

Statement of Zygmunt A. Pines, Esq.
Acting Court Administrator of Pennsylvania

House Appropriations Committee Hearing
Tuesday, March 7, 2000, 10 a.m.

Good morning Mr. Chairman. I am the Acting Court Administrator of Pennsylvania and my name is Zygmunt Pines. I am pleased to be here this morning and am joined by staff of the three appellate courts and of the Administrative Office of Pennsylvania Courts – the AOPC.

As some of you may know, Nancy Sobolevitch occupied this chair every year for the past thirteen years. Prior to her becoming state court administrator, Nancy was also a long time staff member in this very legislative chamber. Nancy retired in January and that occasions my presence here in the role of acting state court administrator.

Although I am new to this particular task, I have attended a number of appropriations hearings while serving with Nancy as the AOPC's chief legal counsel. Most of my colleagues here today are also veteran participants in this process from one vantage point or another. So, while we may not precisely reflect the wisdom of Nancy's accumulated expertise, we do sincerely wish to answer your questions on behalf of our respective segments of the court system.

Naturally, the representatives from our three appellate courts are able to speak more eloquently than I can of the specific achievements of their respective courts during the past year. I would take just a moment though to note implementation this year of a common case management system for use by all three of our appellate courts.

Development of this system has been a joint project involving jurists and staff from the Supreme, Superior and Commonwealth courts as well as members of the AOPC's information technology staff. Its significance is, I believe, three-fold. First, it solves specific, pressing technology issues for each court; second, it represents the most recent example of the Pennsylvania courts' ability to develop technological solutions to challenges of administrative process; and third, it again demonstrates the Judiciary's ability to wisely use financial resources which have been made available to us.

Of similar significance is another technology project just now being pilot tested by staff of several district justice offices and the AOPC. Assuming that those tests are successful, this effort -- which we refer to as the "thin client project" because of the technology involved -- will upgrade the judiciary's existing, automated District Justice System. Those upgrades are important to maintain the DJS as a successful case processing system, but they may be equally important as exemplars of the judiciary's long-term and active participation in the executive branch's Justice Network, or J-NET, initiative. As many of you know, J-NET's goal is to benefit various criminal justice agencies by sharing commonly needed data in a web-based information system.

One of the things I am told that J-NET has served to reemphasize is the continued need for the Judiciary to develop and integrate automation of Pennsylvania's trial courts, much as we have so successfully done at the district justice level. We remain committed to undertaking that task, consistent with the Supreme Court's strategic directive that all levels of

our judiciary must make effective use of the opportunities technology can offer. To that end, we have allocated part of the non-tax revenue resources available for judicial computerization to studying how best this may be accomplished and at what overall cost.

As a point of general interest, it may be worth noting here that we in the Judiciary -- like so many others involved in information technology efforts -- have experienced periodic difficulties in identifying, recruiting and occasionally even retaining qualified IT staff. To some degree this has inhibited our ability to move forward as deliberately as we might have preferred on projects like trial court automation. In part, we have responded to these staffing challenges by greater reliance on contractual and consultant expertise -- and our experience in this regard has been good. Of both desire and necessity, our plan is to continue to pursue each of the Judiciary's information technology goals using a mix of in-house and contractual staff, both as are available in each category and to the greatest financial advantage that we can achieve.

With regard to fiscal aspects of our information technology efforts, we do have two specific requests, neither of which is new to the dialogue of these hearings. First, we ask that the legislature continue to include "transfer language" in the new appropriations act. As you probably know, this language has allowed the Judiciary to transfer funds among selected line items, subject to certain notice requirements and limitations. Largely that language has been used to assist in funding the judiciary's information technology work, although it can also afford limited flexibility for us to manage other aspects of the Judiciary's finances in a business-like manner. As the records of past transfers will show, we have used the transfer capability granted by the legislature sparingly and, I believe, prudently.

Our second request is that the appropriation level which we are seeking for the Judicial Computer System be fully funded. By so doing, the Judiciary has the ability to use these non-tax revenues effectively to pursue these and other automation projects we have outlined here and to fund day-to-day information technology operations.

I would be remiss were I not to briefly note what we believe has been an exceptionally successful transition of county court administrators to the state judiciary staff as of January 1, 2000. While human resources issues involved in this transfer of approximately 175 staff were and are very complex, the spirit with which president judges and local court administrators joined with our own Administrative Office staff to effect the transition was gratifying. More remains to be done to effectively integrate those county staff to the state judicial staff, but we are committed to doing so in a manner that effectively ensures that the beneficial aspects of local management are not lost.

Mr. Chairman, much more remains that I might say about Pennsylvania's courts. But doing so will only diminish the opportunity to answer your questions and those of your committee members. So in closing, let me simply note that we in Pennsylvania's judicial system are pleased -- like so much of the western world -- to have weathered the millennium successfully. Now, with this spending plan, we are poised to pursue the challenges of this new age and we are pleased to start the discussion of our plans here.