

# AOPC CONNECTED



Issue 4, 2025

## In this issue

In this issue, read about recent regional behavioral health summits, new court and civics programs, ongoing elder justice efforts, as well as various honors and recognitions around the judiciary.



Judge Brandon Neuman



Judge Stella Tsai

# Pennsylvania's Appellate Courts Welcome New Judges

Pennsylvania's intermediate appellate courts are preparing to welcome new members following recent judicial elections.

In November, Washington County Common Pleas Judge **Brandon Neuman** was elected to the Superior Court, while Philadelphia County Common Pleas Judge **Stella Tsai** won election to the Commonwealth Court.

Judge Neuman joined the Washington County Court of Common Pleas in 2018, where he primarily presided over civil and veterans court and has prior experience in criminal and family law. Prior to becoming a judge, he served in the Pennsylvania House of Representatives from 2011 to 2017. Judge Neuman earned his undergraduate degree from the University of Richmond and his JD from Duquesne University Kline School of Law.

Judge Tsai has served as a Common Pleas judge in Philadelphia County since 2016. Before joining the bench, she was a business litigation partner and had previously chaired the administrative law section in the City of Philadelphia's Law Department. She holds a BA from Penn State University and a JD from the University of Pennsylvania Carey Law School, where she also now teaches as an adjunct professor.

Please join us in congratulating both judges as they step into their new roles!

## Welcoming New DCAs

The 39th Judicial District, serving Franklin and Fulton Counties, has announced the appointment of **Rebekah Reigner** as its new District Court Administrator (DCA) in October.

Reigner brings extensive experience to her new role, having previously served as director of Franklin County Domestic Relations and as Domestic Relations supervisor in Berks County.

"I am honored to have been appointed as the DCA for Franklin and Fulton Counties," Reigner said. "This opportunity represents both a

professional milestone and a profound responsibility to serve the judiciary and our communities with integrity, efficiency and dedication."

Meanwhile, Berks County also recently welcomed a new DCA. **Brendan Harker** brings more than 24 years of experience with the County of Berks, having served in a variety of probation and court administration roles.

His prior position was deputy chief probation officer, following earlier positions as director of Court Programs & Development, assistant chief probation officer,



Rebekah Reigner



Brendan Harker

probation officer and corrections officer.

With his extensive background in court operations and community supervision, Harker is well-positioned to support the continued efficacy of the Berks County Courts.

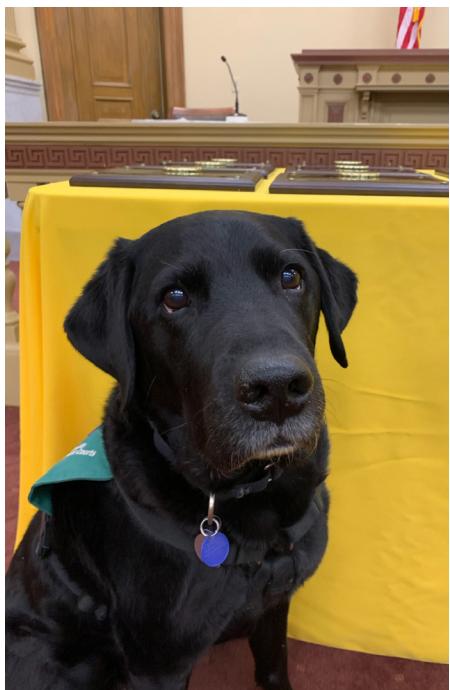
"I'm deeply grateful to have been appointed as the

DCA for the 23rd Judicial District and excited to take on this new challenge in my career. Having spent nearly 30 years in court-related service, I welcome the opportunity to continue my commitment to public service in this new role," Harker said.

# Courthouse Companions Hang Up Their Vests

Two trailblazing courthouse facility dogs – **Hamlet** of Lancaster County and **Buster** of York County – have officially retired, leaving behind a legacy of compassion and comfort.

Buster made history in 2013 as the nation's first Treatment Court facility dog. For more than 12 years, he was a steady, calming presence for participants in Drug, DUI, Mental Health and Veterans Treatment Courts.



Buster

His work extended far beyond the courtroom, touching lives at schools, senior centers and community events. Approaching age 14, Buster is now enjoying a well-deserved



Buster and Holly Wise

retirement at home with his longtime handler, deputy director of Wellness Courts **Holly Wise**, and her family.

Inspired by Buster's success, Lancaster County welcomed his half-brother, Hamlet, in 2014. The second facility dog in the state, Hamlet quickly became a vital part of the Treatment Court team.

For more than 11 years, he comforted clients, children and even staff through some of life's hardest moments – whether sitting with a grieving coworker, easing the fears of a child or offering quiet companionship in court. Now 13, Hamlet has retired, passing his duties to a new facility dog, Felicity.



Hamlet

Together, Hamlet and Buster sparked a statewide movement that has grown to 27 professionally-trained courthouse facility dogs serving communities across Pennsylvania, alongside 24 therapy dogs that provide comfort with less formal certification. Their impact will be felt for years to come, as future dogs continue their legacy of healing and hope in the justice system.



Hamlet's retirement ceremony

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# PA Courts Hold Regional Behavioral Health Summits

As part of an ongoing effort to address the growing behavioral health crisis affecting Pennsylvania and the nation, the Pennsylvania Courts, led by Supreme Court Justice **Kevin M. Dougherty** in partnership with the Pennsylvania Commission on Crime and Delinquency (PCCD), held seven regional Behavioral Health Summits throughout the fall.

*“The behavioral health crisis reaches into every corner of our justice system, and that is why our work through the summits is not only important – it is urgent,” said Chief Justice Debra Todd. “The decisions we make, and the partnerships we build, have the power to redirect a person’s entire life. The scope of this issue is vast, but so is our opportunity to make a difference.”*

“Mental and behavioral health challenges have become a defining issue across Pennsylvania, reaching into our homes, schools, workplaces and courtrooms,” said Justice Dougherty. “Across the Commonwealth, judges are seeing more cases where mental health is at the heart of the matter – whether in criminal proceedings, family disputes or child welfare concerns. The need for stronger, more accessible behavioral health resources could not be clearer.”

The summits brought together judges, court staff, behavioral health professionals, law enforcement and local and state officials to discuss best practices, identify challenges and develop strategies that prioritize treatment



Chief Justice Debra Todd

and support over repeated court involvement and incarceration.

Summit sessions focused on practical, cross-system collaboration to address mental and behavioral health challenges – covering topics such as diversion programs, crisis response and access to person-centered care.

“We’re grateful for the expertise and collaboration that these regional summits bring as they help us identify and close the gaps that exist across systems,” said Court Administrator of Pennsylvania **Andrea Tuominen**. “The courts play a critical role, but real progress depends on partnership. These relationships are the foundation of our success because no single institution can tackle these complex challenges on its own.”

By hosting these regional summits across the Commonwealth, the Courts are fostering stronger, more coordinated responses to one of the most urgent issues facing Pennsylvania communities today.



Court Administrator Andrea Tuominen



Justice Kevin M. Dougherty



## Civics Brought to Life

At the end of September, more than 150 elementary school students experienced civics in action thanks to a special partnership between the Pennsylvania Courts, Walnut Street Theatre and Girard College.

The students attended a performance of *Grace for President* – a play that tells the story of a young girl who sets out to understand elections, leadership and democracy after realizing that no woman has ever been elected U.S. president.

Commonwealth Court Judge **Lori Dumas**, Philadelphia Municipal Court Supervising Judge **Karen Simmons** and Superior Court Judge **Timika Lane** helped present the program as part of the courts' ongoing effort to expand civics education across Pennsylvania.

"Introducing civics to students in creative and interactive ways is important because it helps them see themselves as future leaders and community members," Judge Dumas said. "This program shows that civics is



(l to r) Judge Timika Lane, Judge Karen Simmons, Judge Lori Dumas

not just something in a textbook, but something students can live and experience as they grow into active participants in our democracy."

Judge Simmons added, "By working together with the Walnut Street Theatre and Girard College, we're giving young learners an engaging, hands-on experience that helps them understand democracy and the importance of civic participation. It's exciting to see their curiosity and enthusiasm."

The event was part of the Pennsylvania Courts' broader civics outreach efforts, which include school visits, student contests, classroom resources and community partnerships. Learn more at [www.pacourts.us/civics-ed](http://www.pacourts.us/civics-ed).



# Project LITIGATE and the Implications of the Disappearing Jury Trial

By JJ Gismondi

Project LITIGATE (Lawyers Initiative To Improve next Generation Attorney Trial Experience) is a statewide initiative to encourage law firms to take steps to facilitate the development of litigation skills for aspiring trial attorneys. It was created through the joint efforts of Pennsylvania Supreme Court Justice Christine Donohue and Pittsburgh trial attorney John Gismondi. Justice Donohue traveled throughout the commonwealth talking about the need for real world litigation experience for young attorneys, and Gismondi created and oversaw a committee made up of representatives from a consortium of statewide bar groups to address the issue. That committee eventually developed the LITIGATE Pledge, a voluntary commitment law firms make to adopt in-house practices that incrementally give aspiring litigators more and more exposure to litigation tasks such as witness preparation, taking of depositions, motions argument,

examination of witnesses and, eventually, complete responsibility for a jury trial. Presently, in order to secure the long-term viability and visibility of the initiative, the Pennsylvania Bar Association is taking ownership and oversight of Project LITIGATE.

It is universally agreed that jury trials are an essential, fundamental pillar of our democratic society, a sentiment that dates back to the nation's founding. Thomas Jefferson regarded trial by jury "as the only anchor, ever yet imagined by man, by which a government can be held to the principles of its constitution." John Adams is said to have remarked, "Representative government and trial by jury are the heart and lungs of liberty. Without them, we have no other fortification against being ridden like horses, fleeced like sheep, worked like cattle, and fed and clothed like swine and hounds." These sentiments reflect a shared belief that the fairest way to resolve disputes between

members of society is to place that power in the collective hands of a jury made up of the parties' peers, not in the hands of a king, judge or government official.

And yet, unfortunately, jury trials have been becoming increasingly less frequent over the past few decades, a development that has serious ramifications for our profession and the public at large. Jury trials not only provide essential trial advocacy experience for young attorneys, but they also serve as a vehicle for our democratic society to enforce its shared values and ideals. It is thus important that the legal community recognizes its obligation to support initiatives like Project LITIGATE so that the jury trial does not one day come to be regarded as a quaint, anachronistic vestige of a bygone era.

#### **The Dwindling Number of Jury Trials**

When I was in law school, I heard stories from trial attorneys about how they were given early opportunities to "cut their teeth" in litigation. These included stories from those who were sworn in almost immediately after passing the bar ahead of their official admission ceremony so they could cover matters at motions court, new associates given the opportunity to attend depositions, and even a few young lawyers who gained jury trial experience within their first few years of practice.

But getting that kind of early experience — especially in jury trials — has become increasingly rare for anyone entering civil practice during the past 10–15 years, both in Pennsylvania and nationally, due to the dwindling number of jury trials. Indeed, the average number of civil cases going to verdict in recent years is a small fraction compared to those in years past. According to statistics from the Administrative Office of the Pennsylvania Courts, between 1996 and 2000, approximately 2,000 civil jury trials went to verdict each year in Pennsylvania. By 2019, however, that

number had declined to just over 700 cases, roughly a 65% drop. In other words, assuming a consistent rate of cases throughout a given year, more civil jury trials went to verdict by April or May during the mid-to-late 1990s than during all of 2019. In the most recent full year, 2024, the number of civil jury trials that went to verdict in Pennsylvania fell below 600.

The story is similar in other parts of the country. According to data from the National Center for State Courts, the number of civil and criminal jury trials per 100,000 people declined by 26% between 2007 and 2019. The raw number of jury trials also fell by 17%, a decline that the researchers noted would have been even greater were it not counterbalanced by population growth over that same period. Civil jury trials specifically fell by 37% from approximately 46,000 nationwide in 2007 to around 28,800 just 12 years later in 2019.

Suffice it to say, jury trials have become increasingly rare, a trend that many laud as a positive for the profession and society at large. To be sure, out-of-court case resolution has its benefits; it is cheaper, quicker and less risky than going to trial, just to name a few. It also avoids the possibility of a lengthy appeal that could lead all involved back to the courtroom for a second trial. But those benefits come at a price both to the profession and the public.

#### **Professional Implications of Fewer Jury Trials**

A byproduct of that decline is that even when cases do proceed to trial today, they are more likely to be handled by a senior attorney. It appears that there are a few different reasons for this consolidation. For one, more complex cases with hotly contested issues of fact tend to be the ones that are most likely to proceed to trial, and those types of cases are usually handled by more experienced counsel. Also, clients often insist that if their case is going to trial,



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Jury trials not only provide essential trial advocacy experience for young attorneys, but they also serve as a vehicle for our democratic society to enforce its shared values and ideals.

they want a veteran litigator to advocate for them. Another contributing factor is the reluctance of senior counsel to relinquish trial opportunities or client exposure to young associates out of concern for protecting their “book of business.”

The ultimate effect then, and the issue that Project LITIGATE aims to address, is that there are now far fewer opportunities for young attorneys to develop trial skills.

Some may argue that despite the decline in jury trials, there are still other avenues to train the next generation of trial lawyers, such as law school moot court and trial advocacy training programs. That is a fair point, as each of these certainly have their role in preparing future trial lawyers. But I have learned that none of these are a substitute for being lead counsel in a real jury trial.

Thanks to an Allegheny County Bar Association program inspired by Project LITIGATE, I enjoyed the rather unique opportunity of trying a jury trial by myself barely one month after passing the bar exam in the fall of 2024. And just two months later, I got the chance to “second-seat” a weeklong medical malpractice trial during

which I was permitted to argue motions and handle direct examination. I have also had the opportunity to take numerous depositions, many of them of defendant doctors or other adverse medical witnesses.

Based on those experiences, I propose that nothing matches the learning environment of a real deposition or trial – not moot court, not a seminar and not even the greatest advocacy lecture in the world. Trial advocacy is an acquired skill, one best “learned by doing,” as there is simply no better way to develop the art of direct- and cross-examination or the nuances of trial planning and strategy than personally handling a real deposition or trial with real consequences for real people. It is when the stakes are real that our decisions and, perhaps more significantly, our mistakes provide the most memorable and lasting insights for our future improvement. In short, there is simply no substitute for real litigation experience, particularly trial experience.

With all that said, the long-term implication of declining jury trials should thus be obvious: Fewer and fewer attorneys will know how to effectively try cases in the coming



this dilemma with the following medical analogy: Even though many medical conditions can be successfully treated with just conservative measures, there will always be some patients who need to have surgery and, in those instances, the hospital needs to have enough competent physicians who know their way around the operating room. Likewise, our profession has an obligation to ensure that there are an adequate number of trial attorneys who know their way around the courtroom so that the public continues to have access to competent legal representation.

### Public Implications of Fewer Jury Trials

One may be tempted to conclude that fewer jury trials is ultimately in the public interest because settlements resolve cases without all the time and expense that trials require — much of it on the taxpayers' dime — and that, in turn, allows dockets to move more swiftly and for judges and staff to devote their time to other matters of social benefit. Moreover, jury verdicts are typically an “all or nothing” proposition with clear winners and losers, whereas settlements, as voluntary resolutions, offer each side some measure of satisfaction by participating in the outcome.

But settling cases is not always in the public interest. The “settlement is best” argument incorrectly assumes that the only purpose of trial is simply dispute resolution when, in fact, it has another equally important purpose — ensuring that justice is done. Professor Owen M. Fiss made this very point in his famous *Yale Law Review* article “Against Settlement,” in which he argued that for the parties, out-of-court-settlement represents a bargained-for peace allowing both sides to avoid all the risks and uncertainty associated with trial. But “when the parties settle, society gets less than what appears” because they may do so “while leaving justice undone” that a trial would otherwise dispense. Indeed, it

is a jury’s verdict, not a signed settlement agreement, that ensures we as a society live up to the ideals embodied in our laws. Taking disputes to court is an endeavor by which we test and recommit ourselves to accepted norms and ideals. In other words, the rendering of a jury verdict represents a public recommitment to long-held values or an announcement of new ones, a socially valuable outcome that is lost when cases settle. Moreover, jury verdicts serve as a clear, unequivocal reminder that we are a nation dedicated to the rule of law, something that is perhaps more important now to reaffirm than ever before in our history. The fact that such verdicts are rendered by common citizens, not a judge or a government official, reminds us that the jury trial is the most direct form of “government by the people, for the people” our system has to offer.

In summary, as the number of jury trials continues to decline, there are proportionate adverse effects for our profession, the public and our legal system. For those reasons, it is my hope as a young trial lawyer that bar groups, individual lawyers and law firm leaders will recognize the virtue of initiatives like Project LITIGATE and pledge to provide meaningful long-term support to it. Doing so will help to ensure that our profession remains prepared to handle the litigation needs of our clients and, more broadly, that the jury trial as an institution will continue to play a vital role in publicly reaffirming commitment to our shared ideals and the rule of law. ☐



JJ Gismondi is an associate at Gismondi & Associates in Pittsburgh, representing plaintiffs in a variety of medical malpractice, motor vehicle collision and other personal injury cases. He is the son of Project LITIGATE founder John Gismondi.

# Building Pathways to Justice Careers

An innovative partnership between the Beaver County Courts and the Penn State Beaver Campus is giving students a hands-on introduction to the justice system, while also helping the courts meet staffing needs in a changing workforce.

The collaboration began in the aftermath of COVID-19, when the courts were struggling to fill positions after a wave of retirements and increased competition from the private sector.

Beaver County Deputy District Court Administrator **Aileen Bowers** explained, "In meeting with a member of our Criminal Justice Advisory Board, we started talking about filling part-time positions with Penn State students."

Through this partnership, students have been able to gain valuable experience across a range of court-related offices – including magisterial district judge offices, probation and parole, public defender offices and court administration.

"A recent Penn State graduate, who previously worked as a summer intern in both MDJ and court administration offices, is now pursuing a career as a court-certified interpreter – a position she hadn't even known existed before joining us," said Bowers.

The program's success has even expanded beyond Penn State.

"We've also hired graduates from the University of Pittsburgh who participated in our summer internship program," Bowers said. "One is now working in court administration, another in a magisterial district judge office while preparing for law school and another former intern is now a first-year law student at Akron."

"The partnership is a great collaboration that benefits everyone involved. Our courts have been able to tap into a well of motivated, intelligent young adults who are already contributing to our courts – and we very much enjoy opportunity to mentor them."

"Credit also goes to District Court Administrator **Garrett Harper**, who has been very supportive of what we've been able to accomplish with the students."

By linking classroom learning with hands-on experience, the program is not only preparing students for careers in law and public service but also strengthening the county's courts by cultivating skilled, motivated talent for the future.

## AOPC/IT Senior Leader Honored with Women in Technology Impact Award

The AOPC is proud to recognize **Soumya Krishnamurthi**, a senior leader in AOPC/IT who was recently named the recipient of the 2025 Women in Technology Impact Award – Public Sector/Government from the Technology Council of Central Pennsylvania (TCCP). This award recognizes a woman in technology whose contributions have had an impact in the public sector/government.

The TCCP is a leading organization that promotes technology and drives economic growth throughout the Central Pennsylvania region. Each year, its Women in Technology Awards celebrate exceptional women across various categories who serve as innovators, role models and trailblazers in the technology community.

Soumya received the Impact Award for her work in the public sector at AOPC/IT, her leadership in promoting STEM education through her entrepreneurship with Code Ninjas and her continued service and mentorship in the community.

"Technology has never been just a profession to me; it has been a way to advance meaningful change and strengthen the communities we serve," Soumya said. "My work has always centered on driving excellence while using innovation to create a lasting, positive impact across the public sector. This award is a powerful reflection of that mission and reinforces my passion for building a more inclusive, equitable and forward-thinking tech landscape for all. My hope is that my journey inspires more women and girls to envision



themselves in this field, to speak up, take space and lead boldly into the future."

Through her leadership, innovation and commitment to service, Soumya continues to make a lasting impact both within the AOPC and throughout the Commonwealth's technology community.

# Inspiring the Next Generation of Legal Leaders

At the end of November, Allegheny County Common Pleas Judge **Nicola Henry-Taylor** worked with the Pittsburgh Legal Diversity & Inclusion Coalition (PLDIC), the Boys & Girls Clubs of Western Pennsylvania and the Pittsburgh Chapter of Jack and Jill of America, Inc. to host a series of dynamic civic engagement and career exploration activities for students across the region.

Throughout the week, local youth participated in the PLDIC's Legal Career Pathways Program (LCPP) – an initiative designed to cultivate homegrown legal talent and strengthen a diverse pipeline into the legal profession.

As part of the program, students engaged in hands-on activities including interactive fact patterns, "career captures" and a mock-trial preparation exercise. They also had the opportunity to tour the Pennsylvania Supreme Court Courtroom and hear from court staff who all shared insight into their daily responsibilities and spoke about their career paths.

The week culminated with a Saturday program where Judge Henry-Taylor joined PLDIC leaders and local practitioners for a career panel and discussion. In early December, students returned to the courthouse to present the full mock trial they had earlier prepared for with volunteer attorneys.

Among the volunteers was a senior at Duquesne University who will be pursuing a law degree and who first became interested in the profession after participating in this same program as a teen – proof of how initiatives like these can inspire confidence and help young people truly see themselves as future lawyers, judges and leaders.



# Service Beyond the Bench

## Wyoming County MDJ Helps Rescue Injured Dog

Demonstrating a commitment to service that extends beyond the courtroom, Wyoming County Magisterial District Judge **David Plummer** recently participated in a rescue mission to help reunite an injured dog with its family.

Through the national nonprofit organization Pilots N Paws, Judge Plummer volunteered alongside **Laurie Besden**, executive director of Lawyers Concerned for Lawyers of Pennsylvania, to help transport Blue – a dog whose owners tragically died in a car accident. The mission ensured that Blue could safely return to family members in Pennsylvania after receiving critical medical care.

Blue survived the crash but sustained serious injuries, including a broken leg and a dislocated hip. Judge Plummer said he was moved to help after learning about the situation.

"As an animal lover myself, I saw an opportunity to do a good thing," Judge Plummer said. "The program provides a mission and a destination. We're looking to return these animals to owners or get them the help they need, and we're trying to get them where they need to go to get that help."

Judge Plummer described the rescue as one of the most emotional experiences of his volunteer work.

"The most recent rescue was especially emotional to witness," he said. "The owner had not survived the crash, and Blue recognized his family instantly when he was returned."

Pilots N Paws is a nonprofit organization that connects animal rescue volunteers, shelters and foster groups with licensed pilots who donate their time and aircraft to transport animals in need. The program enables coordination of rescue flights, foster care, shelter arrangements and adoption efforts nationwide – saving thousands of animals each year.



*Laurie Besden and Judge Plummer*



## Senior Judge Kim Berkeley Clark Honored as 2025 Distinguished Daughter of Pennsylvania

The Honorable **Kim Berkeley Clark**, senior judge of the Court of Common Pleas of Allegheny County, has been named one of the 2025 Distinguished Daughters of Pennsylvania – a statewide honor recognizing women for extraordinary service and contributions to the Commonwealth.

After serving nearly 20 years on the bench, Judge Clark made history in 2018 when she became the first African American to serve as president judge of Allegheny County. Throughout her impressive judicial career, she has championed criminal justice reform, court modernization and advancements in technology.

Judge Clark's dedication to the Family Division, particularly Juvenile Court, has helped transform how courts support children and families – especially through the development of a trauma-informed courthouse model that has since been replicated across Pennsylvania and throughout the country.

Her accomplishments were celebrated in October during the Distinguished Daughters of Pennsylvania Annual Luncheon at the Governor's Residence, where Governor Josh Shapiro and First Lady Lori Shapiro recognized this year's eight honorees.

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



*Senior Judge Kim Berkeley Clark recognized as a Distinguished Daughter of Pennsylvania*

"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."

## Westmoreland Judge Recognized for Leadership in Veterans Support



Westmoreland County Common Pleas Judge **Tim Krieger** was recently honored with the Fred Funari Award for Outstanding Service to the Mental Health Community for his dedication to supporting veterans involved in the court system.

The award was presented by Mental Health America of Southwestern Pennsylvania in recognition of Judge Krieger's work establishing and overseeing the Westmoreland County Veterans Treatment Court, which launched in 2019.

Since its inception in 2019, the program has graduated 64 veterans, with 15 currently enrolled.

Judge Krieger's leadership and experience, as both a judge and a U.S. Navy veteran, have been credited with shaping the program into a model of how courts can support veterans in crisis.

*Judge Tim Krieger*



(l to r) Erin Ferry, Erin Verdone, Patrick Martin, Bill Wichert, Kimberly Oliver, Edwin Dugan and Creadell Webb

## Philadelphia Jury Commission Honored for Innovative Juror Support Program

Earlier this year, the First Judicial District (FJD) launched a first-of-its-kind partnership in Pennsylvania to provide post-trial support for jurors who may experience vicarious trauma after serving on cases, especially those involving graphic or disturbing evidence.

Established through collaboration with West Chester University (WCU), the program offers confidential access to licensed professionals for jurors who may need to process their experience after completing jury service. With this initiative, the FJD joins Alaska, Massachusetts and Texas as the only jurisdictions in the country to provide such support.

What sets the FJD apart is that, unlike other states that received funding to contract with private providers, the district was able to develop a zero-cost partnership with WCU.

**Here's how the program works: After a trial concludes, the presiding judge thanks jurors for their service, acknowledges the sensitive nature of the case and informs them of the opportunity for post-trial support. Jurors interested in speaking with a counselor can visit a website created specifically for them, fill out a brief online form and expect to hear from a WCU representative within 24 hours.**

In June, the FJD extended the program to neighboring counties, and plans are underway for more counties across the Commonwealth to have access to the program in the coming months.

The program has already received significant recognition. In September, the FJD Jury Commission and Jury Commissioner **Patrick Martin** were honored with the Mid-Atlantic Association for Court Management's John Neufeld Court Achievement Award. This award recognizes outstanding contributions to the field of court administration through the creation of innovative programs that improve service delivery and strengthen the judiciary across the Mid-Atlantic region.

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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

# ELDER JUSTICE IN ACTION



Chief Justice of Pennsylvania Debra Todd speaks at the Department of Aging's press conference.

## Legal Support for Grandparents Raising Grandchildren

Currently, approximately 83,000 grandparents and other kinship caregivers are raising nearly 260,000 children in Pennsylvania – and many of these families interact regularly with the state's court system.

At the end of September, Pennsylvania Department of Aging Secretary Jason Kavulich announced a major expansion of a free legal service for grandparents and older caregivers raising grandchildren across the Commonwealth.

The PA Grandparents Raising Grandchildren Legal Line, staffed by attorneys at SeniorLAW Center, is a first-of-its-kind phone service offering free legal information, advice and referrals to help older caregivers navigate custody and other kinship care issues.

The service assists with family court matters such as custody and dependency cases, by providing guidance for self-representation, helping prepare necessary documents, and connecting families with support groups and community resources.

At the press conference announcing the initiative, Chief Justice of Pennsylvania **Debra Todd** praised the

initiative, emphasizing the importance of access to justice for older Pennsylvanians.

"We applaud and support the expansion of this helpline into a service accessible to all grandparents raising grandchildren in Pennsylvania," said Chief Justice Todd. She explained that this effort is a part of a broader commitment to protecting older adults and ensuring they have the resources they need.

"Older Pennsylvanians are often among our most vulnerable citizens, and it is our responsibility to ensure they have access to justice and protections against abuse, neglect and financial exploitation. Through the work of the Office of Elder Justice in the Courts and our Advisory Council, we are taking meaningful steps to safeguard older adults and strengthen support systems statewide."

**Legal Line:**  
**1-877-PA SR LAW**

## Planning Ahead: Guardianship and Elder Care in Pennsylvania

Planning for the future is never easy, but with the right knowledge and guidance, families can work together to ensure a support network and legal documents are established for older adults in case they need assistance due to diminished capacity.

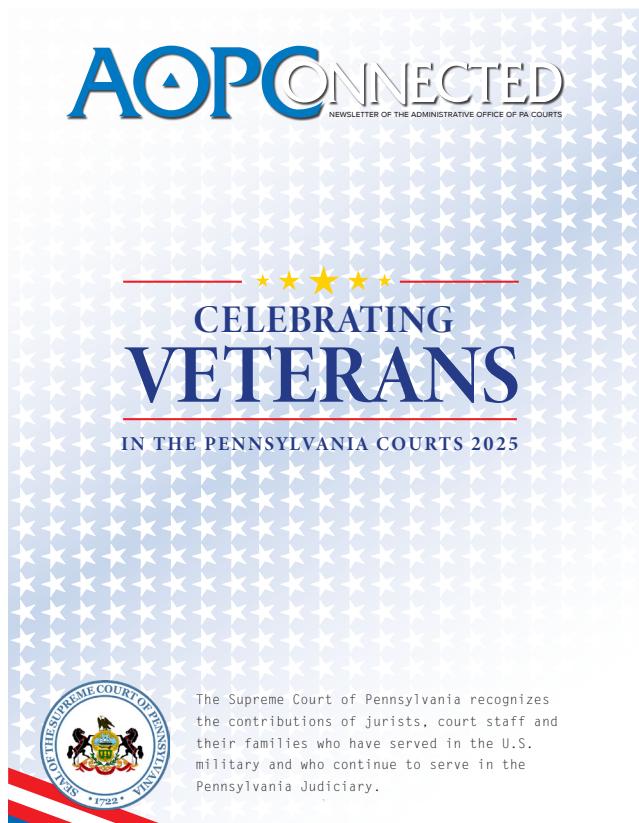
Recently, the Office of Elder Justice in the Courts (OEJC) partnered with Geisinger College of Health Sciences to present Needing Help Later in Life: Guardianship and Alternatives to Guardianship for older adults in the community.

OEJC Assistant Director **Keith Hinkel**, along with Lackawanna County Judge **Frank Ruggiero** and Pennsylvania Department of Aging Secretary Jason Kavulich, shared insights on guardianship in Pennsylvania, highlighting why planning ahead matters to ensure guardianship is only used as a last resort and how collaboration between medical and legal professionals benefits older adults and their families.

The presentation provided an overview of guardianship and various alternatives to guardianship, insights into the work of the Department of Aging, resources available to assist guardians and their loved ones and how families can protect their loved ones' rights while keeping them safe in the community.

The presentation is available to watch [here](#).

For more information about guardianship in Pennsylvania, [visit the OEJC webpage](#).



## Pennsylvania Courts Celebrating Veterans

The Pennsylvania Courts proudly recognized Veterans Day by honoring the many jurists, court staff and their families who have served in the U.S. Armed Forces. Across the Commonwealth, the courts paused to express gratitude for the dedication and sacrifice of these individuals – both in uniform and in service to justice.

To mark the occasion, the PA Courts published a special [Veterans Day newsletter](#) highlighting the stories and service of more than 50 veterans within the Pennsylvania judicial system.

Judges and court staff not featured in the newsletter who served in the military should contact [Communicationsoffice@pacourts.us](mailto:Communicationsoffice@pacourts.us) to be included in future issues.

# Fall Staff Events



# UJS Holiday Parties



# Around the Judiciary



On Sept. 25, Chief Justice **Debra Todd** joined Judge **Kenneth A. Mumma** (l) Judge **Michael F. Salisbury** (r) to celebrate Perry County's first graduate from the Regional Veterans Treatment Court.

The 2nd Annual Philly Civics Fair was held in September at Parkway Central Library where local nonprofits, educators and government agencies shared resources on civics, justice, law and the courts. Highlights included a keynote from Pa. Supreme Court Justice **Kevin Dougherty** and a panel featuring Justice **Daniel McCaffery**, Judge **A. Nicole Tate-Wilborn** (Montgomery), Judge **Stephanie M. Sawyer** (Philadelphia) and Philadelphia Municipal Court President Judge **T. Francis Shields**.



*Justice Kevin Dougherty*

*(l to r) back: Justice McCaffery, Justice Dougherty, Judge Shields; front: Judge Nicole Tate-Wilborn, Catherine Hicks (NAACP Philadelphia President), Elaine Tomlin (Free Library Philadelphia Trustee Board Member), Judge Stephanie Sawyer, Morgan Robinson (LWVPhilly President), Tony Cuffie (WHYY Senior Manager).*

*photo courtesy: Daniel Jackson*



On Nov. 5, 24 Widener Law Commonwealth alumni were sworn in by Justice **P. Kevin Brobson** ('95) in the Court's Supreme Courtroom.



Pa. Supreme Court Justice **Christine Donohue** ('80) administered the oath to nearly 100 Duquesne Kline School of Law 2025 graduates at the Bar Swearing-In Ceremony on Oct. 17.



A Pennsylvania team attended the CCJ/COSCA Mid-Atlantic Region Effective Criminal Case Management in a Post-Pandemic World: A Leadership Summit for Courts & Their Communities held in Annapolis, MD from October 23-25.

*(l to r) Montgomery Common Pleas Judge Garrett Page, Beaver County Clerk of Courts Judy Enslen, AOPC Senior IT Analyst Manager Denise Aylward, Deputy State Court Administrator David Price, Lackawanna County DCA Frank Castellano. Not pictured: Allegheny County Judge Bruce Beemer.*



Judge Michael McCarthy



Judge Dwayne Woodruff

The Thomas R. Kline School of Law of Duquesne University recently recognized two Allegheny County Common Pleas judges at its Law Alumni Reunion. Judge **Michael McCarthy** ('84) received the Distinguished Alumnus Award and Judge **Dwayne Woodruff** ('88) was honored with the Dr. John E. Murray, Jr. Meritorious Service Award.



The Fayette County Juvenile Probation Team defended their title at the 2025 Faith and Blue Kickball Event in Uniontown – an annual event that brings together law enforcement, local youth and community groups to build trust, teamwork and mutual respect.



On Nov. 20, Cumberland County President Judge **Albert Masland** and Judge **Jessica Brewbaker** oversaw the graduation ceremony of six participants from the county's Treatment Courts.



This year, the Luzerne County Courts celebrated Constitution Day by honoring winners of their Student Essay and Poster Contest, held in partnership with the Luzerne Intermediate Unit. With over 150 submissions, Judge **Jennifer Rogers** and her colleagues hope to make this an annual tradition.



photo credit: Bedford Gazette

On Nov. 10, President Judge **Travis Livengood** presided over a milestone ceremony celebrating the first graduate of Bedford County's Treatment Court program.



photo credit: Alex Rose – Daily Times

Judge **W. Keith Williams II** swore in his son, also named Keith, in his Delaware County courtroom on Oct. 31 after the younger Williams passed the bar exam with flying colors.



photo credit: Philadelphia Municipal Court Judge **Jacquelyn Frazier-Lyde**

(l to r) Judicial Ethics Advisory Board Executive Director **Brian Jacisin**, Esq., Judicial Conduct Board Chief Counsel **Melissa Norton**, Esq., and Board Community Member Dr. **Alyn Waller**

On Nov. 6, representatives from the Judicial Ethics Advisory Board and the Judicial Conduct Board presented at the Municipal Court of Philadelphia Education Conference for the first time. The session, "The Judicial Conduct Complaint: From Beginning to End", provided judges with insight into the complaint process with the goal of reinforcing accountability and public trust in the judiciary.



On Nov. 17, Washington County Magisterial District Judge **Louis McQuillan** visited sixth-grade classes to share lessons on the courts, the branches of government and good citizenship.

## In Memoriam



The Pennsylvania judiciary mourns the passing of **Judge William H. Platt**, a distinguished public servant whose career spanned nearly five decades and left a lasting impact on the Lehigh County legal community and the Commonwealth.

Judge Platt, who died on Oct. 21 at age 85, was remembered by colleagues, friends, and family as a humble, soft-spoken leader with an

exceptional command of the law and a deep commitment to justice.

Prior to becoming a judge, he served as Lehigh County's chief public defender and then as district attorney – a role he held for 15 years. In 1995, Judge Platt was elected to the Lehigh County Court of Common Pleas, where he served with distinction, including two terms as president judge. After reaching the mandatory retirement age in 2010, he continued his service as a senior judge on the Pennsylvania Superior Court.

Judge Platt leaves behind a legacy of dedicated service. His influence, colleagues said, could be seen not only in the decisions he rendered, but in the people he lifted up along the way.