



ADMINISTRATIVE OFFICE of PENNSYLVANIA COURTS

NEWS RELEASE

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Report Issued on the “State of the Commonwealth’s Courts”

HARRISBURG, May 1, 2008 - Chief Justice Ronald D. Castille today issued a report on the State of the Commonwealth’s Courts for 2008 outlining goals and discussing highlights of the past year.

The report is the third annual overview of Pennsylvania’s Unified Judicial System issued by the chief justice in behalf of the Supreme Court in the last three years.

In the report, Castille credits former Chief Justice Ralph J. Cappy, who retired early this year, for his efforts to improve the Pennsylvania courts through judicial automation, specialized treatment courts, improved judicial education and other programs.

“As Pennsylvania’s new Chief Justice, I intend to continue those programs and to begin other programs in keeping with the Supreme Court’s constant commitment to improve the administration of justice,” Castille writes.

Among the innovations cited in the report is a statewide jury information system through which more potential jurors will be identified for inclusion in county jury pools. The aim is to increase citizen participation and expand diversity on juries. Utilizing data from state executive branch agencies, the Administrative Office of Pennsylvania Courts (AOPC) is compiling a statewide master list from which data identifying potential jurors will be provided to each county this fall.

The report also discusses a new educational video on the Pennsylvania court system which is designed for use in jury assembly rooms and by judges or lawyers when speaking in schools or to community groups. The 15-minute video was commissioned by the AOPC and may be viewed through a link at www.courts.state.pa.us.

“A lack of understanding of how our government works and the loss of civics as a component of basic education is potentially the most serious threat we face when we speak of threats to judicial independence,” Castille writes in the report.

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Other topics discussed in the State of the Commonwealth’s Courts report include:

- Problem-solving courts. A decade ago, Philadelphia Municipal Court began its drug court on an experimental basis, the first “problem-solving court” in Pennsylvania. There now are more than 50 such courts in the state, including drug courts, DUI courts and mental health courts.
- Benchbooks. These volumes are a new professional tool being developed within the court system. The first, released in 2007, was the Public Health Law Benchbook, for use by Pennsylvania judges in the event of a pandemic or other public health emergency. A more recent volume is the Sexual Violence Benchbook, issued this year to assist judges with the complex and changing body of law relating to sex crimes.
- Automation. Pennsylvania continues to be a national leader in statewide judicial automation. Appellate court opinions and dockets are available online. Criminal case dockets also are available online statewide. In the state’s 546 magisterial district courts, the second generation of technology now is underway, an upgrade that is expected to take five years. These courts were first automated in 1992.

A copy of this year’s State of the Commonwealth’s Courts report may be seen at the Pennsylvania Judiciary’s Web site at: www.court.state.pa.us.

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