



Administrative Office of Pennsylvania Courts

PRESS RELEASE

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Supreme Court Realigns Fifth Judicial District

- ✍ **Pgh. Magistrates Court study puts future appointments on hold;**
- ✍ **County District Justice seats consolidate from 55 to 48**

HARRISBURG, December 30, 2002 — Chief Justice of Pennsylvania Stephen A. Zappala today announced that the state Supreme Court is realigning the Fifth Judicial District (Allegheny County) as part of the decennial realignment process for district justices mandated by Pennsylvania's Constitution.

An order issued today by the Court outlines the new boundaries from which district justices will be elected and in which they will serve. A key provision of the realignment order is an approximate two-year study of Pittsburgh Magistrates Court to gauge the feasibility of transitioning it into the commonwealth's district justice system.

"The Supreme Court's constitutional obligation in the district justice realignment process is to ensure that access to justice is equitable throughout the commonwealth and efficiently and effectively delivered," Chief Justice Zappala said. "Today's order by this Court offers a means to reasonably examine what has appeared to be an unwise duplication of judicial function within the City of Pittsburgh."

Under provisions of the order Pittsburgh Magistrates Court continues to exist, but all judicial appointments or reappointments to vacancies on Magistrates Court on or after December 31, 2002 are suspended at least through the period of the two-year study. Sitting magistrates will continue to serve to the expiration of their current commissions. Existing revenue flows of fines, fees, and costs from Magistrates Court remain unchanged. Other provisions of the order stipulate that elected district justices will be assigned by the president judge of the Fifth Judicial District to fulfill judicial duties created by the vacancies during the evaluation period. The president judge retains the ability to petition the Supreme Court at any time during the evaluation period to seek changes to the Court's order.

Prior to this order there have been 55 district justice seats in Allegheny County, including 17 within and encompassing the entire City of Pittsburgh, who are elected by voters to six-year terms. There are seven city magistrates, who are appointed by the mayor to four-year terms, who hear cases in City Court, Traffic Court and Housing Court.

“Simply put,” said Chief Justice Zappala, “with district justices elected to serve within the city’s boundaries but whose caseloads were unusually light in many instances, and with seven city magistrates hearing cases that in other parts of the state would be heard by district justices, the need for both district justices and magistrates co-existing within the city suggests an inefficient distribution of judicial resource. Today’s order provides the first ever means to systematically determine the effectiveness of this co-existence.”

The order is based on a third realignment plan submitted earlier this month to the Court that represents elements from two plans previously presented in June. The two earlier versions either outlined a plan for the retention or elimination of Pittsburgh Magistrates Court. The third plan was recommended to provide more information about such options.

Throughout the year, Administrative Office of Pennsylvania Courts’ staff and city officials collaboratively have worked to update automated systems in Pittsburgh Magistrates Court through installation of the long-successful, statewide, automated District Justice System (DJS.) Installation of the DJS is anticipated in early 2003, with the ultimate expectation that it will boost the efficiency of court case management and caseload data collection in the City of Pittsburgh. Implementation of the DJS in Magistrates Court will for the first time also make case dispositions from that court more easily accessible on a statewide basis.

The order also addresses the realignment of district justice boundaries in the county outside the City of Pittsburgh. The 55 district justice seats existing prior to today’s order will eventually consolidate to 48 as the order provides. Allegheny County is among 59 judicial districts statewide that are undergoing a realignment of district justice courts based on a number of factors, including population changes and caseloads.

(A copy of the order is attached)

