



ADMINISTRATIVE OFFICE of PENNSYLVANIA COURTS

# NEWS RELEASE

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**BROADCAST EDITORS NOTE:** For audio actualities from Chief Justice Castille click [here](#).

## **Computer Systems Assist Court Staff in Collecting, Processing Payments** **PA Courts Collect Record \$480 Million in Penalties, Restitution**

**HARRISBURG, March 24, 2011**—Pennsylvania’s criminal courts last year processed a record \$480 million in fees, fines, costs and restitution collected from defendants, according to first-ever comprehensive court disbursement reports released today by the Supreme Court of Pennsylvania.

Many county court officials responsible for collecting the penalties are crediting the state’s judicial automation systems and the use of advanced technology for helping them step up their efforts, particularly at the state’s Common Pleas court level.

“Courts are not collection agencies—justice is always our fundamental mission, but striving to enforce court-ordered sanctions, including efficient collection of fines, fees, costs and restitution—is one way of sustaining the public’s trust and confidence in the effectiveness of the entire justice system,” Chief Justice Ronald D. Castille said.

“Defendants have an obligation to pay these costs,” Chief Justice Castille added. “By providing an easy way to settle these court ordered costs, criminal defendants can avoid facing arrests, contempt of court proceedings or drivers license suspensions. Through the court’s new ‘e-Pay’ application defendants can make payments via the Internet with a debt or credit card and, perhaps, void these procedures.”

The total disbursed in 2010 by Pennsylvania’s more than 540 magisterial district and 67 Common Pleas criminal courts was a four-point-three percent increase over 2009, despite the recent economic downturn and fewer case filings over the last couple years. ([see case filings charts](#))

More than \$203 million, or 44 percent, of the court collections, was distributed to the Commonwealth’s coffer; \$103 million, or 21 percent, to counties; \$61 million, or 12 percent to municipalities; and \$37 million, or approximately eight percent, was paid to crime victims for restitution. An additional \$70 million was collected in “county fees,” of which approximately 80 percent goes to the counties and 15 percent to the state. A small portion of the court fees and county fees were disbursed to various entities such as schools, libraries and tax agencies.

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“Although the numbers may pale in comparison to many government budget deficits,” Chief Justice Castille said, “any increase of court collections is a plus for revenue-strapped municipalities, counties and for the Commonwealth.

The court disbursement totals include payments processed for traffic, summary, civil and landlord/tenant cases at the magisterial district courts, and criminal offenses at the common pleas courts. They *exclude* payments processed by Pennsylvania’s civil common pleas courts which the judiciary hopes to automate on a statewide basis within the next several years, and the Philadelphia Traffic Court whose data is not integrated with the statewide case management system ([See disbursement tables](#)). The majority of the funds disbursed by the courts to the Commonwealth are deposited into specific funds such as the state’s motor vehicle fund, while most of the funds disbursed to local governments go to general funds.

Of the \$480 million disbursed in 2010, \$275 million came from magisterial district courts and \$205 million from Common Pleas courts. Common Pleas courts drove overall collections’ increases last year, easily surpassing the 2009 total of \$185 million. ([See county-by-county court collection tables](#))

The statewide Common Pleas Case Management System (CPCMS), installed in all counties by 2007, provides several features to improve collections, and over the years court officials have become more adept at using them.

“CPCMS provides court officials access to statewide bail and warrant information, and can link one defendant to all of his/her cases within the system. This allows court officials to identify unpaid balances across jurisdictions and to actively collect balances on old and new cases through individual or case consolidated payment plans,” said Justice J. Michael Eakin, the Supreme Court’s liaison for judicial automation.

“Both our magisterial district and Common Pleas case management systems have the ability to generate customized court payment delinquency letters, and our Judicial Automation staff works with county court staff to exchange case financial data with outside collection agencies hired by the counties,” Justice Eakin added. “And, just last year we developed “e-Pay”—a Web-based application that allows defendants to pay court financial obligations via the Internet with credit and debit cards. E-Pay makes the court payments more convenient for the defendant and less time consuming for court staff to process.”

**“Although automated tools within CPCMS and a nearly-implemented, updated statewide Magisterial District Judge System seem to be making a difference in improving collections,” Chief Justice Castille said, “much of the credit must go to local court staff who are aggressively working to improve the collection and processing of court payments.”**

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*Editors’ Note: Comments from county court officers and background attached.*

## COMMENTS FROM COUNTY COURT OFFICERS

**Erie County** Court Collections Supervisor Dante Battles said, "Our old court system had no way of linking multiple cases together for the same defendant. In CPCMS, one defendant has all of his/her cases linked, meaning no cases with balances slip through the cracks and we can easily combine a defendant's old and new cases on the same payment plan. Over the last couple years, CPCMS has definitely improved our collections activities and has given us the ability to work together with other counties to collect outstanding court balances."

"We attribute an increase in court collections to better delinquency tracking through the use of payment plans in CPCMS, increased utilization of our collection agency by the ability to send monthly electronic feeds, and increased emphasis by staff and court related departments to collections," said **Buck County** Clerk of Courts Mary K. Smithson.

Erie County's Common Pleas court disbursed \$3.7 million in 2008, nearly \$3.8 million in 2009 and more than \$4 million in 2010. Bucks County's Common Pleas court disbursed \$8.3 million in 2008, \$8.5 million in 2009 and \$9.4 million in 2010.

"Without CPCMS our collections enforcement effort would be non-existent," said Donald O'Shell, **York County** Clerk of Courts. "CPCMS provides the ability to monitor a defendant's payment plan compliance, automatically generate overdue notices and electronically refer delinquent payment plans to third party collection agencies at the push of a button. CPCMS also automatically transmits notices for driver license suspensions for failure to pay traffic fines.

"Last year we generated overdue notices for nearly 28,000 cases, suspended nearly 1,200 driver licenses for delinquent payments, restored 353 driver licenses for payment compliance receiving \$193,000, and electronically referred nearly 8,000 delinquent cases to our collections vendor representing more than \$8.6 million owed in costs, fines and restitution," O'Shell added. "In 2004, prior to CPCMS, we collected \$4.3 million in costs, fines and restitution, and in 2010 we collected and disbursed more than \$9.2 million. CPCMS has and continues to be the critical factor in our success."

### **BACKGROUND**

*The Common Pleas Criminal Court Case Management System has nearly 8,850 users, and when completed in late 2006, the National Center for State Courts awarded Pennsylvania the distinction of being the largest state in the country to have automated all of its criminal courts on a statewide basis. CPCMS improves judicial administration by providing common, statewide case docketing, financial accounting and reporting functions that help move criminal cases expeditiously and consistently.*

*The AOPC has recently upgraded the outdated 18 year-old Magisterial District Judge Court System (MDJS) to improve efficiency. The new system, to be implemented in all magisterial district courts by the end of 2011, not only allows defendants to pay court financial obligations online, it allows court staff access to statewide bail and warrant information, features expected to enhance law-enforcement safety, and save costs and further improve court collections ([see MDJS rollout schedule](#)).*

*The Pennsylvania Supreme Court established a [Uniform Disbursement Schedule](#) directing the disbursement of all fines, fees, costs, reparation, penalties and restitution. The system automatically disburse all payments in accordance with this schedule which, based on legislation, places a high priority on the payments to victims and counties to pay collection agency fees first up to the amount allowed by law.*