



Administrative Office of Pennsylvania Courts

PRESS RELEASE

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Intergovernmental Task Force Recommends Changes to Boost District Justice System Efficiency

HARRISBURG, November 2, 2001 — A special task force designed to study Pennsylvania's minor courts is recommending administrative and operational changes to make justice at the local level even more effective.

The recommendations made by the Intergovernmental Task Force to Study the District Justice System are outlined in a report that was presented yesterday to the Supreme Court of Pennsylvania for further consideration. The complete report is available online through the Judiciary's web site at:

www.courts.state.pa.us

Created in May by the Supreme Court of Pennsylvania, the 22-member task force was made up of representatives from the judicial, legislative and executive branches of government. Members of the task force were asked to advise the Supreme Court on how to enhance the effectiveness of the district justice system.

Supreme Court Justices Stephen A. Zappala and Ronald D. Castille co-chaired the task force.

The Supreme Court is required to reestablish or realign magisterial districts each decade once the federal government completes a new census. The task force was developed to propose guidelines for realigning the districts while also taking a broader look at whether the overall district justice system could operate even more effectively.

"Our responsibility to reestablish magisterial districts gives us an opportunity to prepare more rigorously for the future so that we can continue to meet the needs of the Commonwealth for years to come," Justice Zappala said. "This task force report — with valuable input from all branches of government — will provide the basis for the advancement of sound judicial administration for all Pennsylvanians."

The report provides a blueprint for determining how the state's magisterial districts should be shaped and how justice at the local level might be enhanced. Though the court can implement new administrative policies and procedures, other recommendations in the report would require action from the other two branches of government.

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“This report creates a fair-handed approach to the immediate task of redistricting the jurisdictional boundaries of Pennsylvania’s district justices and highlights the important issues applicable to the first level of court in the justice system,” Justice Castille said. “Because of the dedicated effort, competence and professionalism of the task force members appointed by the Supreme Court who came from myriad backgrounds, this remarkable document provides the blueprint for a fair and efficient district justice system in Pennsylvania.”

To better address the task at hand, members split into three subcommittees: Magisterial District Reestablishment; Special Courts Administration and Quality of Justice. Each subcommittee made both short- and long-term recommendations for changes in the Pennsylvania Constitution, Pennsylvania Rules of Court and proposed legislation.

Some of the recommendations made by the task force include:

- Establish retention elections for district justices
- Require non-attorney district justice candidates and nominees to qualify for office before filing nominating petitions or being eligible for a gubernatorial nomination
- Create statewide standards for district court staffing levels, facilities and office equipment
- Undertake a systematic review of the challenges facing courtroom security, inactive cases and the collection of fines and fees at the district justice level
- Develop alternatives to night and weekend coverage of the district courts
- Implement uniform magisterial district reestablishment procedures
- Clarify a president judge’s authority, powers and responsibilities concerning management of the local district justice courts

Broad-based participation in the task force is another example of how collective governmental decision-making is being used to enhance the administration of justice in Pennsylvania. Intergovernmental cooperation helped pave the way for the new integrated Justice Network or JNET, which allows authorized users access to police, court, corrections, probation, parole and Department of Transportation information.

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