the office into the future as we overcome new challenges.”

Please join us in thanking Irene for her many years of service and wishing Kaitlin good luck in her new role!

DEPARTMENT SPOTLIGHT:

Administrative Services



(l to r): Front row: Shavonne Mowrey, Christopher Shultz, Lauren Steele-Murphy, Rhonda Walters Lenig, Serena Nedrow, Irene Engart, Kristin Bair, Frank Antonucci. Back row: Fred Cassatt, Christopher Tomlinson, David Anderson, Greg Krupski, Kevin Frantz, David Jones. Not pictured – Tony Armstead

The Administrative Services department is the “customer service” arm of the AOPC. It is responsible for ensuring the efficient operations of office facilities in Harrisburg, Mechanicsburg and Philadelphia.

David Jones, who has been with the AOPC since 2014, oversees the department.

The department’s primary areas of responsibility include office management/administration, operational policies and procedures, interbranch agreements, facilities management, central services (mail, shipping and receiving, etc.), PJC switchboard and conference center-related activities.

Administrative Services consists of 15 employees who have 24/7/365 on-call responsibilities. Select employees follow an on-call schedule so that

someone is always available to address datacenter, facilities, security and emergency response issues whenever they occur.

Staff are readily available to assist with all facilities-related requests – from booking a conference room and coordinating catering requests, to managing pool vehicles and working with the Department of General Services or external contractors to address a building issue.

Among many other responsibilities, the department manages all furniture modifications, capital construction projects, security surveillance and access control, parking, janitorial and contract administration of over 30 contracts for ongoing maintenance services on behalf of the AOPC.

OEJC Takes Part in Guardianship Listening Tour

On June 7, the Southwestern Pennsylvania Partnership on Aging (SWPPA) moderated a Guardianship Listening Session, both in person in Pittsburgh and virtually. Office of Elder Justice in the Courts (OEJC) staff **Keith Hinkel**, analyst supervisor, and **Joan Bertone**, trainer, served on the panel, along with Anne John, Esq. and Grace Orsatti, Esq., members of the Advisory Council on Elder Justice in the Courts (Advisory Council).

The session was attended by approximately 60 individuals from across the state. SWPPA members, Area Agency on Aging staff, protective services staff, medical professionals, attorneys and those personally affected by guardianship shared their stories and presented ideas on how Pennsylvania can improve its guardianship practices.

Key takeaways from the listening session:

- Guardianship should be a last resort only used when other services and supports (alternatives to guardianship) are not able to meet a person's needs.
- Guardianship professionals and community members face challenges when trying to identify and implement alternatives to guardianship due to a lack of community resources.
- Education is needed for guardianship professionals and families to increase their awareness of the programs and resources available to assist Pennsylvanians.
- Education is needed to increase the accessibility and use of advance planning documents that should be created while persons have decisional capacity.
- Low-cost or free assistance for families looking to file a guardianship petition is needed

as the process to obtain guardianship can be expensive and confusing.

The panel stated that education on alternatives to guardianship is a key component of a project funded through a three-year grant awarded to the Pennsylvania Courts by the federal Administration for Community Living. The project will include trainings and the development of a web-based resource and trainings on alternatives to guardianship for the public and the courts.

The information shared with the panel will be considered for future projects of the OEJC and Advisory Council.



(l to r) Keith Hinkel, Joan Bertone, Grace Orsatti, Anne John

FOR MORE INFORMATION ABOUT PENNSYLVANIA'S COURTS, VISIT:



www.pacourts.us



Facebook
[@pennsylvaniacourts](https://www.facebook.com/pennsylvaniacourts)



YouTube
[@PACourts](https://www.youtube.com/PACourts)



Twitter
[@PACourts](https://twitter.com/PACourts)



Instagram
[@pennsylvaniacourts](https://www.instagram.com/pennsylvaniacourts)

Take Your Child to Work Day Comes Full Circle

The Pennsylvania Courts' held its first Take Your Child to Work Day (TYCWD) in April and for one employee, it was an extra special day where everything seemed to come full circle.

Rhonda Hocker, administrative assistant to the court administrator, was excited to invite her great niece, Milena, for the day and show her where she works.

Nearly thirty years ago, Rhonda remembers bringing her niece and Milena's mom, Francesca, to TYCWD when she worked in the state Treasury Department.

"Imagine my excitement when I realized I would be able to share my work experience with her daughter many years later," Rhonda said.

Francesca, who has now worked for the PA House of Representatives for ten years, and Rhonda were both excited they would have the opportunity to recreate a similar experience for Milena.

"What a thrill it was to have her participate in a truly fantastic program that included meeting with judges, getting to sit in the Commonwealth Courtroom and donning a robe for a picture. She was even brave enough to ask Justice Brobson a question during his meet and greet," added Rhonda.

"A truly special day all the way around. The tradition came full circle that day. Now my 3-year-old granddaughter wants to know when it's her turn to come to work with Nanny!"



Rhonda and her niece, Francesca, at TYCWD at the Pa. Treasury Department in 1996.



(l to r) Francesca Summa, Milena and Rhonda Hocker

Pennsylvania's Mental Health Courts



What are Mental Health Courts (MHCs)?

MHCs are problem-solving courts that work with key justice system officials and leaders in the mental health system to divert offenders with severe mental illness into a judicially-supervised program, including community-based treatment.

Statewide admission data (2021):

304 people were admitted.

68% of participants were male.

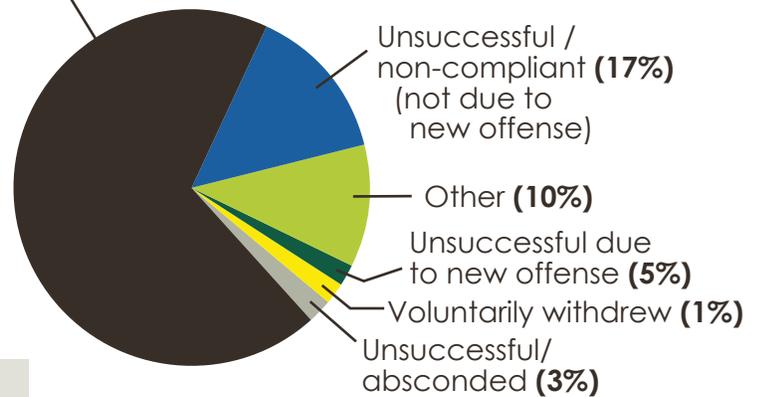
Average age of participants is **36**.

Among successful graduates, there was a

113% increase
in employment.

Statewide discharge data (2021):

64% (233) of all discharges graduated successfully

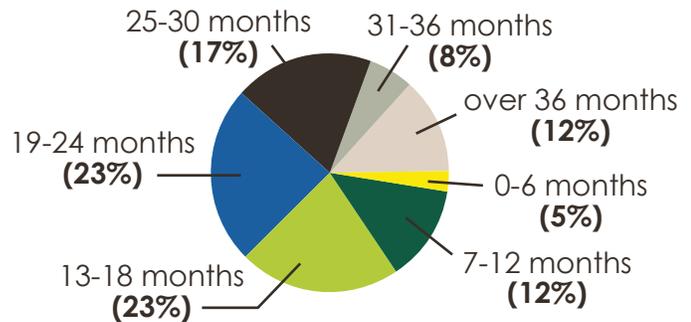


Pennsylvania's MHCs: 26 courts currently



63% successfully completed the program in 2 years or less.

Months in program (graduated successfully):



11% of participants

improved their **level of education** at discharge.

Additional data, including county-level data, available at

<http://www.pacourts.us/news-and-statistics/research-and-statistics/>



Appearance rate project challenges courts to address failures to appear



Courts in six states recently committed to adopt numerous new programs and methods to reduce nonappearance in their jurisdictions during an NCSC Appearance Rate Summit.

Earlier this year, NCSC launched a project supported by the Pew Charitable Trusts to help courts find solutions for missed court appearances. Six jurisdictions were chosen and invited to an April summit as part of the project. Summit participants learned from an array of experts from NCSC, Pew Charitable Trusts, Emily LaGratta Consulting, and ideas42 on topics such as why people miss court and how emerging practices are helping courts become more accessible to litigants.

“It was important for us to have a set of jurisdictions with varying characteristics - including size, demographic, and political diversity - so we can gauge how effective certain methods are in targeting different types of populations,” said NCSC Senior Court Management Consultant Mike Tartaglia. “We’ve worked directly with these courts to help them ensure people have the tools they need to get to court on time and avoid warrants for missed appearances, which can destabilize people’s lives and are costly to the legal system as a whole. I’m encouraged by the dedication shown by each of our participating courts, and excited to continue working with them and to see how well we do in knocking down barriers to appearance.”

Building on the presentations, participants worked together to identify a set of programs and methods to reduce nonappearance, including:

- Revising court forms and websites;
- Expanding the use of technology for virtual appearances and court date reminders; and
- Reviewing policies and procedures regarding warrants.

In the months following the summit, NCSC will provide technical assistance to prepare and launch the newly identified initiatives.

Participating courts include: Buckeye Municipal Court (Ariz.); 10th Judicial Circuit-District Court, Jefferson County (Ala.); La Crosse Circuit Court (Wis.); Lincoln County District Court (Wash.); Richmond County State Court (Ga.); and the 16th Judicial Circuit Court, Kansas City Municipal Division (Mo.).

Kansas City Municipal Court Presiding Judge Courtney Wachal shared that one way her court works to improve accessibility is by having regular walk-in dockets for warrant recalls and virtual dockets. Through the court’s work with NCSC, they learned that fear is a primary reason for many missed court appearances.

“Our court is now working to promote a message of trust, fairness, and accessibility. Some of the ways we plan to do this include increased community outreach and rebranding,” she said. “At my most recent walk-in docket, I implemented an NCSC recommended strategy of making brief welcoming remarks where I told those present that I appreciated them being there and that I knew their time was valuable. The change in attitude of those present was obvious.”

To learn more about the project and ways your court can improve appearance rates, visit the [NCSC website](#) or contact [Mike Tartaglia](#).

Reprinted with permission from the National Center for State Courts newsletter – @ the Center

Making Time For Work And Family



Excerpt reprinted with permission from BHS Focus 2023

Living a life in balance

Do you feel like your life is too complicated? Are you often torn between your work and home responsibilities?

"If so, you're not alone, and you don't have to despair," says Odette Pollar, president of Smart Ways to Work, a personal productivity firm in Oakland, Calif., and author of *Take Back Your Life*. "You can gain peace and relief by making a conscious effort to reduce the complexities in your life and achieve balance."

Given all you have to do, it's easy to lose sight of what's probably your ultimate goal: to enjoy your life as you follow through on your personal and professional responsibilities in satisfying ways.

Here are Ms. Pollar's suggestions for successfully balancing your time and life.

Learn to streamline

Speeding up and trying to force more and more into the same blocks of time isn't the best way to have more time in your life. According to Ms. Pollar, the best way to "get it all done" is to have fewer things to do by consciously streamlining your ongoing responsibilities.

Being selective about your choices and how you spend your time is important. And it's vital to keep your perspective and establish realistic expectations for yourself.

"Regaining balance starts with the awareness that something is out of kilter, that you have too much going on," she says. "From there you can identify what you want less of in your life."

Ask yourself questions

You can achieve balance by setting your priorities and creating a life around them. This is a long-term process and requires thought and insight.

As a way to get started, take some time to list three to five answers to these questions:

- What physical needs are important to you and why?
- What emotional needs are important to you and why?
- What mental needs must be filled to make you content?
- What causes the sense of frustration or depression you may feel?
- What does success -- both personal and professional -- mean to you?

Your answers will provide information you can use to make changes in your life.

Determine what you want

Before making any big changes, consider the results you want to achieve. This will give you a starting point from which to choose a direction and set goals.

For example, you might want to:

- Enjoy work and have enough

energy left at the end of the day to enjoy your home life.

- Cultivate a better relationship with your children, partner, friends and extended family.
- Do more things you'd like to do and feel more content.

By reacquainting yourself with your needs, desires and feelings, you can make a plan with a systematic approach for achieving your goals.

Respect the process

Achieving balance is an ongoing process that requires your regular attention. As you move forward, talk with others about how they have achieved balance in their lives and share your successes.

As you continue on your road to a more satisfying life, remember the following.

- Keep your job and your life in perspective. Success at the expense of relaxation and enjoyment is not success.
- Take yourself less seriously. Learn to see and appreciate the lighter side of life.
- Learn to say "no." Be firm without apology or guilt.

"It's easier to balance a simpler life," says Ms. Pollar. "For a life worth living, eliminate the unimportant, whether it be relationships, tasks, responsibilities, possessions or beliefs."

Around the Judiciary

PJ/PACM Conference in State College



PACM Board of Directors



Chief Justice of Pennsylvania **Debra Todd** delivers remarks.



Court Administrator of Pennsylvania **Geoff Moulton** provides opening remarks to attendees.



Schuylkill County President Judge **Jacqueline Russell**,
Schuylkill County District Court Administrator **Mary Timpany**,
Mercer County Lead Court Reporter **Melissa Keating**



Westmoreland District Court Administrator **Amy DeMatt**,
Jefferson County President Judge **John Foradora**, Deputy Court
Administrator of Pennsylvania **Andrea Tuominen**



AOPC Judicial Operations and Programs Administrator **Rick Pierce**,
Berks County President Judge **M. Theresa Johnson**



Chief Justice **Debra Todd** and Deputy Court Administrator **Andrea Tuominen** participated in a panel discussion at the Pa. Bar Association's Commission on Women in the Profession Annual Conference. The session explored the influence of ethics on business development, career advancement, diversity and inclusion and promotion of women in various sectors of the legal profession.



Last month, the Board of Commissioners in Westmoreland County adopted a proclamation to recognize May as Drug Court Month.



In May, Judge **Eleni Dimitriou Geishauer** (r) and Senior Judge **Stephen Lieberman** (l) presided over a ceremony celebrating the graduation of 22 participants across all four Berks County Treatment Courts, as well as marking 20 years since the inception of their DUI Treatment Court program.



At the end of April, the Interpreter Certification Program conducted an in-person orientation in Pittsburgh with 20 attendees working in 10 foreign languages.

Allegheny County Common Pleas Judge **Eleanor Bush** attended the first day of the orientation as a special guest where she welcomed interpreters and answered questions.



On June 8, President Judge **Dominick Motto** presided over the ceremony celebrating the graduation of the first participant from the Veterans Track of the Lawrence County Treatment Courts.



Pa. Supreme Court Justice **Kevin Dougherty**, Trebor Glover, Will Kiefer, Rhys Brunner, Kenneth Jackson-Keifer, Department of Human Services' Office of Children, Youth, & Families Deputy Secretary Laval Miller-Wilson

Will Kiefer, BenchMark Program executive director and founder, and three program participants presented information during a recent State Roundtable session titled "Building Resilience through Relationships." The session provided information to State Roundtable members regarding the importance of ongoing, supportive connections between young people and safe adults. The session also presented information regarding what makes an effective community-based mentoring program.