



ADMINISTRATIVE OFFICE of PENNSYLVANIA COURTS

NEWS FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

April 11, 2023

Pennsylvania Supreme Court Highlights Autism Acceptance Month *Announces Autism and the Courts Community Education Tour*

HARRISBURG – Focused on reducing trauma and supporting children and families in the court system with an autism spectrum disorder (ASD), Pennsylvania Supreme Court Justice Kevin Dougherty, on behalf of the Court is once again promoting autism acceptance throughout the court system and encouraging judges and staff to join them in the effort.

“According to the latest numbers from the U.S. Centers for Disease Control, now one in 36 Pennsylvania children and more than five million adults nationwide are diagnosed with autism,” said Dougherty. “As the number continues to grow, so does our commitment to ensuring Pennsylvania’s courts are prepared to recognize, accept and meet the needs of all court users and their families.

“Pennsylvania is the first and only state in the nation focused on creating meaningful change for those with an ASD coming through the court system. We have the opportunity to be the starting point for new conversations and increased levels of understanding – that’s not something to be taken lightly. We must do everything we can to be the positive change that children and families need.”

To highlight the Court’s support for autism awareness and acceptance, Justice Dougherty has announced plans for an upcoming community education tour, during which he will visit county courts working to implement an autism-based focus in their courtrooms through innovative concepts including the use of environmental studies and sensory items.

In each of those counties, the Justice will also visit a community autism provider to educate them about the work of the courts while working to establish additional partnerships to benefit families and children within the court system.

“Three years ago, we started working on the idea that the courts could play a critical role in identifying and supporting the needs of neurodiverse families within the court system,” Dougherty said. “From that idea, we now have judges, staff and advocates working together to implement lasting change in the system.”

Throughout the month, the courts will be sharing information about autism and resources, services and support available statewide through its social media channels (Twitter [@PaCourts](#), Facebook [@Pennsylvaniacourts](#)) and [website](#).

In 2020, the Supreme Court signaled its commitment to Pennsylvanians with autism by forming a first-of-its-kind partnership with the Department of Human Services (DHS) to heighten the focus on helping judges better understand the necessary evaluations required for diagnosis, treatment and services for individuals with an ASD. More than 200 judges attended the first in-person training session held that year, indicating the interest and the need for the courts to focus on ASD.

Committed to moving the initiative forward, Dougherty and DHS developed a statewide virtual listening tour to hear first-hand about challenges faced in the system from medical professionals, service providers and individuals with autism alike as they sought access to justice. More than 1,200 individuals attended the virtual tour and heard from more than 60 justice system professional, self-advocates, parents and service providers statewide.

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

Since that time, Justice Dougherty has partnered with the Pennsylvania Courts' Office of Children and Families in the Courts to create a taskforce known as the Autism in the Courts Taskforce. The taskforce is focused on providing increased training opportunities for judges, helping further identify gaps in the system for individuals with autism and intellectual disabilities and creating a local roadmap to resources and services.

For more information about the Autism and the Courts effort visit <https://www.pacourts.us/learn/autism-and-the-courts>.

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