



ADMINISTRATIVE OFFICE of PENNSYLVANIA COURTS

NEWS RELEASE

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Commonwealth's First Sex Offender Court Opens in Pittsburgh

PITTSBURGH, May 4, 2011—The Supreme Court of Pennsylvania today announced the establishment of the state's first Sex Offender Court — an innovative approach to handling some of the most serious crimes facing the citizens of the Commonwealth — with the goal of increased community safety through a reduction in recidivism among sex offenders.

The court, composed of judges with specialized knowledge in handling such cases, will focus on increased uniformity, accountability, and coordinated case management of adult defendants charged with and convicted of Megan's Law offenses. Additionally, the Sex Offender Court will provide a vehicle for improved communication and organization among the various agencies involved in sex offense cases. This specialized court will open in the state's Fifth Judicial District, Allegheny County Court of Common Pleas, on June 23, 2011.

Justice Debra Todd, who has guided the establishment of the Sex Offender Court on behalf of the Supreme Court of Pennsylvania, praised those involved in the creation of this cutting-edge effort, "I commend the judges of Allegheny County for recognizing a problem and collaborating with their criminal justice partners and victim advocates to develop this innovative approach for achieving consistency in sentencing and managing the difficult population of sex offenders, in our continuing effort to reduce recidivism."

Justice Todd further stressed one unique aspect of the court — the impact upon children. "Our Supreme Court has been proactive in establishing and promoting innovative programs, particularly those that serve to further protect our Commonwealth's children. Each year, thousands of Pennsylvania children are reported as victims of sexual abuse. We continually strive to better protect our children and prosecute and punish those who harm them. This program is specifically designed to include sexual crimes against children."

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Allegheny County President Judge Donna Jo McDaniel will preside over the pilot court program. Judges Jill E. Rangos and Thomas E. Flaherty will also be assigned to this specialized docket, working under the direction of President Judge McDaniel. Judge McDaniel explained: "Our goal in developing this rigorous program is to enable us to be consistent in the application of proven sex offender management techniques. Regular judicial compliance reviews of each offender will enhance the accountability of those convicted, particularly when they appear before judges who know their case, know their history and are knowledgeable in cutting edge research on supervision of sex offenders."

Judge McDaniel noted the practical importance of the project, "This court is designed to promote justice by providing a comprehensive approach to case resolution, increasing offender accountability, and enhancing community safety while protecting the rights of the parties and victims of sexual abuse."

Judge Jeffrey Manning, Administrative Judge of the Allegheny County Court of Common Pleas - Criminal Division, agreed, "Getting these cases onto a specialized docket, under the supervision of specially trained probation officers and in front of judges educated and experienced in handling these matters, will go a long way toward protecting the public." Although the program is targeting offenders charged with and convicted of Megan's Law violations (See 42 Pa.C.S.A. §9795.1, attached), defendants charged with other sex offenses may be considered on a case by case basis.

In the coordination and planning of this specialty court, the Supreme Court solicited input from Allegheny County District Attorney Stephen Zappala, Allegheny Public Defender Michael Machen, representatives of law enforcement, parole, probation and treatment providers, as well as victim services agencies. In particular, Alison Hall, Executive Director of Pittsburgh Action Against Rape, and members of the Allegheny County Sex Offender Management and Containment Task Force, provided valuable input and consultation. The planning for this pilot program began late last year with a site visit to the Buffalo area to observe the Erie County New York Sex Offense Court, which has been in successful operation since 2006. New York and Ohio are the only other states with programs of this type.

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