

A courtroom scene with several people standing. In the background, a judge's bench is visible, featuring a circular emblem with a scale of justice. The room has wood-paneled walls and a wooden railing in the foreground. A large white box with a black border is centered over the image, containing the title text.

Understanding the Pennsylvania Courts

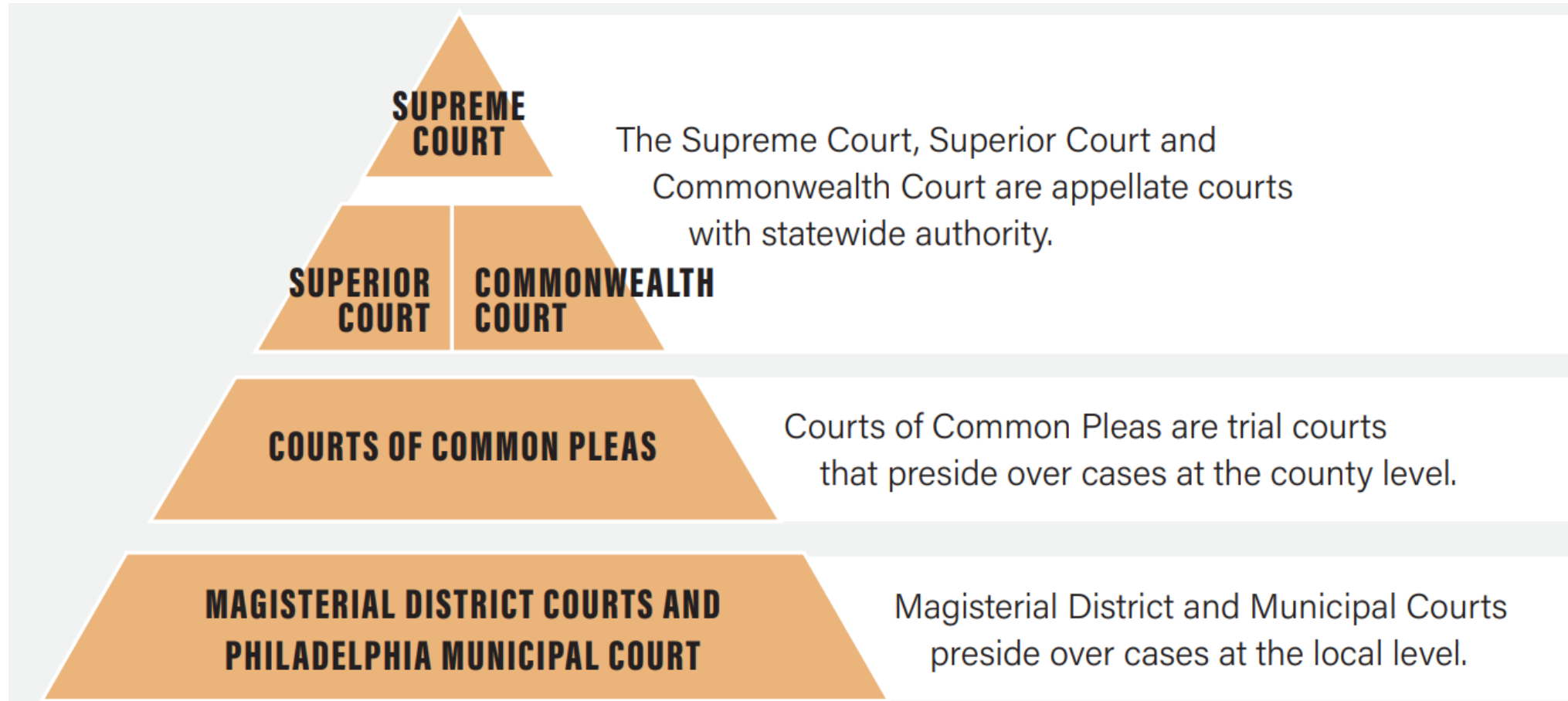


Introduction

Role of Pennsylvania Courts

THE ROLE OF
PENNSYLVANIA COURTS
IN A DEMOCRACY

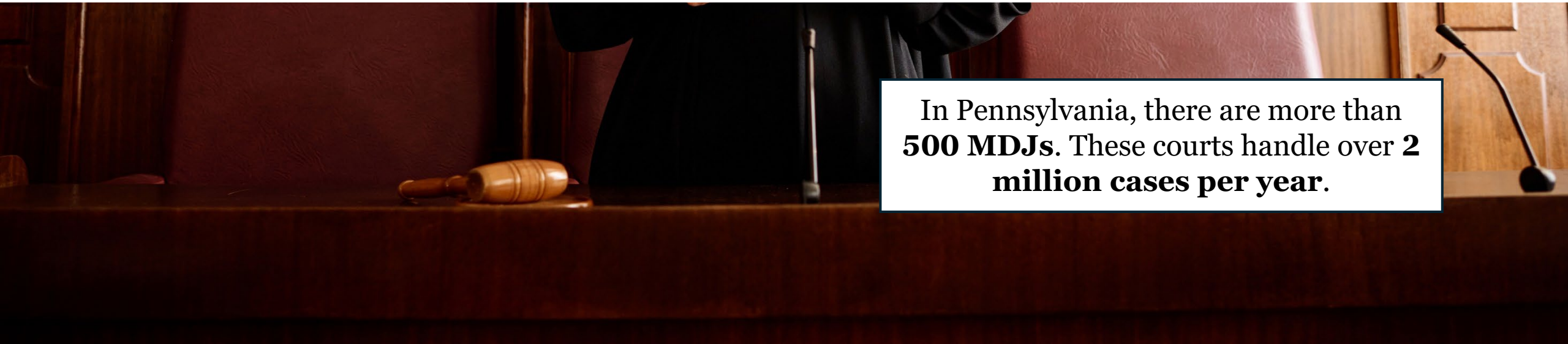
Structure of Pennsylvania Courts



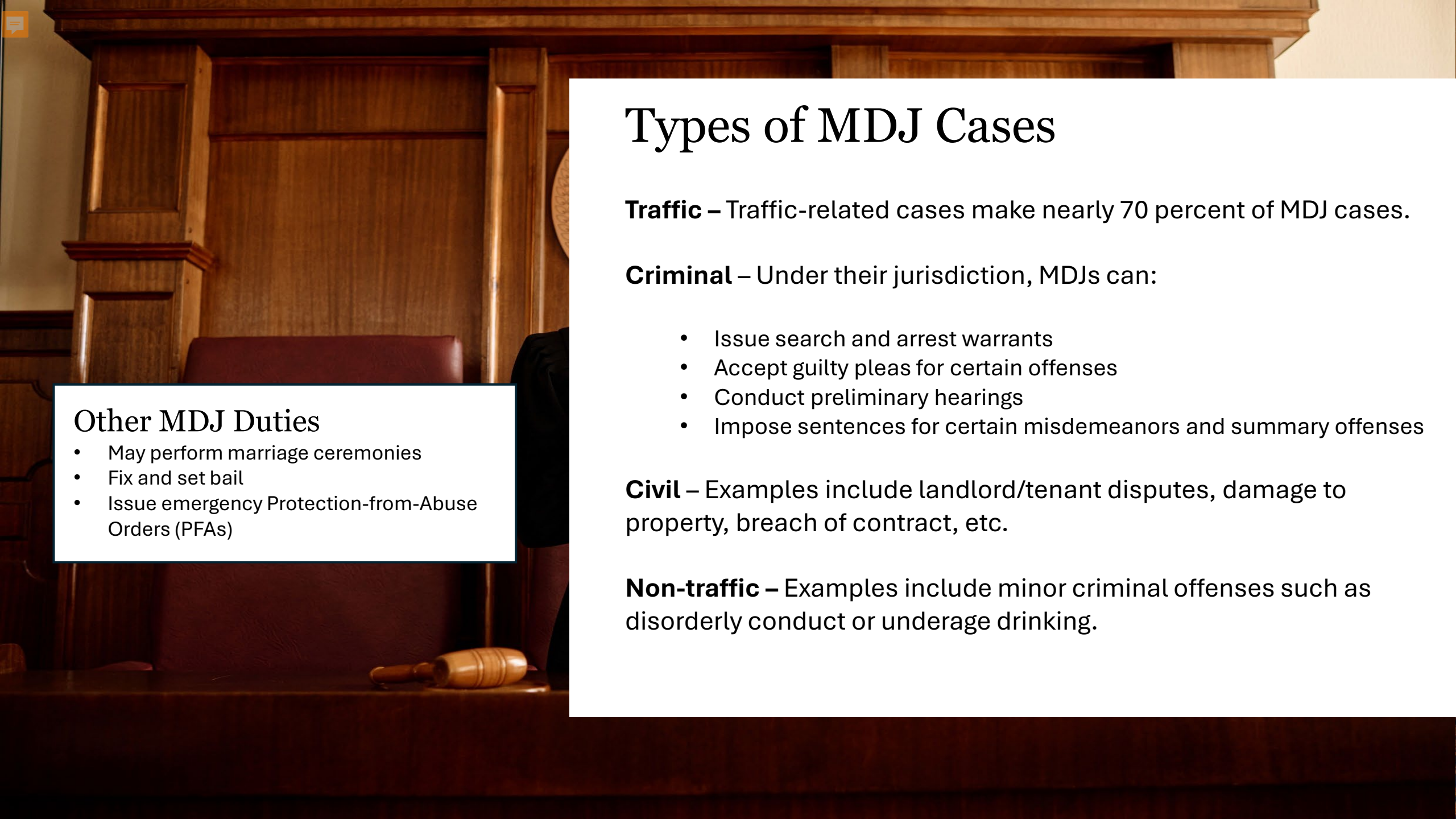


Magisterial District Courts

- **The magisterial district courts are where most people have their first experience with the judicial system.** Magisterial District Judges (MDJs) handle civil cases with claim amounts up to \$12,000, summary matters and have initial jurisdiction over all criminal cases.



In Pennsylvania, there are more than **500 MDJs**. These courts handle over **2 million cases per year**.



Types of MDJ Cases

Traffic – Traffic-related cases make nearly 70 percent of MDJ cases.

Criminal – Under their jurisdiction, MDJs can:

- Issue search and arrest warrants
- Accept guilty pleas for certain offenses
- Conduct preliminary hearings
- Impose sentences for certain misdemeanors and summary offenses

Civil – Examples include landlord/tenant disputes, damage to property, breach of contract, etc.

Non-traffic – Examples include minor criminal offenses such as disorderly conduct or underage drinking.

Other MDJ Duties

- May perform marriage ceremonies
- Fix and set bail
- Issue emergency Protection-from-Abuse Orders (PFAs)



How do the Magisterial District Courts Operate?

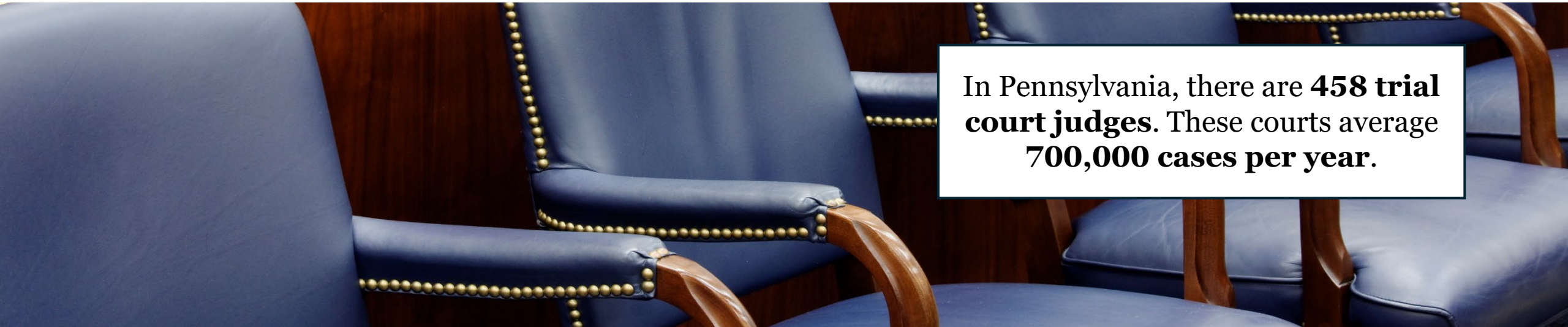
Criminal Case Process





Courts of Common Pleas

- The Courts of Common Pleas hear major civil and criminal cases as well as cases involving children and their families. They also hear appeals from the lower-level courts. These courts are often referred to as **trial courts**.



In Pennsylvania, there are **458 trial court judges**. These courts average **700,000 cases per year**.

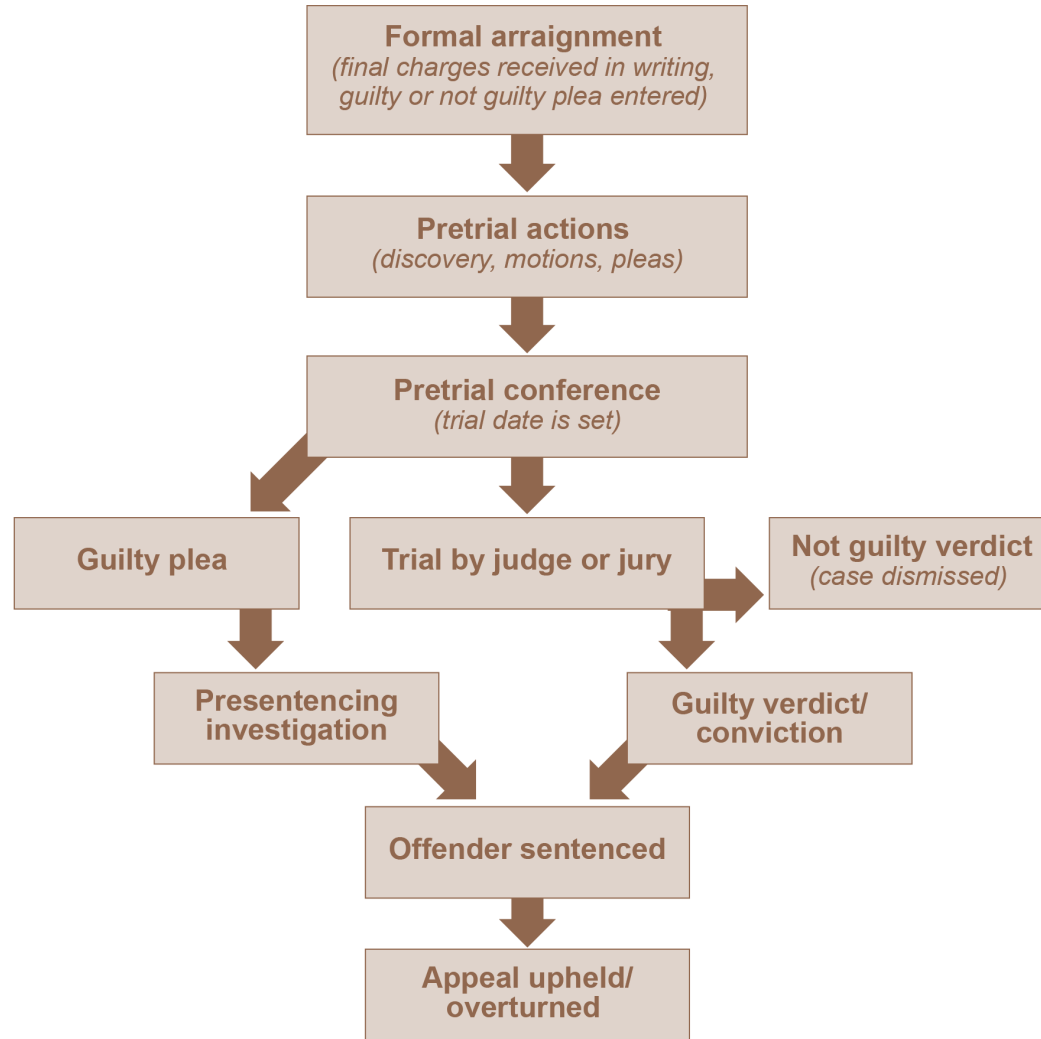


Types of Common Pleas Cases

- **Criminal** – Presides over criminal matters ranging from misdemeanors to violent felony cases with variety of dispositions from non-convictions, guilty pleas to jury trials.
- **Civil** – Oversees legal disputes between individuals, businesses, or organizations concerning matters over \$12,000.
- **Family Law** – Deals with legal matters related to family relationships, such as divorce and separation, child custody and visitation rights, and child/spousal support.
- **Orphans' Court** – Focuses on cases involving wills and estates, guardianships, and adoptions

How do the Common Pleas Courts Operate?

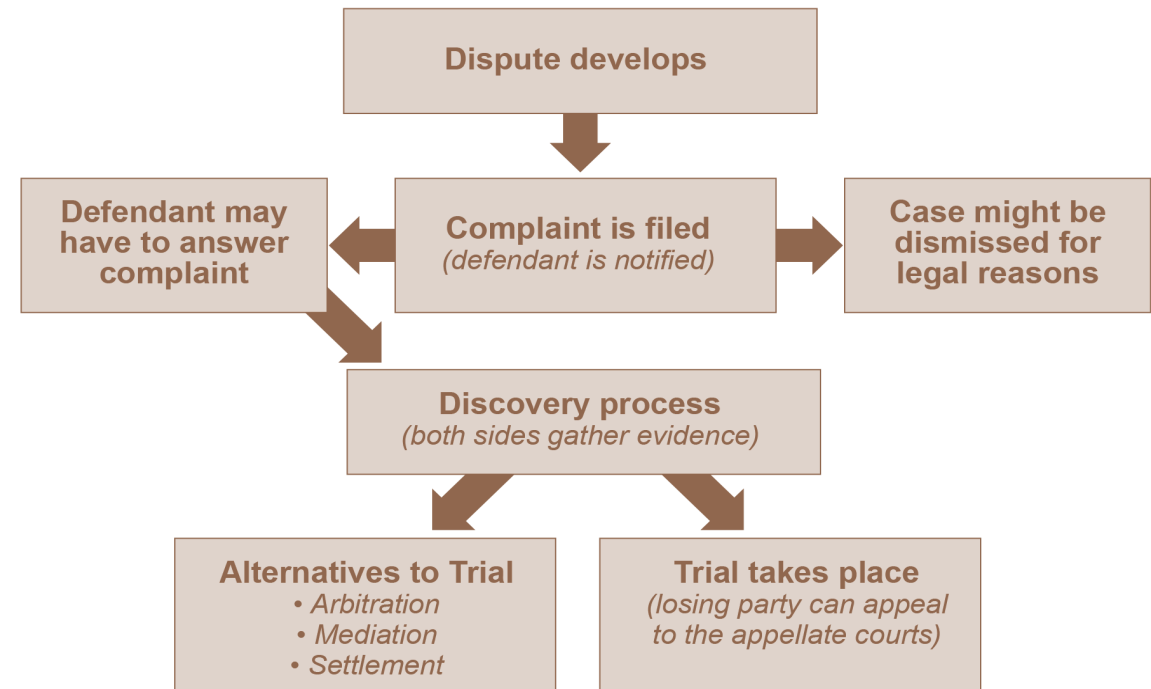
Criminal Case Process





How do the Common Pleas Courts Operate?

Civil Case Process





The Role of a Jury

- Juries are primarily used in **Courts of Common Pleas**.
- Even when a jury is permitted, both sides can agree to have the case tried before a judge instead.

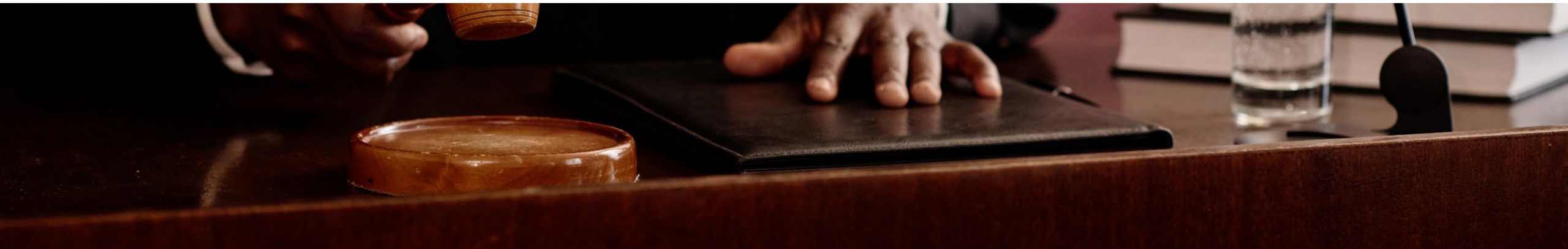
Criminal	Civil
12 jury members	8 jury members
A jury decides whether a defendant is guilty or not .	A jury decides whether the defendant is liable or not .
There must be proof beyond a reasonable doubt – placing the burden on the prosecutor to convince the jury of a defendant’s guilt.	The standard of proof is usually based on a preponderance of evidence – meaning the jury weighs the evidence of each side and the party with the weightiest evidence wins the case.



Appellate Courts

Appellate courts review cases from lower courts to check for legal mistakes, focusing on how the law was applied – not whether someone is guilty or innocent.

- **Superior Court:** Handles most appeals from criminal and civil cases
- **Commonwealth Court:** Specializes in cases involving government agencies or public law
- **Supreme Court :** Final say on constitutional issues and legal interpretations



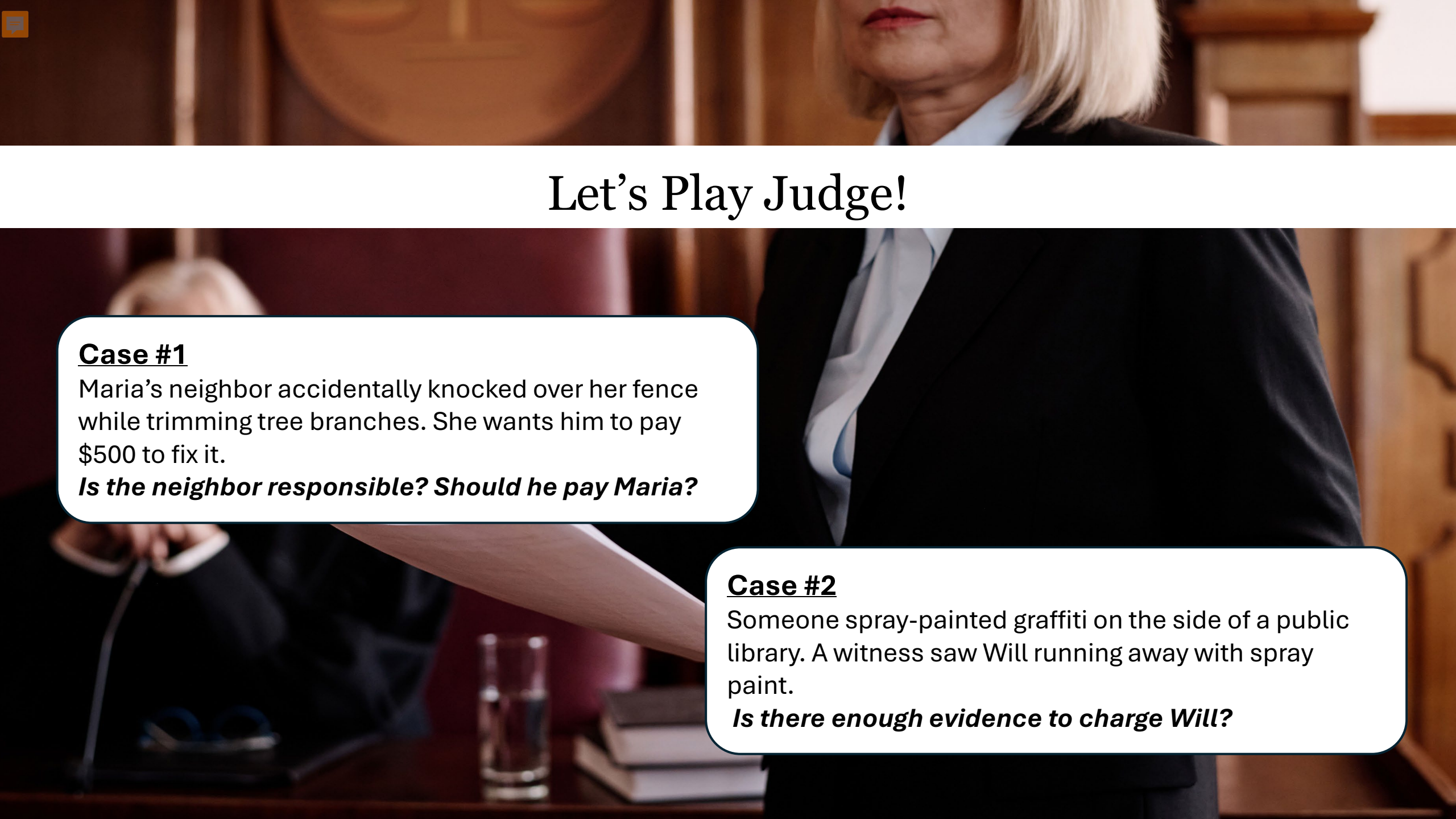
How to Become a Judge



HOW ARE JUDGES SELECTED IN
PENNSYLVANIA?

Day in the Life of a Judge





Let's Play Judge!

Case #1

Maria's neighbor accidentally knocked over her fence while trimming tree branches. She wants him to pay \$500 to fix it.

Is the neighbor responsible? Should he pay Maria?

Case #2

Someone spray-painted graffiti on the side of a public library. A witness saw Will running away with spray paint.

Is there enough evidence to charge Will?

A photograph of a wooden judge's bench. A red leather chair is positioned in front of the bench. A wooden gavel rests on the bench's surface. The background is a wooden wall with paneling.

Careers in the Court System

Court operations require many important roles beyond judges. Some other jobs within the court system include:

- Attorneys
- Law Clerks
- Court Reporters
- Hearing Officers
- Court Clerks and Administrators
- Court Interpreters
- Probation Officers
- Sheriff's Deputies



Thank you for listening!

