



News for Immediate Release

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Pennsylvania Courts Focus Efforts to Combat Growing Behavioral Health Crisis

HARRISBURG — With the start of the new year, Pennsylvania Supreme Court Justice Kevin Dougherty and the Administrative Office of Pennsylvania Courts are redoubling their efforts to combat the behavioral health crisis sweeping the nation and impacting Pennsylvanians and their families.

“Across the nation, courts have seen the behavioral health crisis grow in severity, frequency and intensity and the Pennsylvania judicial system is not immune,” said Justice Kevin Dougherty.

“Pennsylvanians are struggling and finding too many barriers on the road to help and self-sufficiency. We must change that, and I am pleased to champion the need for systemic change in Pennsylvania's court system.

“If we can provide support to people who become involved in the court system and have a plan in place to assist, we can change and save lives. We just need to be willing to do the work and the courts stand ready.”

Supported by government and community partners, Dougherty, the AOPC, and the Pennsylvania Commission on Crime and Delinquency recently brought together all three branches of government to facilitate critical discussions and identify starting points to build and enhance county-based systems with a focus on prevention and intervention.

“Effective and holistic problem solving cannot be done alone, and collaboration is essential to improve access to care and quality of life for Pennsylvanians affected by serious mental illness and other behavioral health concerns. Too often, incarceration occurs because of barriers to treatment. I’m grateful for Justice Dougherty’s leadership and for the collaboration to help alleviate those barriers,” said Pennsylvania Human Services Secretary Dr. Val Arkoosh.

Dougherty went on to note that, “This work is more than necessary – it is urgent and has the potential to redirect a person’s trajectory. I look forward to the progress we’ll continue to make together for Pennsylvanians.”

“Bringing our partners to the table opened the door to so many opportunities to create lasting and meaningful change – but what we heard and learned from each other was eye-opening,” Dougherty said.

“This is an epidemic that has been marginalized for far too long, and people have fallen victim to a system that when it works, should be there to support them. Working together we can find a path forward to address the issues facing people and start unpacking this crisis.”

Reflecting on the importance of the collective work being done, Rep. Mike Schlossberg noted: “One of the biggest challenges we face in addressing behavioral health issues is breaking down silos that prevent people from getting care and support they need. I am so glad Justice Dougherty, Chief Justice Todd and the AOPC have taken an approach that brings critical partners to the table to address issues of behavioral health and its impact on courts and communities across Pennsylvania. In the end, all of Pennsylvania will benefit and our communities will be stronger.”

In 2024, the AOPC created an Office of Behavioral Health aimed at identifying gaps in the system, improving court responses to behavioral health challenges within the judicial system, addressing key issues including access to services and support, and pinpointing intersections between at-risk populations and the courts in a wide range of matters, including truancy, domestic relations, juvenile delinquency and dependency, criminal justice and civil commitments.

The office is developing training opportunities for judges and creating a local roadmap to resources and services statewide.

In response to the growing crisis, a statewide mental health summit was held in late 2024 in partnership with the Pennsylvania Commission on Crime and Delinquency, as well as other government and community leaders and organizations. This collaborative “call to action” summit was a critical starting point to develop a statewide action plan to improve court responses to behavioral health challenges.

“As courts increasingly encounter individuals with behavioral health issues, there is a pressing need for a coordinated response that ensures both effective legal proceedings and compassionate, trauma-informed care. That’s why I am thankful for Justice Dougherty and the AOPC doubling down on these efforts from a unified approach,” said Mike Pennington, Executive Director of the Pennsylvania Commission on Crime and Delinquency.

“By building relationships across professions and fostering understanding among judges, mental health professionals, advocates, and community organizations, we can develop informed strategies that truly make a difference.”

More information about the courts behavioral health efforts is available [here](#).

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