

NEWS RELEASE

CONTACT:

Art Heinz, (717) 795-2062

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Total request less than one percent of state spending

Pennsylvania courts seek funding for education, security and “fairness” initiatives

HARRISBURG, February 26, 2004 — Members of the Supreme Court of Pennsylvania will outline today at legislative budget hearings three low-cost, yet significant, initiatives that will strengthen and secure the Commonwealth’s courts.

At Chief Justice of Pennsylvania Ralph J. Cappy’s request, Justice Ronald D. Castille is slated to appear today on behalf of the Unified Judicial System before the Senate (9:00am) and House (1:00pm) Appropriations Committees. In identical testimony before both committees, Justice Castille will seek modest funding that would:

- Systematically enhance continuing education efforts for jurists
- Boost ongoing efforts to provide better all-round courthouse security for jurists, lawyers, litigants and the general public
- Create a permanent intergovernmental panel to help ensure racial, gender and ethnic fairness within not only the state court system but also within the remaining two co-equal branches of government.

Joining the justices for the presentation were Court Administrator of Pennsylvania Zygmunt Pines; Commonwealth Court President Judge James G. Colins; Superior Court Judge Correale Stevens; Judicial Conduct Board Chief Counsel Joseph Massa Jr. and Court of Judicial Discipline President Judge Sal Cognetti.

Development of judicial continuing education curricula has traditionally been a voluntary task of interested judges who could take time to plan twice yearly, multi-day educational programs and other programs throughout the year. With burgeoning issues of science, technology, ethics, and other fields confronting jurists in courts, the new funding will support two full-time and one part-time staff positions. Those staff will work with jurists to develop and maintain updated curricula to help Pennsylvania’s jurists meet the intellectual challenges of the 21st century.

(MORE)

Ensuring safety in court buildings for the public, litigants, staff and jurists is an imperative that the Judiciary had begun to study long before the tragic events of “9-11.” Ground breaking research has shown that in one year, 52% of Pennsylvania’s jurists had been threatened in some manner and 1.2% had been physically assaulted. To address these and related issues, the Judiciary’s budget requests funding for continued security planning by the Judicial Council of Pennsylvania’s Committee on Judicial Security and Emergency Preparedness. Part of the requested funding continues the Judiciary’s parallel efforts to finalize and maintain business continuity plans, including assessment of the potential impact of the unplanned loss of key staff and automation systems within the state court system.

In keeping with its mandate to ensure impartiality within the courts, the Judiciary also is seeking modest funding for a permanent, intergovernmental commission to further explore and implement solutions in the areas of gender, ethnic and racial fairness. It is anticipated that commission representatives from all three branches of government will rely on the work and report of the Supreme Court Committee on Racial and Gender Fairness as a basis for its work.

Along similar lines, the Judiciary has requested \$25,000 to join a national consortium that will assist in improving, in a uniform manner, the availability of interpreter services in our linguistically diverse society.

“The Commonwealth’s fiscal vitality is a serious factor to be weighed as the components of the Unified Judicial System consider their budgets for the coming fiscal year,” said Supreme Court Justice Ronald D. Castille, during the legislative hearings. “We are mindful that competition for scarce funding is strong, the desirability of effectively maximizing available revenues is great and the imperative to function efficiently and effectively must be ongoing.”

Funding for judicial operations comes primarily from General Fund appropriations, except in the area of information technology. Most judicial automation development and ongoing operations are financed through fine and fee-based funding — not general tax revenues.

A significant portion of the budget request is for statutory programs with little or no spending discretion — including salaries and benefits for Pennsylvania’s elected jurists at the appellate, trial and minor court levels. The Judiciary’s entire annual appropriation represents less than one percent of the state’s total General Fund budget.

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To view a copy of Justice Ronald D. Castille’s remarks before the Appropriations Committees, please visit the Unified Judicial System’s web site at www.courts.state.pa.us and refer to the scrolling “Site News” box at left.