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NEWS RELEASE

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Justice Details New Court Leadership; Cappy Outlines Plan to Strengthen First Judicial District Court Reforms

HARRISBURG, March 26, 1996 — New steps designed to continue the successful reforms initiated in the Philadelphia court system were announced today by state Supreme Court Justice Ralph J. Cappy. The changes, to take effect April 1, 1996, are intended to build upon achievements of the past five years and guide Pennsylvania's First Judicial District into the twenty-first century.

"My colleagues on the Court and I have been gratified by the hard work, ready cooperation, and proven performance of judges within the First Judicial District since we announced the first series of reforms in 1992," said Justice Cappy. "They, working together with dedicated staff, have taken dramatic strides to improve every aspect of Philadelphia's court system.

"We are particularly pleased to recognize these efforts and successes as Chief Justice Robert N.C. Nix, Jr. ends his distinguished tenure this July, for the Chief's support in our drive for reform -- both as a Philadelphian and as a jurist keenly interested in progressive judicial administration -- has been significant and will serve as a lasting hallmark of his tenure."

Beginning with a six-year, zero-growth budget established in 1992, among the achievements within the First District have been:

- strict adherence to the zero-growth commitment with attendant savings to the City in excess of \$300 million;
- extraordinary overall reductions of 38% in Common Pleas pending case inventories over a six-year period, national recognition of Family Court's juvenile section as a model for delinquency case processing, and impressive disposition rates in Municipal Court all with an eye toward attaining nationally accepted disposition standards in all case categories;
- establishment of a First District procurement unit which has improved service within the courts and provided the means for judges and staff to have electronic tools to perform their jobs, at a 25% decrease in procurement appropriations levels over a five-year period;
- across-the-board salary increases for all court staff totaling 19% and merit increases for many other staff, with funding for the bulk of those increases internally generated through cost savings, including the elimination of 465 positions over a five-year period.

"With the impetus from these and other forward strides, current and future leaders in the First District are fully prepared to further our common commitment to excellence in administering Philadelphia's courts," said Justice Cappy. "Given that commitment and considering our experience of the past six years, we also have a clear vision of a First District leadership structure to propel us into the next century along recently charted and successfully navigated paths."

Administrative Governing Board of the First Judicial District

The First District's new leadership structure will be guided by an Administrative Governing Board of the First Judicial District comprised of the President Judges of the Common Pleas, Municipal and Traffic Courts; the Administrative Judges of the Common Pleas Court Trial, Family, and Orphans' Court divisions; and the Court Administrator of Pennsylvania. The Chair of the Board will be selected annually by the Supreme Court; its first Chair will be Common Pleas President Judge Alex Bonavitacola, who was recently elected by his peers to that position.

The Board's responsibilities will include monitoring the overall performance of all courts and departments of the First District, designating those empowered to negotiate the First District's budget with city officials, and reporting the District's progress annually to the Supreme Court.

Assisting the Board, and guiding the First District's administrative operations on a day-to-day basis in concert with the President and Administrative Judges will be two separate executive officers, both of whom will report to the Board. Those officers will be a Court Administrator of the First District and a Budget Administrator of the First District. Each will be selected by the Board and each will report directly to the Board.

Justice Cappy noted that the new structure will provide President Judges and Administrative Judges with greater autonomy in selecting staff within a checks and balances system which establishes a pool of qualified candidates administered within the Court Administrator's office.

First District Budget Administrator

"If one lesson has been learned since the Supreme Court became directly involved with the First District's operations, it is that careful preparation and effective monitoring of individual budgets within the District's individual budgets and of the District's central budget is essential -- partly because we know this to be true of any large, complex organization but more importantly because many have worked too hard to allow the momentum for change to dissipate," said Justice Cappy.

"It is with the importance of the financial tasks in mind, that we have decided to marshal specific expertise and experience in an executive-level Budget Administrator whose fiscal responsibilities will encompass all courts, divisions of the courts and departments of the First District by overseeing preparation of their budgets and monitoring those budgets and the various court and divisional expenditures. The sole exception to the Budget Administrator's fiscal oversight will be the First District's procurement unit, which was established and continues to be overseen by the Administrative Office of Pennsylvania Courts."

Justice Cappy announced that Dr. Geoff Gallas has been asked to assume the new position of Budget Administrator and Gallas has accepted the position. For the past four and one half years Gallas has been Executive Court Administrator of the First Judicial District, a post which will be abolished in the new structure.

"Geoff's energy, expertise and sheer force of personality, together with the collective efforts of judges, staff and volunteers throughout the First District, has helped to foster constructive change where many thought change was not possible," Justice Cappy noted. "Achieving that change in the context of a multi-year, no-growth budget was an even more difficult task and Geoff's success in that area is the key to our assigning him the Budget Administrator's role."

Justice Cappy explained that Philadelphia Fiscal Year 1997, which begins July 1, 1996, will be the last year of the multi-year, no-growth budget agreement negotiated by former state Supreme Court Justice Nicholas Papadakos between the First District and the City. Beginning in October, 1996, negotiations between the First District and the City will begin to chart the District's financial future.

"These negotiations are obviously crucial to the First District's ability to proceed further in its efforts at reform -- ranging from additional progress toward nationally-accepted case management standards to locally-inspired efforts to improve the collection of fines, fees and costs from those adjudicated guilty," said Cappy. "Equally important to the First District's success in furthering reform efforts will be continued careful administration of appropriated City funds. Geoff Gallas will be central in providing the necessary transition to ensure that the First District's financial house remains in order."

First District Court Administrator

Like the First District Budget Administrator, the First District Court Administrator will report directly to the First District Administrative Governing Board and the Board, as ultimately with the Budget Administrator, will be responsible for selecting the Court Administrator. The Court Administrator's responsibilities will encompass all those of the present Executive Court Administrator, except for those specifically reserved to the Budget Administrator, the Chair of the Governing Board, and the AOPC-led procurement unit.

"Judges and staff will need the leadership of a Court Administrator if the 'programmatic ship' of the First District is to sail as smoothly as we anticipate the 'fiscal ship' will," said Justice Cappy. "A court system as large as Philadelphia's needs a team approach to meet its challenges and we anticipate the Court Administrator will work jointly with talented First District staff, the Budget Administrator, the President and Administrative Judges, and the Administrative Governing Board to take the next -- possibly final -- steps toward excellence."

Justice Cappy indicated that the method and time frame in selecting a Court Administrator will be at the discretion of the Governing Board. Until a Court Administrator is selected, the Governing Board Chair, Judge Alex Bonavita, and Court Administrator of Pennsylvania Nancy M. Sobolevitch will jointly serve as Court Administrator.

Sylvester and Lewis Lauded for Distinctive Service

While announcing these changes in the First Judicial District's leadership structure, Justice Cappy also noted the appointment of Judge Petrese B. Tucker as Administrative Judge of Common Pleas Court's Orphans' division and of Judge Paul P. Panepinto as Administrative Judge of the Family division. Judge Tucker succeeds Judge Kathryn S. Lewis, while Judge Panepinto succeeds Judge Esther R. Sylvester.

"The contributions which Judges Sylvester and Lewis have made to the First Judicial District, both in their respective divisions and at large, have been outstanding," said Justice Cappy. "Truly, both jurists have been the key players in strengthening their divisions, part of the measure of which is that both judges have served at the Supreme Court's pleasure in their respective positions as Administrative Judge for nearly a year longer than their formal terms' provided.

"Particular recognition is due Judge Sylvester, given the national honors which Family Court has received during her tenure and through her leadership and hard work, as well as through the hard work of her colleagues both present and past. Family Court's juvenile section has been recognized as one of the finest in the country, while its domestic relations section is considered a national model for its computerized collection of court-ordered support for dependent spouses and children. That peer recognition speaks eloquently of those who labor in and lead a Court which literally helps shape society by carefully guiding the individual lives.

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"Chief Justice Nix, our Supreme Court colleagues and I, personally, deeply appreciate the hard work which so many have sincerely dedicated to the task of improving Pennsylvania's First Judicial District," said Justice Cappy. "None of the success which Philadelphia's courts has enjoyed in recent years has come easily, nor has it resulted from the efforts of any single individual or group of individuals. Rather, the collective achievements have made the First District stronger, more creative, more resilient, even in the face of continuing challenges. For those challenges, but most importantly, for those whom we serve, I encourage us all to stretch even further toward the promise of the even greater successes which are clearly within our grasp."

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