



## ADMINISTRATIVE OFFICE of PENNSYLVANIA COURTS

### News for Immediate Release

Feb. 23, 2021

#### **Pennsylvania Supreme Court, Department of Human Services Discuss Criminal Justice Reform for Pennsylvanians with Autism**

**HARRISBURG** — Recognizing the importance of criminal justice reform for those with an autism spectrum disorder (ASD), the Pennsylvania Supreme Court, along with the Pennsylvania Department of Human Services (DHS), will hold a virtual forum to address access to justice issues in the Lehigh Valley.

The discussion is the second in a five-part regional series aimed at learning about court experiences from individuals with an ASD. A statewide virtual kick-off event was held in Nov., setting the stage for the regional listening tour.

Spearheaded by Supreme Court Justice Kevin Dougherty on behalf of the Court, the virtual event will be held Feb. 23 from 11 a.m. to 1 p.m. The event will be available for the public to view and submit comments and questions via court social media pages (Twitter @[PACourts](#) or Facebook @[pennsylvaniacourts](#)).

“If we’re truly concerned about reforming our system, we need to broaden our vision and open ourselves up to someone else’s reality. Incarceration is not the answer – services, support and rehabilitation are,” Dougherty said. “If these forums allow us to align one person with the appropriate resource that will advance their ability to succeed in the community – then we all win.

“The goal here is simple -- keep listening to those living in silence for too long, learn from their experiences and give power to their voices to educate those around us. That’s the way you work together to bring about real and lasting change for people in need.”

Participating in the virtual forum are:

- Ardhika Aziz, Self-advocate living with autism
- Kerri Miller, Parent
- Marina Ermold, Parent
- Jim Martin, Lehigh County District Attorney
- Steve Luksa, Assistant District Attorney

- President Judge Brian Johnson, Lehigh County Court of Common Pleas
- David Vaida, Attorney
- Maraleen Shields, Attorney
- Brandon Sands, Berks County Diversion Program
- Drew Taylor, Human Services/IDA System
- Capt. Christopher King, Pennsylvania State Police
- Capt. Joanne Reed, Pennsylvania State Police
- Lt. Adam Reed, Pennsylvania State Police

Through the discussion, the Court and DHS will hear first-hand about challenges faced in Philadelphia and the surrounding counties from providers and individuals with autism alike as they seek access to justice.

With nearly one in 59 children diagnosed with an ASD\*, judges hearing cases in criminal, juvenile, orphans', family court, etc. are sure to have individuals living with autism come before them.

As part of this effort, during the COVID-19 pandemic, the courts have added information and resources for families supporting an individual with autism on the Pennsylvania Courts frequently asked questions [page](#).

Those interested in viewing the virtual forum, including media and the public may register [here](#).

For more information about this joint effort and services and support for individuals with autism visit ASERT (Autism Services Education Resources and Training) at <https://paautism.org/resource/justice/>.

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*\*Statistic from the Center for Disease Control and Prevention's Autism and Developmental Disabilities Monitoring (ADDM) Network, 2018*