



ADMINISTRATIVE OFFICE of PENNSYLVANIA COURTS

NEWS RELEASE

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***State of the Commonwealth's Courts 2011:*
Six Years of Underfunding Threaten
Pennsylvania's Judiciary**

HARRISBURG, PA, April 26, 2011— The Pennsylvania Supreme Court has issued its annual [State of the Commonwealth's Courts](#) report which highlights the judiciary's challenges and successes, this year focusing on the strain of six straight years of inadequate funding.

“The judiciary projects a \$47 million deficit in fiscal year (FY) 2011-12 after a current year deficit of \$12 million,” Supreme Court Chief Justice Castille said. “Without immediate increases in state court funding, our ability to cover those deficits depends on borrowing funds from a dedicated computer projects account that would end 2012 in near bankruptcy.

“Pennsylvania's judiciary did not create these serial, structural deficits and Pennsylvania's judiciary cannot save its way out of them. If we cannot pay judges and fund court operations – including our successful computerization efforts – those who depend on the judiciary for resolution of issues in civil, family and problem-solving courts may soon face this crisis as well.”

The judiciary receives about one-half of one percent of the total state budget, about the same as the legislature. More than 83 percent of the budget request for 2011-12 would cover personnel costs, another 13 percent flows directly to the counties for court-related costs and less than 4 percent goes to operating costs.

The current budget proposal for the judiciary in 2011-2012 does not include funding for 70 current Common Pleas judges, 2,347 Common Pleas senior judge days, 87 magisterial district judges and 42 district court administrators. It also does not include funds to fully cover grants to counties to help them pay for their court operations.

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Cost-cutting measures by the judiciary have saved approximately \$17 million over the past three years. Savings resulted from not filling vacant judge positions; suspending staff merit and cost of living salary increases for periods of time; implementing a targeted hiring freeze and out-of-state travel ban; and, historically, beginning a process to “right size” the number of magisterial district and Common Pleas judges across the state.

Despite these savings, the judiciary’s gross deficit in the past six years has been \$94 million. Shortfalls have been covered in part by loans from a dedicated Judicial Computer System fund that is used to build, expand and maintain an information technology system supporting the judiciary and numerous other state and local agencies. Future transfers from that fund to cover general government operating shortfalls will quickly jeopardize the computer system’s long-term operations.

Traditionally, the Supreme Court has used the occasion of Law Day, which is commemorated annually on May 1, to issue the *State of the Commonwealth’s Courts* to give people a better understanding of the judicial branch.

“Naturally, I would prefer that this report focused only on achievements of the judiciary, but that is impossible when we face increasingly overwhelming deficits,” Castille said. “Nevertheless, despite the challenges caused by under-funding, the judiciary has thus far been able to continue programs that serve justice, save money and make a difference in peoples’ lives.”

Among such programs:

- Pennsylvania’s problem-solving courts -- drug, mental illness, DUI and veterans’ courts, among others -- have increased by 40 percent over the past two years. For every dollar invested in these courts, \$4.74 can be saved in costs to the criminal justice system and the community.
- The Judiciary’s Office of Children and Families in the Courts helps at-risk children find safe and permanent homes. As a result of its work, there are 5,500 fewer children in foster care home, saving millions of taxpayer dollars and, most importantly, improving kids’ lives.
- In 2010, 32 million judicial case records were accessed through the court’s website without charge, saving citizens, the media, the government and those with commercial interests and staff countless hours in travel and copying time.
- In addition, automation and a convenient new online payment application improved the collection and processing of defendants’ penalties, helping to make possible the record \$480 million that the judiciary secured in 2010.

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