

# How the Judiciary Impacts Pennsylvanians

**T**he impact of Pennsylvania's courts is felt in ways that few know. Here are four of them:

Pennsylvania State Trooper Adam Reed describes how the Judicial Computer System helps police do their jobs *safely*, just one of the values that court-developed computerization has created in the justice system over the past two decades.

Mindy Arnold talks about her life, including addictions and the prospect of serious jail time. Her story demonstrates a success in one of Pennsylvania's nearly 100 problem-solving courts.

Venango County's Bill Cisek tells from the inside how the collaboration of judges and court staff with the state Department of Public Welfare has made a dramatic difference in securing permanent, loving homes for thousands of children.

And why would someone want to be a judge? Sheila Woods-Skipper, Philadelphia president judge, describes what "making a difference" means to her. Her words could echo from any judge in any courtroom across Pennsylvania.

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## Helping the Trooper

It may not occur to people that Pennsylvania's courts play a role in helping Pennsylvania's finest – troopers of the Pennsylvania State Police (PSP) – as well as other police officers across the state, be safer and save tax dollars.

Meet **Trooper Adam Reed**, a western Pennsylvania native, who, after graduating from the University of Pittsburgh, graduated from the PSP training academy, was assigned to the Carlisle barracks, and now serves as a PSP headquarters public information officer.



Trooper Reed knows firsthand the value of the data that is at an officer's fingertips through the laptop computer found in all PSP vehicles – data that comes from the Judicial Computer System.

"The computer system is our lifeline of information. It could be a traffic stop or responding to a domestic violence incident – we use the computer to get information about the people we're dealing with.

"On numerous occasions, more than I can count, I would stop a vehicle for something seemingly innocent only to find that the vehicle was stolen or the person had an active arrest warrant out of another county or even another state.

"The information we get off the computer can literally be a lifesaver for police officers performing their duties. If we

*Continued inside.*

**Helping the Trooper**, *continued.*

stop somebody for speeding, for example, we would like to know if that person has some sort of a warrant, perhaps even for homicide, before we approach the vehicle. That information will completely change how we go about performing that stop. We know information that will change the way the suspect will approach their interaction with us." In addition to being a lifesaver, Trooper Reed notes that the Judicial Computer System offers the PSP efficiencies which save time and money.

"Prior to the new technology, we would hand write all our traffic citations, they would be collected and a trooper would hand deliver them to the magisterial district judges' offices. Now with everything being electronic, it saves us some time. Roadside, we can compose a traffic citation, issue it to the motorist and electronically transmit it to the judges' offices. Saving time and saving money gives us more time to do our job – to get out and get the bad guys and make arrests.

"Information provided by the courts is crucial for performance of our duties as police officers. The timeliness and the availability of that information certainly saves lives. And is certainly important to what we do everyday."

## Saving the Defendant

**Mindy Arnold** holds a degree in microbiology from Penn State, is a certified medical technologist, currently works two jobs and is the loving mother of two children. She is also a recovering alcoholic and says that those who oversee Union County's drug court, "saved my life."

**"I was offered the option of drug court...It is very strict, very strenuous, a very structured program."**

Arnold is a proud graduate of drug treatment court. She is so passionate about the work of drug courts that she regularly speaks at program graduations, with county officials and the general public about the importance and difference drug court can make in a person's life. And she knows.

"I had two DUIs, was a very heavy alcoholic, really couldn't get clean on my own. I was looking at 2½ to five in state prison, plus I had other charges," Arnold says in a deep, soft and sincere voice.

"I was offered the option of drug court. With children and a family, I opted for the program. It didn't start out very easy. It is very strict, very strenuous, a very structured program.

"When you're just getting clean, your mind isn't working the right way yet. I bucked the system as much as I could. At one point I relapsed on another substance."



At that point those involved sent her to an inpatient rehabilitation facility. She completed the program and has been clean ever since.

"I was committed; I had to be. I knew I was dying, and it was either keep going the way I was or change. I opted for change."

Arnold said drug court included three, four-month segments.

During the first she was under house arrest and continually monitored for alcohol and drug use, attended five self-help meetings a week, underwent intensive outpatient treatment and was required to report to probation twice a week. It was a challenge – she had no driver's license, lived miles from the courthouse and her brain wasn't yet functioning normally. But she did it.

In each phase she was required to go before the drug court judge: weekly in phase one, bi-weekly in phase two, and monthly in phase three. In phase two she was taken off of house arrest while continuing the other requirements of the program. In phase three the drug monitor was removed and her counseling and probation contacts were decreased.

Finally, with a clean record, she graduated. How did she feel? "Awesome. I finally made it. A relief. But it's never over. It was tough getting to this point, but it was worth it. I'm not there yet. Progress, not perfection."

Arnold said the tax dollars spent on drug court are "definitely, 100 percent, no doubt" worth it.

Where would she be today without drug court?

"I would have gone away to prison. I'm not sure how much time I would have done. I guarantee you, I wouldn't be sitting here today, with a full-time job, a part-time job, visitation with my kids, clean, sober, a member of society. I can guarantee it."

To see **video clips** from all of these interviews, visit [www.pacourts.us](http://www.pacourts.us) and go to the budget page.

## Protecting the Child

In late 2006 the Pennsylvania Supreme Court created within the Administrative Office of Pennsylvania Courts the Office of Children and Families in the Courts (OCFC) to achieve better outcomes for foster children. The OCFC goal, working with partners in local courts and the Department of Public Welfare, is to minimize the time abused or neglected children spend in temporary living situations and maximize their opportunity to be in permanent, loving homes.

**“We bring the family together to ferret out their issues and come up with a plan to meet the concerns. And that’s what it’s all about.”**

The results tell the story. In 2007 more than 21,000 abused and neglected children were living temporarily in foster care homes. By 2013 the OCFC and its partners had reduced that number to 14,000 – a 34 percent reduction, saving an estimated \$117 million tax dollars each year. Better yet is that the lives of children are improved by being reunited with caring family members whenever possible.



**Bill Cisek** knows the value of the work of the OCFC and its partners. He has lived in Venango County most of his life and as solicitor to the county’s Children and Youth Services Agency has seen the value of changes in the way Pennsylvania approaches issues of child dependency.

“They’ve made a huge impact. Prior to OCFC, on a scale of one to 10, we were probably operating

at a one. Now, children and youth agencies are operating between eight and 10 – it’s that much of a difference. And if you’re a child that has been positively impacted by this, it means the world.

“Who better than family to raise a child? A child should be where their roots come from, not with someone else, unless warranted.

“Prior to the work of OCFC, the agency in our county was known as the Evil Empire – the agency that went and snatched babies and didn’t work with people. It was the dark agency that did what they thought was right and didn’t seek input from anyone else.

“Today, there’s a night-and-day difference. We bring the family together to ferret out their issues and come up with a plan to meet the concerns. And that’s what it’s all about. A family who comes up with their own plan is more likely to follow that plan, to become successful and to do it on their own.”

## Being a Judge

Historically, judges have been regarded as respected members of communities, committed to the law and its equal application to everyone who comes before them in their courtrooms.

Why does a person want to become a judge? What is it like to be one and how do judges view their role and the role of the judiciary in our society?

Philadelphia Common Pleas Court **President Judge Sheila Woods-Skipper** was first appointed, then elected to the bench. She has heard criminal cases including those in mental health court. She says being a judge “is the best job I’ve ever had, a wonderful experience, and I would not trade it for the world.



“As a judge, I have the ability to make a difference. To show that everyone has the right to have access to justice, to know that there is an even playing field and that you will have the opportunity to have someone listen and give you your day in court. It doesn’t matter whether it is civil, criminal or family court; everyone has the right to be heard.”

President Judge Woods-Skipper says that one challenge of being a jurist is the isolation that comes as one takes on an entirely different role among colleagues and that sometimes even friends look at you a little differently.

**“As a judge, I have the ability to make a difference. To show that everyone has the right to have access to justice, to know that there is an even playing field...”**

“I remember being in the deli line in the supermarket and someone turned around and said, ‘Judge, what are you doing here?’ And I laughed and I said, ‘I have to eat, just like you do.’”

*Continued on back.*

**Being a Judge**, *continued.*

She said that people often think judges only sit and hear cases and render decisions, but in actuality they do so much more by overseeing programs to help people who come before the courts.

President Judge Woods-Skipper talks with pride and passion about presiding over Philadelphia's mental health court – one of the judiciary's many problem-solving courts – and the satisfaction in providing support that allows participants to achieve goals ranging from reconnecting with family to learning how to take medications, to finding jobs or volunteer opportunities.

"We need resources to be current and relevant. For example, on the criminal side, most of the individuals we sentence are not spending a lifetime in prison. If we want them to be successful and not repeat offenders, there need to be resources available to make sure they are getting things they need – education, training, housing – so as judges we need to be sure there is re-entry planning. You need funding to do that.

"I would like the public to recognize the importance that judges place on the administration of justice and that they are really committed and dedicated to doing that. We pride ourselves on knowing the law, applying the law equally and providing access to justice. We just need to make sure we have the appropriate resources to do that."

*Sincere thanks to:*

***Trooper Adam Reed***

***Ms. Mindy Arnold***

***Mr. Bill Cisek***

***The Honorable Sheila Woods-Skipper***



**AOPC**

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