



ADMINISTRATIVE OFFICE of PENNSYLVANIA COURTS

NEWS RELEASE

CONTACT:

[Steve Schell](#), Communications Coordinator
(717) 795-2000 ext 3269 or 795-2015 ext 7461

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PA Supreme Court Continues Efforts to Improve Court Security **Video Arraignment of Criminal Defendants to Expand**

HARRISBURG, July 16, 2008 – While being transported to or from court proceedings, criminal defendants can be combative and occasionally make desperate attempts to flee, jeopardizing the safety of law enforcement officers, judges, court staff and the public.

To avoid such situations and to reduce defendant transportation costs, the Pennsylvania Supreme Court is launching a \$2.8 million initiative to expand the use of video conferencing technology within Pennsylvania's magisterial district courts. Instead of having a constable, sheriff or police officer transport defendants to court, this technology allows magisterial judges to arraign or hold hearings with defendants from secure locations within central booking centers, local police departments, jails, state police barracks, and state and county correctional institutions.

“Implementation of video preliminary arraignment enhances safety for magisterial district judges, their staffs and others who have business in their courts since fewer detainees are present,” Chief Justice of Pennsylvania Ronald D. Castille said. “In addition, this technology makes defendant processing more efficient, while significantly reducing defendant transportation costs.”

Officials in Lancaster County, for example, have estimated that video conferencing within its 20 districts courts will annually save more than \$115,000 in constable transportation fees alone.

Court Administrator of Pennsylvania Zygmunt A. Pines said, “The video conferencing equipment will be installed in two phases. The first phase begins with the installation of equipment in approximately 150 district courts that have yet to install such technology. (*see attached list*) Over the last three weeks, the equipment has been installed in Crawford, Carbon, Mifflin and Lancaster counties. Twenty additional counties will receive equipment over the next few months. The second phase will include replacement or repair of equipment already in courts to bring it up to current standards.”

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The first phase of the project will be completed within the next four months, while the second phase is expected to be completed within a year.

“This is an important security achievement that will benefit our judicial districts and law enforcement,” Pines added. “Many security benefits will be recognized with the flexibility the equipment provides, allowing judges anywhere within the state to conduct arraignments and hearings with a secure Internet connection using desktop monitors with a high definition video and voice conferencing network.”

RoData Inc., www.rodata.com, a Pittsburgh-based company with a primary focus in design and installation of integrated presentation/conference room solutions, was chosen in a competitive selection to provide hardware, software, installation, training maintenance and support for court users. The company’s work is performed in coordination with the Office of Judicial Security within the Administrative Office of Pennsylvania Courts.

The installation of video equipment is part of the court’s ongoing efforts to improve security, and a direct result of the collaboration between the legislative and executive branches of state government with the state judiciary and, in turn, with county commissioners, judges and staff within local police departments, jails, central booking centers, state police and state correctional institutions.

“We are appreciative of the legislature's funding to support this initiative,” Pines said.

In 2006, the Supreme Court completed a \$4.4 million project to provide 553 magisterial district courts, central booking and night court facilities with a total of 750 digital cameras, 1,400 duress alarms, shatterproof safety glass and better restraints for in-custody defendants. In 2007, 57 counties were reimbursed more than \$2.2 million for 25 magnetometers, 35 X-ray machines, 23 card key entry systems and 43 duress alarms installed in county courthouses.

In addition to security hardware measures, an automated security incident reporting system was implemented for magisterial district courts and county courthouses, providing vital information on actual or potential threats to anyone with business in the courts.

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Editor’s Note: These efforts to improve court security join other recent programs of the Supreme Court designed to modernize and improve the court system throughout Pennsylvania. Those initiatives include, among others, programs that are designed to assist children and families in the courts; provide trained court interpreters; assist in the establishment of specialty—or problem-solving—courts, such as drug and DUI courts; and train judges in general and specialized areas of jurisprudence, using the most advanced educational techniques available.