

AOPC CONNECTED



Issue 4, 2024

In this issue

In this issue, read about recent AOPC leadership transitions, events and initiatives, as well as county court highlights.

OEJC Conducts Regional Report Reviewer Roundtables

By: Robert Campbell, OEJC Trainer

In August and September, the Office of Elder Justice in the Courts (OEJC) conducted five Regional Report Reviewer Roundtables.

Report reviewers are assigned by the counties and they represent a wide range of professionals in a wide range of roles. In larger counties, there are dedicated staff for report review due to the high workload. In smaller counties, report review is usually handled by someone already managing other responsibilities, as the caseload is smaller.

Hosted in Butler, Centre, Dauphin, Lackawanna and Montgomery Counties, the roundtables provided an opportunity for court staff tasked with reviewing guardianship reports in the Guardianship Tracking System (GTS) to gather and discuss challenges, best practices and data trends with OEJC staff.

After inviting the court staff members involved in the guardianship report review process from all 67 counties, 44 counties were represented at one of the five roundtables.

The roundtables provided significant takeaways to all who attended. Report reviewers got to hear about a wide range of strategies and techniques utilized in different counties, and the OEJC was able to hear firsthand accounts of how reviewers work with guardians, court staff and judges to ensure that matters raised on reports are promptly and appropriately addressed.

Reviewers universally expressed appreciation for the chance to be heard and to connect with their peers to share stories of resolving challenging issues and to swap ideas about best practices. The OEJC plans to design future report reviewer trainings based on the needs expressed by the reviewers present at the roundtables.

Attendees at the roundtables also provided feedback on GTS and offered suggestions on how the system could be improved to make a more efficient and user-friendly experience for guardianship report reviewers and guardians. The OEJC, AOPC IT and the GTS Governance Committee are reviewing the suggestions for possible implementation.

"We view these very successful roundtables as another positive step in improving guardianship monitoring in Pennsylvania," **Amy Whitworth**, director of the OEJC, said. "We believe Pennsylvania is



Presentation at the Pennsylvania Judicial Center as part of the Dauphin County Roundtable.



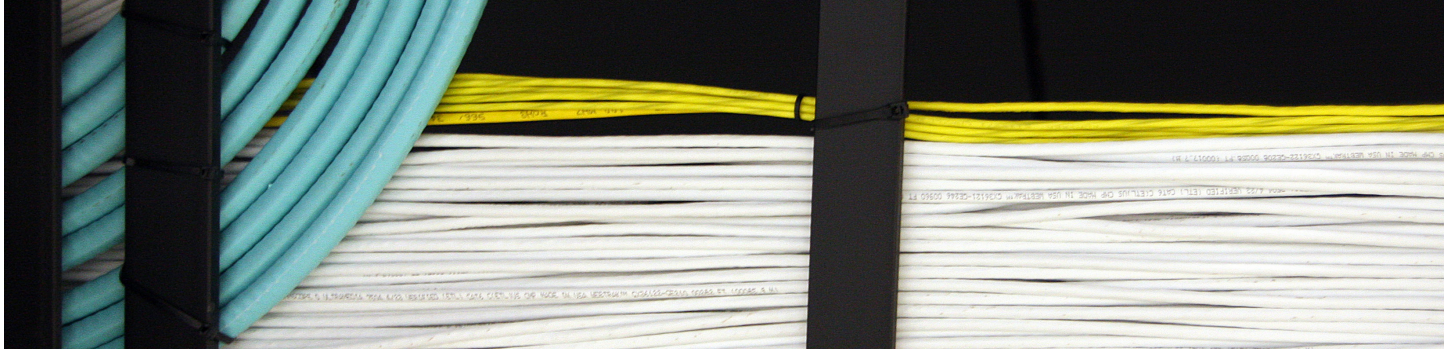
Attendees at the Montgomery County Roundtable, hosted at the Montgomery County Courthouse.

positioned to take a great leap forward in the area of guardianship monitoring.

"The exercise of listening to report reviewers through focus groups has been invaluable in revealing aspects of monitoring that need improvement. We believe that every county, given the proper tools and support, will implement best guardianship monitoring practices, resulting in better protection of the person under guardianship's wellbeing and asset security."

The OEJC looks forward to continued engagement with report reviewers statewide to promote the exchange of ideas, training opportunities and resource sharing via a newly created report reviewer listserv, which was a suggestion received during the roundtables.

Thank you to all of the attendees and their willingness to engage in thoughtful conversations on how the OEJC and court staff can work together to improve the guardianship report review process statewide.



AOPC IT Updates

AOPC/IT has been hard at work driving technological improvements across the organization, focusing on enhancing security, collaboration and efficiency. A few of their recent projects are highlighted below:

KnowBe4

Cybersecurity remains a significant concern for all organizations as cybercriminals continually find new ways to gain unauthorized access to systems and data. They often use this information to extort money by threatening to release or sell it. One primary method used is phishing, where attackers send forged emails that appear legitimate, urging recipients to click a link or open an attachment.

These actions can trigger malicious processes that allow attackers to impersonate the user and access protected systems and data. While cybersecurity products can detect suspicious behavior, once an action is taken, it may be too late. Therefore, training and user awareness are crucial for preventing these attacks.

Recognizing the importance of securing its data and systems, AOPC partnered with KnowBe4, a leader in security awareness training. During the fall, users of AOPC/IT email systems, including those in the Supreme Court and its Boards and Committees, were enrolled in KnowBe4's training and given simulated phishing tests. An initial test in August assessed how many users could identify phishing emails. Following this, a "Phish Alert Button" was added to Outlook, enabling users to report suspicious emails.

In September, users were invited to complete training on identifying and reporting phishing emails and understanding other cybersecurity threats. After the training, follow-up phishing tests showed significant improvement: the number of users who fell for phishing attempts was cut in half, and over half of the users used the Phish Alert Button to report suspicious emails.

These early results demonstrate the positive impact of increased awareness. The AOPC/IT cybersecurity team will analyze the 2024 data to plan future

phishing tests and training in 2025. Thank you to all email users for helping protect AOPC's systems and data from cyberattacks.

Email Encryption

The Messaging team implemented email encryption for all users which helps protect data transmitted through our email system. This new feature was initially piloted with the Human Resources and Finance departments within AOPC.

An email or attachment(s) should be encrypted when it contains sensitive or confidential information. Sensitive or confidential information, simply put, is information you don't want anyone else to access.

It is important to note that encrypting the email secures the message while it is being transmitted and exists in anyone's email client inbox. It also encrypts the same message for any email forwarding or replying.

O365 Phase 2

AOPC/IT introduced Office 365 to all AOPC computers to enhance future technical collaboration. Phase 1, completed in 2023, focused on Microsoft Teams training for messaging and video conferencing. Phase 2 expanded the training to cover Teams, SharePoint Online and OneDrive, while also migrating files from legacy on-premises file servers to cloud storage.

The goals of Phase 2 are to provide secure, flexible file access from anywhere and lower costs by eliminating most on-premises servers. Files are accessible via Teams, browsers or File Explorer, allowing staff to work comfortably while maintaining department processes. Although some data will remain on-site, most file servers will be decommissioned, reducing licensing and maintenance costs.

The project also introduces new tools like version control, sharing and real-time co-authoring through SharePoint and OneDrive, aiming to improve efficiency and simplify tasks.

AOPC Chief Counsel Announces Retirement



John Witherow

After decades of dedicated service to Pennsylvania's judiciary, **John Witherow**, chief counsel for the AOPC, will officially retire on Dec. 31, 2024.

Witherow has been a respected member of Pennsylvania's legal community, providing invaluable expertise and guidance for decades.

Prior to becoming AOPC's chief counsel in 2022, he served as the chief law clerk for the Honorable **Thomas G. Saylor** during his tenure as a justice of the Supreme Court of Pennsylvania from 1998 – 2014 and as chief justice of Pennsylvania from 2015 – 2021.

Reflecting on Witherow's impact, Court Administrator **Andrea Tuominen** said, "In my first year as court administrator, John's wise counsel and steadfast support have been indispensable. I would like to thank John for his exceptional service to the Unified Judicial System. Please join me in wishing him all the best in this new chapter—and perhaps we can even look forward to another book from this talented author."

Witherow offered words of reflection as he prepares for his next chapter.

"A wise mentor once told me to stay on the road of reasonableness and care deeply about the cases, though sometimes you have to let the chips fall where they may," he said. "I'm grateful to everyone who walked alongside me in the daily challenge of making sense of those principles. Best wishes to all—and Godspeed!"

Congratulations to John and we wish him well in his future endeavors!

Deputy Chief Counsel Appointed



Sean Concannon

Sean Concannon, who currently serves as AOPC's deputy chief counsel, will step into the role of chief counsel overseeing the legal affairs for the AOPC on Jan. 1, 2025.

As Concannon steps into his new role as chief counsel, his vast legal experience and dedication to public service positions him to be a valuable asset to the court system.

"It has been an absolute pleasure to meet and work alongside the many talented and dedicated members of the judiciary and the AOPC/Legal team," Concannon said. "I am deeply honored to be selected to serve as the next chief counsel and look forward to supporting the judiciary and staff in the years ahead."

Concannon previously served as deputy chief counsel for the AOPC since March 2024 and deputy general counsel for the Milton Hershey School where he oversaw high-level legal matters for the home and school for children, as well as deputy general counsel for the Governor's Office of General Counsel.

The AOPC looks forward to his leadership and wishes him all the best in his new role!

OEJC Welcomes New Assistant Director

Earlier this fall, the Office of Elder Justice in the Courts (OEJC) was proud to announce **Keith Hinkel** as its new assistant director.

Keith began his career with the AOPC in 2010 as an IT system trainer for the magisterial district court system. His role expanded over the years, notably including his work on the Guardianship Tracking System (GTS) project.

Since joining the OEJC in 2018, Keith has been a key player in advancing the office's mission. Most recently, he served as analyst supervisor, where his

leadership and dedication to addressing elder justice issues and enhancing access to justice for Pennsylvania's older adults became apparent. His work has significantly impacted the lives of many within the state's aging population.

"We look forward to the continued good work of the OEJC under the leadership of Keith and **Amy Whitworth** to identify and address elder justice issues in concert with the Advisory Council on Elder Justice in the Courts," said Court Administrator **Andrea Tuominen**.



Keith Hinkel

New PCSTJ President

Judge **Dennis E. Reinaker** has been named the new president of the Pennsylvania Conference of State Trial Judges (PCSTJ), bringing decades of judicial experience and leadership to the organization.

Judge Reinaker has served as a judge in the Lancaster County Court of Common Pleas, where he has presided over a wide range of cases and earned a reputation for fairness, integrity and a deep commitment to the rule of law. As president of the PCSTJ, he will play a vital role in shaping policies, providing judicial education and fostering collaboration among the state's trial judges.

"I am very honored to serve as president of the Pennsylvania Conference of State Trial Judges, in particular, to be the first from Lancaster County in its 60-year history," said Judge Reinaker.

"I look forward to working with my fellow officers and each of the members of our various committees to help ensure that our colleagues across the Commonwealth are provided with all of the resources and training they need to handle the challenges we face on a daily basis."

The PCSTJ is a statewide organization committed to supporting the commonwealth's

trial judges by providing resources, educational opportunities and a forum for collaboration.



Judge Reinaker

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Legislative Roundup

by Damian J. Wachter, Esq.

The General Assembly has concluded the 2023-2024 legislative session – the session officially expired on Nov. 30. The House and Senate will next convene on Tues., Jan. 7th, 2025, for the ceremonial swearing in of the members and the start of the 2025-2026 legislative session.

Politically, the chambers remain as they were during the 2023-2024 session. The Democrats control the House by a margin of 102 to 101; the Republicans control the Senate by a margin of 28 to 22.

Minor changes occurred in all four caucus leadership teams. Some as the result of current leadership members not running, others were defeated in caucus elections. Select legislative leadership members include:

House

Speaker-designee – Joanna McClinton (Philadelphia)
Majority Leader – Matt Bradford (Montgomery)
Majority Appropriations Chair – Jordan Harris (Philadelphia)
Republican Leader – Jesse Topper (Bedford)
Republican Appropriations Chair – Jim Struzzi (Indiana)

Senate

President Pro Tempore – Kim Ward (Westmoreland)
Majority Leader – Joe Pittman (Indiana)
Majority Appropriations Chair – Scott Martin (Lancaster)
Democratic Leader – Jay Costa (Allegheny)

Democratic Appropriations Chair – Vince Hughes (Philadelphia)

Since the Legislative Roundup has not appeared since January 2024, included in this article are a few enactments that occurred earlier this year.

Judicial Vacancies

Superior Court – one current vacancy
Courts of Common Pleas – 24 current vacancies
Magisterial District Courts – eight current vacancies

In addition to the above, it is expected several jurists will retire in early 2025. Seats for which resignations occur on or before Jan. 3 will be on the 2025 ballot. All resignations will be considered vacancies regardless of date, but timing will determine if the seat appears on the ballot, in accordance with the Pa. Constitution.

A judicial vacancy package could be negotiated between the Governor and the Senate in late January or could remain pending until after the May primary election. Nominations for appellate and common pleas courts require a two-thirds vote of the members elected to the Senate; magisterial appointees require a majority.

Juvenile Justice

[Act 107 of 2024](#) amends Title 42, requiring the court to hold a disposition review hearing at least every three months for the purpose of ensuring that a child committed to out-of-home placement is receiving necessary services and treatment and that the terms

and conditions of the disposition are being met. Minimally, the court must determine whether:

1. The child is receiving the necessary services or treatment contemplated by the court's disposition.
2. The child continues to pose a threat to the community.
3. Additional services or treatment are needed.
4. The child should continue in placement or be released under aftercare supervision.

Additionally, the court must set a date for the next disposition review hearing. Upon the conclusion of the review hearing and prior to entering an order, the court must state on the record and in open court its reasons for each determination. Effective April 15, 2025.

[Act 108 of 2024](#) amends Titles 18 and 42, standardizing the juvenile record expungement process, expediting the current expungement timeframe for offenses classified as misdemeanors and providing for a five-year timeframe for felonies. Additionally, the legislation requires notification of eligibility for expungement by the juvenile probation officer. Effective April 15, 2025.

Adjudicative Alternatives – Title 75 (Vehicles)

[Act 138 of 2024](#) amends Titles 42 and 75, authorizing community services program alternatives to restore operating privileges, specifically, MDJs may admit individuals to an appropriate adjudicative alternative program for Title 75 violations. The act also increases from 15 to 30 days the time an individual must respond to a citation or summons. Effective May 1, 2026.

Companion Animals and PFA Proceedings

[Act 146 of 2024](#) amends Title 23, allowing a protection order or consent agreement to include granting temporary ownership rights over a companion animal – as defined – and directing a defendant to refrain from possessing, contacting, attempting to contact, transferring, or relocating the companion animal or contacting or entering the property of any person sheltering the companion animal. The act further allows a final protection agreement to direct a defendant to refrain from abusing, harassing, stalking, threatening, or attempting or threatening to use physical force against a companion animal. Effective Jan. 17, 2025.

Expansion of the Slayer Statute

[Act 40 of 2024](#) amends Title 20, defining the terms elder abuser and elder abuse and prohibiting an elder abuser from acquiring any property or receiving any benefit upon the death of the abuse victim. Current law applies only to slayers – persons who participate, either as a principal or as an accessory before the fact, in the willful and unlawful killing of another. Expansion of the Slayer Statute was Recommendation No. 102 of the Supreme Court Elder Law Task Force. Effective Dec. 30, 2024.

Judicial Budget

[Act 1A of 2024](#) provided for the 2024-25 General Appropriations Act, funding the judiciary with \$435.618 million in state funds for FY 2024-25 – a \$40.5 million overall increase. The act includes full funding of a new cybersecurity and disaster recovery line item, a slight increase in JNET line item – reflecting an amount closer to actual costs, and full funding of a supplemental funds request – \$13.325 million. Became effective July 11, 2024.

The 2025-2026 judicial budget request was sent to the governor in early November. The governor will submit his overall budget proposal, including the governor's proposal for the judiciary, to the General Assembly in an address to a joint session on Feb. 4. Budget hearings will then occur over the following three or four weeks. At this time, it is unknown whether the judicial branch will be asked to appear.



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



l to r: Chris Dandro, Adam McKay, Soumya Krishnamurthi, Larry Lichty and Dan Hyde

Coding the Future of Justice: Highlights from the 2024 CITOC Summit

By: Soumya Krishnamurthi, IT Development manager

In late September, the Court Information Technology Officers Consortium (CITOC) held its second annual “Code for Justice Summit.” This unique event, launched in 2023, is designed for developers and development leaders to foster collaboration across state judiciaries, focusing on best practices, technology tools and emerging trends.

This year, 100 technologists from 19 states gathered for the largest CITOC event to date. Pennsylvania had a notable presence with five representatives: **Dan Hyde, Larry Lichty, Soumya Krishnamurthi, Adam McKay and Chris Dandro.**

The summit opened with welcoming remarks from Arkansas Supreme Court Chief Justice John Dan Kemp and State Court Director Marty Sullivan, setting the stage for two days of dynamic sessions and collaborative discussions. Dan Hyde co-presented with

the Arkansas Administrative Office of Courts in the first session, where they discussed strategies for aligning project goals and enhancing collaboration between development teams and leadership, a crucial factor in the success of court technology projects.

Soumya Krishnamurthi and Chris Dandro showcased Pennsylvania’s recently upgraded Unified Judicial System portal. Their presentation focused on the enhanced infrastructure, architecture and security features, with a spotlight on PACFile, the state’s electronic filing system. Larry Lichty led an engaging roundtable on Microsoft Azure and cloud technologies, sharing how Pennsylvania’s Unified Judicial System leverages these tools.

Key discussions at the summit revolved around emerging technologies, including Cloud Native development, Artificial

Intelligence (AI) and Continuous Integration/Continuous Deployment (CI/CD) pipelines—automated processes that streamline software development. There were also success stories about courts beginning to use AI to address resource shortages. States like Kentucky, Arkansas and Missouri presented their applications, underscoring how court technology teams are transforming judicial processes through innovation.

The summit wrapped up with an engaging session on change management, emphasizing how effective leadership can drive positive transformation within court teams and organizations.

The Code for Justice Summit was an excellent opportunity for technologists to share successes and ideas, paving the way for greater collaboration and advancements in court technology nationwide.



Pennsylvania Courts Hold First Statewide Behavioral Health Summit

More than 500 judges, government leaders and stakeholders gathered on Oct. 29-30 for the first-Pennsylvania Courts statewide summit focused on improving court responses to behavioral health challenges within the judicial system.

Hosted in partnership with the Pennsylvania Commission on Crime and Delinquency and spearheaded by Pennsylvania Supreme Court Justice **Kevin Dougherty**, the summit provided county action teams the opportunity to collaborate and begin creating a roadmap to address the state's behavioral health crisis, which impacts all aspects of the judiciary.

Chief Justice of Pennsylvania **Debra Todd** opened the summit by welcoming judicially-led county action teams, executive and legislative leaders and system partners, and by honoring everyone's efforts to improve outcomes in our courts and communities. Justice Dougherty oversaw the summit's program and convened two state action planning sessions where it was unanimously agreed that regional work is pivotal to support the ongoing work required to effect change.

"Communities across the country continue to fight a battle against what is sometimes a silent and invisible opponent – the mental and behavioral health crisis," Justice Dougherty said. "Over the course of the last decade, courts have seen the behavioral health crisis grow in severity, frequency and intensity and the Pennsylvania judicial system is not immune.

"This first-of-its-kind summit is our "call to action" bringing together our county, judicial and advocacy partners all focused on using their experience and expertise to change and save lives, while expanding solutions in the courts to better respond to court users with behavioral health needs.

"We all have a responsibility to be the change that vulnerable Pennsylvanians need. The judiciary is proud to stand with its partners to meet these challenges head on, in support of those justice-involved individuals who need it most."

AOPC Behavioral Health Administrator **Michael Harper** added, "Judicial leaders convened all three branches of government, county leaders and system



partners to collaboratively address the worsening behavioral health crisis that is sweeping our nation and greatly impacting every sector of the court."

Nationally recognized judicial leaders retired New Hampshire Chief Justice Broderick and Judge Steve Leifman (Miami-Dade County), each spoke of our need and ability to greatly improve outcomes. Chief Justice Broderick shared his family's story and encouraged all leaders to work together in developing an effective mental health system that helps youth and families before a crisis worsens, and Judge Leifman explained how spending money the right way allows communities to decriminalize serious mental illness.

"By its conclusion, the shared goal of every leader at the Summit was to substantially improve continuums of care at the intersections of justice and behavioral health," Harper said.

"Commonwealth and county leaders are aligned to develop more effective early interventions for children, youth, adults and families. Leaders understand that achieving this goal requires building stronger relationships, closer collaborations and the local and regional structures required to sustain change. Progress will take time and significant commitment."

"The initiative's executive committee has a lot to unpack after the summit. In the coming weeks and months, this Committee will listen to stakeholder feedback and develop a collaborative plan that leverages all the good work already going on. It will also determine the best ways that AOPC's Office of Behavioral Health can offer support moving forward."

PA Courts Launch Domestic Violence Awareness Campaign



MYTH: Getting help is hard for survivors.
FACT: It takes **four steps** to apply for a PFA.

KNOW THE SIGNS AND GET HELP



MYTH: Domestic abuse is not common.
FACT: It affects **1 in 3 women**.

KNOW THE SIGNS AND GET HELP



Myth: Survivors of abuse can just leave.
Fact: Many are isolated & financially dependent.

KNOW THE SIGNS AND GET HELP

This year, the AOPC launched a social media education and outreach campaign focusing on debunking common myths surrounding domestic violence. Funded by the federal STOP Violence Against Women Grant, the campaign aimed to raise awareness and provide accurate information on the issue.

The campaign ran on Google during October and November. By addressing misconceptions, the AOPC hopes to foster greater understanding and support for domestic violence survivors across the state.

To learn more, additional information and resources are available at www.pacourts.us/learn/protection-orders.

Lawyer of the Day

Lawyer of the Day (LOTD) is a collaboration between RentHelpPGH, Neighborhood Legal Services and Ebony Law to provide in-person resource navigation and legal aid in four of the highest filing magisterial district courts in the city of Pittsburgh.

The collaboration helps landlords and tenants resolve disputes and stops preventable evictions, focusing on cases of non-payment of rent while ensuring that tenants' rights are being respected.

This program has helped landlords recover more than \$2.5 million in arrears since it launched in October of 2022 and has helped over 1,000 families in Pittsburgh from being evicted.

RentHelpPGH's court resource navigators provide essential support to families by connecting them with a wide range of resources, including rental and utility assistance, legal aid and community services aimed at stabilizing housing. These navigators streamline the rental assistance process by bringing necessary paperwork directly to court, ensuring quicker application processing and eliminating barriers like transportation, computer access or phone issues.

Additionally, they build relationships with landlords, serving as a key point of contact to guide them through rental assistance programs and promote eviction diversion strategies, such as mediation through Just Mediation Pittsburgh.

Eviction hearings in courts with a LOTD program have 58% of the cases result in being withdrawn, settled, dismissed or ruled in favor of the defendant—compared to just 14% in courts without the program.

2024 STOP Regional Training Series – Putting the Pieces Together

By: Jamie Pizzi, STOP program consultant

To provide Pennsylvania justice stakeholders with a foundational overview of interpersonal violence, the STOP Violence Against Women Grant Program launched the regional training series – *Putting the Pieces Together*. The early summer trainings were attended by over 150 justice-system stakeholders from across the commonwealth, including judges, magisterial district judges, court administration, prosecutors, probation, law enforcement, court staff, victim advocates, certified court interpreters and more.

The full-day trainings took place in Bethlehem, State College and Pittsburgh. Attendees were provided with cutting-edge programming covering the fundamentals of domestic and sexual violence from local and national experts. The Center for Justice Innovation kicked off the training with a presentation about procedural justice. Then, the Pennsylvania Coalition Against Domestic Violence provided attendees with an overview of domestic violence in the commonwealth.

During the lunch hour, there was an exclusive screening of *The Last Drop*, a short sci-fi film about relationship abuse inspired by the memories of interpersonal violence survivors. The film's writer, director and co-producer spoke about his experience as a survivor of relationship abuse and helped justice stakeholders learn how to identify the less obvious signs of interpersonal violence.

For the final part of the day, the Pennsylvania Coalition to Advance Respect presented on sexual violence dynamics, and AEQuitas concluded with a training that focused on incorporating trauma-informed practice into everyday procedures.

Court personnel can request a **free** showing of *The Last Drop* by contacting:

AOPC.STOPGrantProject@pacourts.us

The full training series is available at <https://vimeo.com/showcase/11371710>

Working with LGBTQ+ Interpersonal Violence Cases: 3-Workshop Virtual Training Series

Nearly half of all LGBTQ+ persons will experience domestic violence in their lifetime. LGBTQ+ individuals are nearly four times more likely than their heterosexual counterparts to be victims of violent crime, including rape, sexual assault and aggravated



Training in Pittsburgh

or simple assault. This winter, the STOP Violence Against Women Program will host Cat Shugrue dos Santos, MSW, for a three-part virtual training series that will provide attendees with a detailed overview of abuse in the LGBTQ+ community. Cat Shugrue dos Santos, MSW serves as a subject matter expert in violence intervention and prevention and is a senior lecturer at Columbia University School of Social Work.

The introductory session took place in mid-November and covered the fundamentals of language and terminology in the LGBTQ+ community (including information on using pronouns, gender expression and identity) as well as the basics of intimate partner violence, family violence, hate violence and sexual violence in the LGBTQ+ community.

The final two sessions built upon the lessons learned in session one by using case studies to further examine the dynamics of LGBTQ+ interpersonal violence incidents. Common topics related to abuse in this community, such as mutual orders of protection in LGBTQ+ relationships, will be discussed.

** Workshops two and three are approved for 1.5 Continuing Judicial Education Credits (CJE), 1.5 Continuing Legal Education Credits (CLE), and 1.5 Interpreter Continuing Education Credits (CEU).*

All workshops will be recorded and made available on the [STOP Violence Against Women Program Vimeo webpage](#).

Pennsylvania Justice Systems Book Discussion Aims to Deepen Understanding

The STOP Violence Against Women Grant Program hosted a virtual commonwealth-wide book discussion about *No Visible Bruises: What We Don't Know About Domestic Violence Can Kill Us* by Rachel Louise Snyder on Dec. 13, 2024 from 11:30 a.m. to 1 p.m. This first-of-its-kind training format provided justice system stakeholders with an opportunity to learn about interpersonal violence through reading about real-life abuse scenarios and submit prompts to be discussed during the commonwealth-wide meeting.

Through the well-researched anecdotes of survivors, perpetrators, law enforcement and additional stakeholders, the book illuminates the dark corners of private violence, as well as its far-reaching consequences for society.

Registered participants received a copy of the book at no cost, on a first-come first-served basis. Interested stakeholders can contact AOPC.STOPGrantProject@pacourts.us to learn more.

STOP Scholarship Program Expands

This year, the STOP Violence Against Women Grant Program has expanded their scholarship program to award more scholarships than ever for court personnel to attend interpersonal violence conferences and training opportunities across the country.

Be on the lookout for the next scholarship solicitation email for your chance to attend the annual International Conference on Sexual Assault, Domestic Violence, and Forging New Pathways, April 22-24, 2025 in Anaheim, California.



(l to r) (Front) Pennsylvania Superior Court Judges: Judge Maria McLaughlin, Judge Mary Murray, Judge Megan McCarthy King (Back) Crawford County Court of Common Pleas Judges: Judge Mark D. Stevens, President Judge John F. Spataro, Judge Francis J. Schultz

Superior Court Visits Crawford County

Crawford County was honored to be selected as host of two public sessions of the Pennsylvania Superior Court on Oct. 1 and 2, 2024, which gave the public an opportunity to see the appeals judiciary in action.

The first session was held at Allegheny College's Vukovich Center, where Judges **Mary Murray, Maria McLaughlin** and **Megan McCarthy King** were

part of the appeals court panel. The opening session attracted attorneys, adult spectators, more than two dozen Allegheny College students and Meadville Area Senior High School students from the gifted program.

The second session was held at the Court of Common Pleas with case participants and community members in attendance. Opening remarks were given by President

Judge **John F. Spataro** and as part of their opening remarks, Judges Mary Murray and Maria McLaughlin shared their connections to the area.

All efforts were coordinated through the Pennsylvania Superior Court, Crawford County Court of Common Pleas and Allegheny College's Center for Political Participation.

AOPC Represents on the National Association for Judicial Education Board

The AOPC's Director of Judicial Education, Dr. **Steve Feiler**, has been named the new president of the National Association for State Judicial Educators (NASJE).

Joining him in this esteemed organization is Assistant Director of Judicial Education **Darren Breslin**, who has been appointed to the NASJE Board, further strengthening Pennsylvania's representation in the national judicial education community.

"NASJE is the backbone of my professional network and is the primary source of professional development for judicial educators across the country. Having the opportunity to give back to an organization that has given to me so generously is a great privilege," said Dr. Feiler.

"NASJE is marking its 50th Anniversary at the Annual Conference in Philadelphia next September. Serving as the organization's president during this milestone – and being able to celebrate in our own backyard – makes the experience that much more exciting."

Both Feiler and Breslin bring a wealth of knowledge to their new roles, and their appointments reflect Pennsylvania's ongoing leadership in judicial education. Their contributions will play a key role in supporting the courts and judicial professionals in their mission to advance the quality of justice by promoting excellence in judicial branch education.

"The education, tips and skills I've learned through NASJE conferences and contacts have



Dr. Steve Feiler



Darren Breslin

helped me in countless ways in my career. I'm always eager to share and apply what I've learned to both substantive and ethics programs for our judiciary," Breslin said.

NASJE is a national organization committed to promoting excellence in judicial education through collaboration, training and the sharing of best practices. With Feiler's leadership as president and Breslin's contributions as a Board member, the organization is set to continue its important work in shaping the future of judicial education.

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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

AOPC Holds Fall Staff Appreciation Events

Fun Fest



Makin Waves





AOPC Shows Halloween Spirit

This year, the AOPC celebrated Halloween by holding a trick-or-treat candy trail and office decorating contest at the PJC and Ritter Road offices. In addition to being invited to set up candy stations in their workspaces to share treats with colleagues around the building, employees had fun participating in an office/cubicle decorating contest.





2024 Distinguished Daughters of Pennsylvania

PJE Susan Peikes Gantman Recognized as a Distinguished Daughter of Pennsylvania

In a ceremony on Sept. 25, Governor Josh Shapiro and First Lady Lori Shapiro recognized retired Superior Court President Judge Emeritus (PJE) **Susan Peikes Gantman** as one of this year's Distinguished Daughters of Pennsylvania, highlighting her extraordinary achievements and contributions to the commonwealth.

"Since its inception, the Distinguished Daughters has been honoring extraordinary women for their outstanding service and contributions to our Commonwealth," said Governor Josh Shapiro.

"The women we recognize bring an incredible wealth of experience and knowledge, are leaders in their respective fields and have showcased extraordinary professionalism in all aspects of their careers. The Commonwealth is proud to claim each of the Distinguished Daughters as our own, as each of their stories reflect Pennsylvania's rich past and herald the promise of a bright future through collaborative service."

Distinguished Daughters of Pennsylvania was first instituted under Governor James H. Duff in 1949 to honor women who have shown distinguished service through a professional career and/or voluntary service. The women are nominated to receive the honor by non-profit organizations within Pennsylvania.

A closer look at statewide PFA filings

What is a PFA?

A protection from abuse (PFA) order is a civil court order that helps protect victims of domestic violence, providing relief from abuse by an intimate partner, family or household member.

In 2023:

41,772

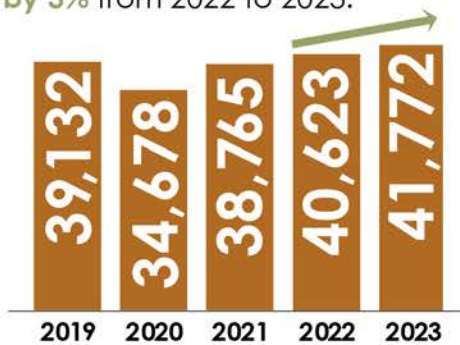
new petitions requesting relief under the PFA Act (Title 23, Ch. 61) were filed

88%

of temporary PFAs filed (valid until a final hearing) were granted

PFAs filed

The number of PFAs filed **increased by 3%** from 2022 to 2023.

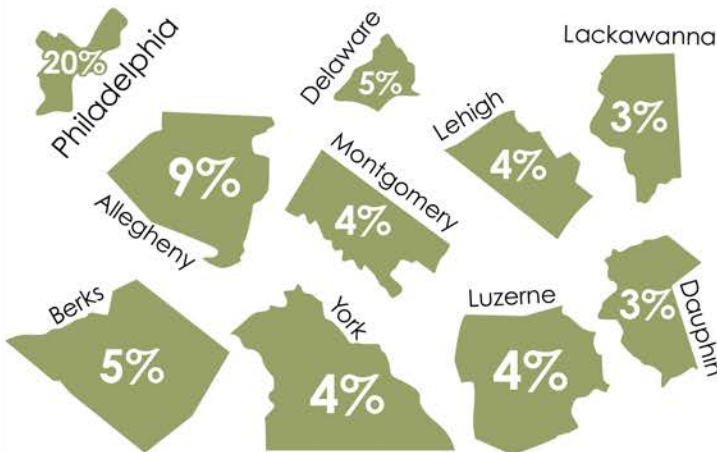


A PFA can order an abuser to:

- Have **no** contact with the victim or victim's children including: no texting, no calling, no communication via social media
- Relinquish any weapons
- Leave the home where the victim lives



Top 10 counties with highest number of new PFA cases in 2023:



Percentages given reflect the percent of total state filings.

PFA case outcomes:

	processed cases	% of total
Plaintiff did not appear in court	10,808	(26%)
Withdrawn by plaintiff	8,728	(21%)
Final order granted	7,438	(18%)
Agreement reached between parties	6,903	(17%)
Temporary order dismissed/denied	5,266	(13%)
Final order denied	2,186	(5%)
Case transferred/other dispositions	357	(1%)

Total # of PFA **cases disposed** in 2022: **41,686**

Interpreter Certification Program Expands Outreach and Training Efforts

In summer and fall 2024, the AOPC Interpreter Certification Program (ICP) actively conducted orientations, tests and recruitment efforts for court interpreters. Registration was completely full for the July orientation in Harrisburg and the September session in Philadelphia.

Despite a Microsoft outage disrupting the Harrisburg workshop and grounding trainers' flights, quick adjustments were made as remote presentations via Zoom supplemented in-person sessions. Overall, 97 prospective interpreters in 15 languages participated in the orientations.

The ICP also sponsored September outreach events, such as the Delaware Valley Translators Association Summit, attended by 150 local linguists. The program's information table featured resources for counties hiring interpreters.

The First Judicial District's Shadowing Program's Open House on Sept. 17 welcomed 16 new participants. This free program, overseen by Judge **Ida Chen**, connects interpreters-in-training with First Judicial District staff and President Judge **Nina Wright Padilla** and Administrative Judge **Daniel J. Anders**. All attendees have started the certification process.

Additionally, the ICP's outreach to the PA Dutch-speaking community led to the certification of 10 interpreters. On Sept. 30, ICP co-sponsored a skill-building workshop in Lancaster County with Agustin de la Mora, funded by an AOPC STOP grant and Safe Communities. The Oct. 17 oral exam in Harrisburg tested 19 candidates across several languages.

On Oct. 22, the ICP held its third outreach event at Penn State University, attracting 46 participants fluent in several less common languages like Korean, Arabic and Malayalam. Past Penn State sessions have produced certified interpreters, with several more candidates in progress. An American Sign Language interpreter was also present for a deaf participant aiming for certification, and the ICP continues to recruit through various outreach strategies.

If you know anyone fluent in English and another language, [please share information about our program](#).



ICP Director Natalia Petrova and ICP Coordinator Mary Provencal-Fogarty representing the ICP at the Delaware Valley Translators Association Summit.



Shadowing program group with Judge Chen, FJD staff and invited justice partners with 2024 Shadowing program participants.

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! CommunicationsOffice@pacourts.us



Miss an issue?

Check out our [newsletter archive!](#)

Honoring the Life and Legacy of Judge Michael H. Sholley

"Someone recently used the word 'remarkable' to describe Mike, and I thought that was a good word for him. He always described himself as a 'simple man,' although I would tell him that did not fit," said OCFC director Sandy Moore when reflecting on the life of her husband.

The legal community and many throughout Snyder and Union Counties are mourning the loss of former President Judge **Michael H. Sholley**, who passed away on Sept. 28, 2024, at the age of 67.

A man of immense character, compassion and service, Judge Sholley dedicated his life to justice, family, and community, leaving behind a legacy that will continue to impact countless lives.

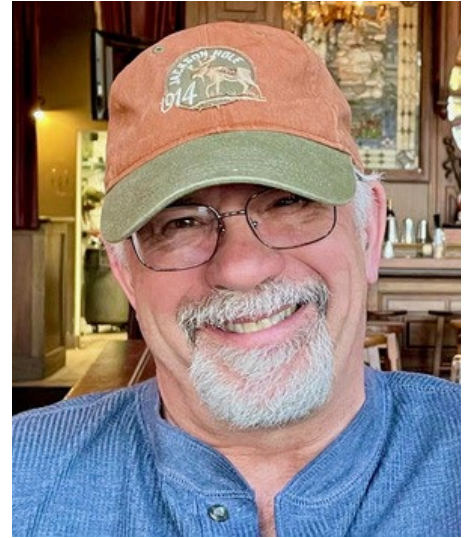
Before embarking on his legal career, Sholley served his country with honor, first as a military policeman in the U.S. Army from 1974 – 1978, and later in the Army National Guard, retiring in 1996 with the rank of major.

His legal journey began as a Lewisburg police officer and Snyder County public defender. He went on to serve as district attorney for Snyder County, eventually opening his own law practice. In 2010, his career reached new heights when he was elected to the Court of Common Pleas, where he served as president judge for five years. Even after stepping down as president judge, his dedication to justice remained strong, continuing as a senior judge until he passed.

Judge Sholley's passion for serving children and families in the court system was one of his greatest contributions. His advocacy efforts in the 17th Judicial District expanded beyond local borders, influencing statewide initiatives and improving the lives of many children in need. He will be remembered as a tireless advocate for fairness, empathy and change.

In addition to his legal work, Sholley was a devoted husband, father and grandfather. Known for his warmth, humor and adventurous spirit, he embraced life fully—whether hunting and fishing at his camp, playing with his two yellow labrador retrievers or attending a black-tie event with ease and joy.

Judge Sholley leaves behind not just a family who loved him deeply but also a community forever enriched by his service.



Judge Sholley

His commitment to justice, children and family was profound, and his absence will be deeply felt by all who knew him. As we honor his legacy, we celebrate a life well-lived—a life marked by kindness, dedication and an enduring sense of purpose.

Around the Judiciary



The University of Pittsburgh School of Law recently recognized two of their alumni in October – Chief Justice **Debra Todd**, who received the Outstanding Alumni Award and Judge **Michael Wojcik** who was honored with the Pro Bono Service Award. Congratulations to both!



Lancaster County President Judge **David Ashworth**, who has presided over the county's drug treatment court since 2005, was

recently honored with the inaugural President's Award from the Pennsylvania Association of Treatment Court Professionals for his longstanding contributions to the treatment court field. The award recognizes individuals with exceptional impact on the treatment court community, which he attributes to the teamwork within the treatment court program.



Senior Judge **John F. Wagner, Jr.**, along with the staff of the Fayette County Juvenile Probation, attended the Juvenile Court Judges Commission awards banquet to congratulate Kimberly Walton on receiving the Juvenile Court Support Service Award.



(l to r) Kara W. Haggerty, Esq, Judge Carrie E. Hyams, Judge Daniel J. Clifford, III, Anna Malcein King, Esq., and Damian J. Wachter, Esq.

As a part of its Bench-Bar Conference, the Cumberland County Bar Association hosted a session entitled How Court Cases Inspire Legislation. Panelists included Cumberland County Common Pleas Judge **Carrie E. Hyams**, Montgomery County Court of Common Pleas Judge **Daniel J. Clifford, III**, **Damian J. Wachter, Esq.**, director of Legislative Affairs, AOPC, and Anna Malcein King, Esq., director of Legislative Affairs, Pennsylvania Bar Association. The panel was moderated by Kara W. Haggerty, Esq. and focused on enactments such as Kayden's Law and Libre's Law, Marsy's Law – a proposed constitutional amendment, the process/path of outcome of a litigated matter becoming legislation and potentially law, and jurist involvement in the legislative process as allowed by the conduct rules and the O'Brien Memorandum and Directive.



Lehigh County MDJ **Linda Vega** has had an eventful year showing up for her community – teaching kids about writing books, hosting a festival to celebrate different cultures and receiving multiple awards from different state representatives, all the while spreading kindness, unity and encouraging young people to be confident and strong in what they do.



Westmoreland County Common Pleas Judge **Harry Smail** attended the 18th Annual Judicial Symposium on Civil Justice at the Antonin Scalia Law School, George Mason University. The three days of intensive programs cover key topics like emerging civil justice issues, legislative proposals, expert testimony standards and more. He describes it as a rigorous and informative experience.



Congratulations to **Kory Trout**, staff attorney in the Commonwealth Court Prothonotary's office, on passing the bar exam and being sworn in by Commonwealth Court Judge **Stacy Wallace**.



Nearly 100 new graduates of the Thomas R. Kline School of Law at Duquesne University participated in a Bar swearing-in ceremony on Oct. 17 at the Allegheny City-County Building's Supreme Court Courtroom, presided over by Pa. Supreme Court Justice **Christine Donohue**.



Justice **Kevin Brobson** swears in Widener graduates as new members of the Pa. Bar.



(l to r) Madeline Bagley, Shane Carey, Kathy Grasela, Edward V. Lehmann, Jr., Supervising Judge Walter J. Olszewski, Administrative Judge Margaret T. Murphy, Pa. Supreme Court Justice Kevin M. Dougherty, William P. Schenk, James Gallagher, Joseph McGill, Benjamin Quintana, Mario D'Adamo, Fred Keller

Administrative Judge **Margaret T. Murphy** received the Robert S. Stewart Award on Sept. 24, given by the Domestic Relations Association of Pennsylvania. Congratulations on this well-deserved recognition!

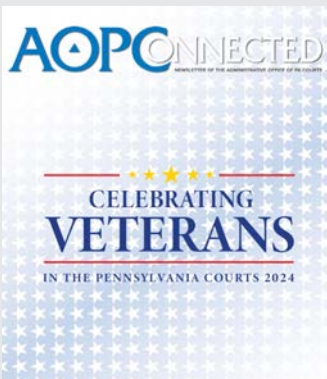


Fayette County Commissioners presented a proclamation to Chief Juvenile Probation Officer **Heath Randolph** in recognition of outstanding services during Juvenile Justice Week in October. Judges from the court joined in congratulating the Juvenile Probation staff!



Fayette County President Judge **Steve P. Leskinen** and staff had 70 trick-or-treaters visit the courthouse on Halloween.

Did you miss it?



[AOPConnected Veterans Tribute Newsletter](#)



[Pa Courts Veterans Tribute Video](#)

Anyone who missed our recent special Veterans Day edition of the newsletter can click to read. Each year, this edition is dedicated to recognizing and honoring the judges and court staff who have bravely served our country.

In it, you'll find the details of service for those who have worn our nation's uniform and now continue to serve in our court system. Their commitment, both in and out of uniform, highlights the enduring spirit of service that shapes our community.



**Allegheny County
District Judges
support
Breast Cancer
Awareness**

