

## NEWS RELEASE

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### ***“Overall costs are one-half peer group average”* Legislative Study: State Judiciary’s Computer System Well-managed, Cost-effective, User-satisfied**

**HARRISBURG, October 15, 1997** - "Two thumbs up" describes the state Legislative Budget and Finance Committee's review of the Pennsylvania Judiciary's automated District Justice System (DJS). The nearly ten-month legislative study was a comprehensive evaluation of the System's cost effectiveness, efficiency and user satisfaction.

The report, "A Review of Pennsylvania's District Justice Computer System," includes an analysis conducted by the Gartner Group's *Real Decisions* unit, a computer consulting firm retained by the legislative committee to compare the cost to operate key aspects of the District Justice System to the costs incurred by peer organizations in these same areas.

The DJS connects the 551 district justice offices throughout the state, providing the necessary electronic tools for district justices to perform their administrative duties and ensuring consistency in their procedures and practices. Each DJ office has an average of three "dumb terminals," which support an average of 1,825 cases per terminal, and related hardware. The DJS is utilized by more than 3,400 district justices and DJ staff and is on-line 24 hours a day, seven days a week.

***“Real Decisions found that the overall costs for the DJS are approximately one-half that of the peer group average costs (\$7.95 million versus \$16.4 million).”***

This economy results from two cost-saving design decisions by the Judiciary. The first is to only replace equipment that has failed, or is prone to failure, rather than following the more common, costly route of routinely replacing or upgrading aging equipment. The second is that the DJS was designed to provide a focused, specific processing function, with tightly controlled user options, thus eliminating the need for a fuller array of costly software programs.

The study revealed, among other things, that when compared to similar systems the DJS has "significantly lower" hardware, software and personnel costs and its 7-member Help Desk, which responds to any problems encountered by end users in the district justice offices, "provides a very high first-level problem resolution rate." According to the report, 87 percent of the 50,000 calls made yearly to the Help Desk are resolved at the first level "at a very low cost of \$8.90 per call. The average cost for the peer group was \$13.87 per call."

***Real Decisions said, "The significantly lower than peer group cost-per-call coupled with the relatively high percentage of first level call resolution are characteristics indicative of a well run, well managed Help Desk environment."***

The automated DJS has gained favorable ratings from practically all users in just about every category studied, despite limits on deposits (only recently removed by Act 32-1997) into the Judicial Computer System Augmentation Account which deprived the Judiciary of \$ 9.4 million in operating funds over a period of only two years. Unstable

year-to-year budgets impact management's ability to develop and implement long-term equipment plans, according to *Real Decisions*.

**According to the report, "Overwhelmingly, the district justices reported that computerization had improved the operations of their offices. For example, approximately 97 percent of the district justices responded affirmatively when asked whether automation had resulted in positive changes for their offices in areas such as case management; timeliness of action and the collection and disbursement of fines, fees and costs."**

"The acknowledgment of the Legislative Budget and Finance Committee through this report, and including the independent analysis of *Real Decisions*, is especially important given the respect in which the committee is held in Pennsylvania government, and the national reputation of the Gartner Group Real Decisions," said Court Administrator of Pennsylvania Nancy M. Sobolevitch

"We believe these acknowledgments are also important because this dispassionate, professional review of the Judiciary's work strongly supports the assertion that the state Supreme Court charted a sound plan for development of a statewide, integrated judicial information system, and that the Administrative Office of Pennsylvania Courts (AOPC) has successfully developed and implemented the first phase of that plan," said Mrs. Sobolevitch.

*The DJS continues to be envisioned by the Supreme Court as the first step in its ultimate goal to connect all the Commonwealth's courts -- from the district justice offices through trial courts, to the appellate courts -- in an integrated, statewide computer network which will serve both the Judiciary's needs and those of state and local government agencies which routinely and increasingly seek judicial system data. To that end, the Fiscal Year 1998-99 Judicial Budget Request will contain a \$3.6 million spending request to 'jump-start' planning for automation of Common Pleas Court criminal divisions, which has been stalled since 1994 for lack of funds. That spending request will require either a fee increase, or some form of additional, sustained, stable funding.*

Noting several concerns raised by a number of district justices, the AOPC indicated that most of those concerns fell into one or more of four categories:

- those that had been or were in process of being addressed
- those that reflect deliberate system design to achieve desired goals
- those that reflect procedural rules requirements which district justices must follow
- and those that reflect cost benefit decisions, given the availability of limited funding.

Among concerns raised by district justices were the cost to counties to send staff for system training; voluminous and complex procedures manuals; a perception of unnecessary DJS-required paper usage; slow system speed; the use of "dumb terminals" (referenced elsewhere as a "point solution") which limited DJS word processing capabilities; and the Help Desk not being staffed round-the-clock. The AOPC indicated it would review each of the concerns, however, to ensure that all possible solutions had been considered.

**The report notes that officials from state agencies such as the Departments of Revenue and Transportation, Pennsylvania Game Commission, the Auditor General, and the Pennsylvania Commission on Crime and Delinquency "commented that automation of the DJS has been of immense benefit to their organizations." Typical comments by the state agencies include:**

- Department of Revenue: faster receipt and disbursement of funds (by one third, from 90 to 60 days) and a much easier way to assure that the various state entities receive the portion of the revenue to which they are entitled.
- Department of Transportation: it would be difficult for the department to meet its legislatively required suspension and revocation time frames if it did not receive data from the AOPC in its present format; has increased efficiency and timeliness, eliminated staff, and reduced data entry errors.

- Auditor General's Office: has found that the computerized system results in more uniformity in accounting practices and envisions that eventually the data received from the [DJS] will substantially reduce their need for paper reports.

Prior to completion of the DJS in December 1992 "on time...and within cost," the DJ offices relied on index cards and other manual procedures to collect fees and fines, issue citations and warrants, and manage their caseloads and court calendars. "Because of the volume of cases, these processes were very time consuming and prone to inaccuracies. Often there were backlogs, cases 'falling through the cracks,' uncollected fines and fees, and inconsistency in operations between DJ offices throughout the state," the report notes.

**With automation, district justice offices are "able to process more cases in less time with greater accuracy and efficiency." As a result, district justice offices are collecting a larger percentage of assessed fines and fees. Prior to automation, the estimated collection rate was 75 percent; following automation the collection rate was 93 percent in 1995.**

In its overall assessment of the DJS, -- which the Legislative Budget and Finance Committee study said is "somewhat unique among state government" -- *Real Decisions* underscores the success of the automated District Justice System:

**The DJS was architected as a 'point solution' [a system that has been designed to provide a focused, specific processing function with tightly controlled user options, thus achieving specific automation objectives often with reduced general office functionality] and to this end has achieved its goals of providing accurate, secured, and affordable processing for a fairly large base of geographically dispersed AOPC users.**

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## **Remarks before the Legislative Budget and Finance Committee,**

Wednesday, October 15, 1997

"Review of Pennsylvania's District Justice Computer System"

**Nancy M. Sobolevitch, Court Administrator of Pennsylvania**

Good morning, Mr. Chairman, Committee Members, and staff. I believe most of you know our Deputy Court Administrator, Tom Darr, and we are joined by three other staff to help answer any questions you may have. They are Sue Willoughby, our Director of Statewide Automation; John Davenport, our Director of Information Technology; and Deborah McDivitt, our Financial Manager.

I understand my letter of response to the report draft is included in the final report copies. Rather than dwell on minor points, I attempted in that letter to highlight certain themes about our automation efforts and the committee's report which we feel are important. Also, I hope I succeeded in tying those themes to specific aspects of the report.

Very briefly this morning, I would like to emphasize a couple of those themes, but before doing so I would also like to express my appreciation to the committee for its courtesies, and especially to your staff for their professional approach to what I suspect was a fairly difficult assignment. Over a ten-month period, there will always be disagreements about approach and details, but my interaction with your staff has suggested that both they and the Judiciary's staff largely worked well together. The committee report is, of course, the product of that work.

We are pleased that the overall impression which we read in this report -- from a respected legislative committee and a nationally-recognized consultant -- is that of a cost-effective, well-run statewide information technology system. When our overall costs are significantly lower than peer groups, when district justices are overwhelmingly satisfied that they can do their jobs infinitely better because of the system, when our staff seems to reflect a high degree of "customer"

orientation, and when the system facilitates a current collection rate hovering around 92 percent, then I have reason to be very pleased.

The truth of the matter is that Pennsylvania's Judiciary has been on the cutting edge throughout the country in developing automation for state court systems. And even taking into consideration debates as to whether this automated District Justice System performs one function or another -- the fact is that no other state as large as Pennsylvania has an integrated minor court computer system. In that same line, another fact is that IBM tells us that even with the passage of seven years time since the DJS was first installed, this system remains among the largest network solutions of its type in the country. Knowing today, "officially," that the system is well-run, I think we can all take a moment as Pennsylvanians to be proud of these accomplishments regardless of which branch of government we serve.

It won't surprise you to know that we think the Supreme Court charted a wise course, as long ago as 1984, when then Chief Justice Robert Nix asked Justice Stephen Zappala to look into why courts weren't making better use of technology to perform tasks that seemed well suited to technological solutions -- and what was needed to engender those solutions statewide.

Part of Justice Zappala's conclusion (which was based on the work of a consultant, judicial staff, and the advice of a broad-based Steering Committee) was the need for a plan to automate the courts -- which was developed. And, of course, the automated District Justice System is the most visible outcome of that plan.

The other part of the problem, and one which Real Decisions highlights in its segment of the committee's report, is the need for stable funding to develop and implement long-term technological solutions. My response letter notes the difficulty posed by unstable funding in our situation quite specifically because it *has* been an **impediment** at times to implementing the DJ System and an *absolute roadblock* to achieving new goals, most notably automation of Common Pleas Courts. I have observed occasionally that in all my years of experience in state government, I am hard-pressed to recall any agency, let alone branch of government, that was forced to rely on unpredictable collections of fees to build a computer system. Couple that with the numerous statutory amendments which began to erode that unstable funding source almost from its inception, and you may understand why I used the word "tortuous" to describe our experience.

My point about funding isn't to complain; the point is to note that stable funding for long-term projects of this magnitude is essential and that the committee's report should lay to rest -- once and for all -- any question of whether the Judiciary is capable of successfully developing, implementing and effectively managing a project of this or similar scope if we are afforded appropriate resources.

The Judiciary is committed to pursuing every practical means of ensuring that Pennsylvania's courts perform their tasks effectively, and clearly as we approach the millennium, it can only be evident that information technology provides the means to that assurance. We believe ample evidence exists here and now, today, in this report, that stable, adequate funding to proceed with automation of Pennsylvania's trial courts is both justified and desirable, and that stable funding to achieve that goal is essential.

Again, let me thank you for your courtesy here today in allowing me to address these issues in the context of the committee's work. We are open to any question you may have.