



ADMINISTRATIVE OFFICE of PENNSYLVANIA COURTS

NEWS RELEASE

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Public Health Bench Book Now Available on Internet
**Pennsylvania Courts Prepare for Public Health Threats, Encourage
Officials Nationwide to Follow Suit**

HARRISBURG, May 21, 2007 — Public health experts say that it is not a question of “if” but “when” the next pandemic like the avian flu will occur again in the United States. Pennsylvania court officials are not waiting for that day but proactively preparing now for the unprecedented challenges that would come with a major public health threat and they are encouraging other state court officials to do the same.

Court Administrator of Pennsylvania Zygmunt A. Pines, said, “We have distributed more than 1,000 Public Health Law Bench Books to Pennsylvania judges and court officials, providing them with legal information and judicial guidance that will expedite the judicial process when time is of the essence.

“We believe that public access to information is important,” Pines said. “Today we are taking another step in making vital court information available by posting our bench book on the Internet. In doing so, we want to assure Pennsylvanians that their government is preparing in advance for the unpredictable health emergency that we hope never comes. In addition we have sent the bench book to every state chief justice and court administrator in the country. It is our hope that this bench book will be used as a model, aiding court and health officials in other states in preparing for public health threats.”

The Administrative Office of Pennsylvania Courts’ (AOPC) Public Health Law Bench Book can be found at www.courts.state.pa.us, see “Site News,” click on Public Health Law Bench Book.

The AOPC, the administrative arm of the Pennsylvania Supreme Court, has been in the forefront in planning for a possible pandemic or public health crisis. Only a handful of other states have developed such bench books to prepare their judges on how to respond to emergency requests for court action or intervention if a public health crisis should develop. Pennsylvania’s bench book is unique in that it gives judges references and tools that were researched and carefully crafted based on state and federal laws, as well as relevant legal authorities from around the country.

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“There hasn't been very much case law development in Pennsylvania's public health laws over the past 50 years to provide guidance on how to apply our statutes,” Pines said. “The bench book will inform judges about the laws and the few state cases available, and hopefully will shorten the learning curve that may result if our judges were required to learn this area of the law on short notice.”

The bench book work is ongoing and will be expanded, updated, and corrected as time, circumstances, and changes in the law require, Pines noted. In conjunction with the bench book, the AOPC is proceeding to the second phase of its emergency planning by developing a Continuity of Operations template for president judges and court administrators to use in shaping their own emergency operations plans in the event a crisis, including pandemics, terrorism, biological threats, and natural disasters occurring in Pennsylvania. Planning at the county level will complement completed emergency planning efforts by AOPC within its own operations and judicial systems.

Preparing and issuing the bench book is among a number of Supreme Court of Pennsylvania initiatives to modernize and improve the state court system's ability to effectively provide services to its citizens. These initiatives include court safety and security, specialty courts, trained court interpreters, statewide judicial automation and access to court information, and responding to needs of families and children involved in court proceedings.

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