



ADMINISTRATIVE OFFICE of PENNSYLVANIA COURTS

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State of the Commonwealth's Courts 2013

Judiciary is challenged by a lack of understanding about its role and by perennial financial shortfalls

HARRISBURG — A lack of understanding about the core role of the courts in American democracy along with financial shortfalls pose the two greatest challenges to courts, Chief Justice of Pennsylvania Ronald D. Castille said today. These observations were noted in the state Supreme Court's annual [State of the Commonwealth's Courts](#) report.

Traditionally, the Supreme Court has used the occasion of Law Day, which is commemorated annually on May 1 and through the month, to issue this report to give Pennsylvanians a better understanding of the judicial branch.

This year's [State of the Commonwealth's Courts](#) defines the state court system "by the numbers," including a survey of its budget request, financial savings, and strong collections of court fines, fees and costs as well as highlighting specific court programs that can improve lives and often save tax dollars as justice is pursued.

But Chief Justice Castille also addressed a disturbing tendency to blame judicial decisions on courts, as if cases leading to those decisions were the creation of the judicial system.

"When you hear a court decision with which you disagree, remember these essentials: cases are brought to court, judges don't create them." Chief Justice Castille said. "The judge's job is to ensure the rights of all parties in a timely proceeding.

"As well, judges' interpretations of law may differ, but appellate courts serve to further ensure fairness and consistency in application of the law. And judges take a solemn oath not to decide cases based on personal or political opinions, least of all on popularity."

Pennsylvania courts have not had to close or curtail services over the past several financially challenging years. The chief justice attributed that achievement to interbranch collaboration in the past two years; a strong savings effort by the judiciary, which has been supported statewide by judges and staff alike; and recognition that courts are a core function of any democratic government.

“As the American Bar Association so succinctly stated last year, ‘no courts, no justice, no freedom,’” said Chief Justice Castille.

Pennsylvania’s judiciary receives one-half of one percent of the state budget, and more than 90 percent of its expenses are fixed. The judiciary relies on the legislature and executive branches to ensure its ability to meet the state constitutional requirement that all courts remain open.

Unique among the branches, the judiciary collects far more in fines and fees than it receives in its state budget. The past six years’ state appropriations have totaled \$1.7 billion, while collections from criminal courts have been \$2.78 billion. For the most part, funds collected by the judiciary fund state and local general government expenses, not the courts.

Chief Justice Castille also referenced judicial wrong-doing by noting that the actions of a few can taint the many. He highlighted the work of just a few of Pennsylvania’s judges who have brought honor to themselves and the judicial system.

“Pennsylvania’s more than 1,000 judges are right-minded men and women dedicated to service,” Castille said. “I am proud of my judicial colleagues and of the important work that many county and state staff provide in support of Pennsylvania’s court system.”

The 2013 report also highlights these programs:

- The Supreme Court’s Office of Children and Families in the Courts (OCFC), led by Justice Max Baer, continued emphasis on helping at-risk children find safe and permanent homes, leading to 7,200 less children in foster care homes – a 34 percent reduction – and an estimated savings of \$200 million in federal, state and local tax dollars over the last two years alone.
- Justice J. Michael Eakin spearheads the judiciary’s sophisticated Judicial Computer System. It provides statewide court case and financial management systems for virtually all courts and court staff. This year, online public accessibility to case records was dramatically increased. The JCS also provides data to the legislature and a myriad of state agencies and offices and is an electronic keystone in Pennsylvania’s criminal justice system.
- A new Elder Law Task Force, chaired by Justice Debra Todd, will study issues and problems of guardianship, elder abuse and neglect, and access to justice for older Pennsylvanians. Pennsylvania has the nation’s fourth largest number of residents age 65 and older.
- Pennsylvania’s problem-solving courts – drug, mental illness, DUI and veterans courts, among others – that reduce recidivism by diverting eligible offenders from the traditional court process into an alternative court program where they received intensive treatment and other services. Problem-solving courts are a less costly alternative to incarceration – drug courts save more than \$3 for every \$1 spent. Justice Seamus McCaffery guides this effort.

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