

Unified Judicial System of Pennsylvania
Senate & House 2014 Appropriations Committee Hearings

Mr. Chairman, I am pleased to join with colleagues and staff today to appear before you and members of the committee to discuss the judiciary's funding request for the coming fiscal year.

The judiciary's core mission, as you know, is the delivery of fair, timely and accessible justice to Pennsylvanians. We believe we are meeting those goals effectively, but we also recognize the need for continuous improvement and being here provides a healthy assessment of others' views.

Funding to fulfill the judiciary's mission derives in its entirety from the annual appropriations process in which the judiciary submits budgets three times, first to the Executive Branch and later to the House and Senate. Thereafter, as we do today at your invitation, we participate in these hearings and then largely await the outcome of deliberations between our sister branches.

Every dollar expended by the judiciary, whether for salaries, grants to counties, computer operations, or programs, is appropriated by the General Assembly, subject to the Governor's concurrence. An insert to our handout today graphically illustrates this fact.

The judiciary's budget is driven primarily by constitutionally required personnel costs. Our discretionary spending is minimal, thus making the judiciary's annual budget somewhat unique within the overall appropriations process and, perhaps, uniquely difficult for you to resolve each year. Consequently, collaboration among the three branches is essential, regardless of other issues, to ensure that fair, timely and accessible justice is possible.

As an example, recent years have seen strong collaboration between Governor Corbett and Senate leaders in avoiding appointments to vacant judicial seats, resulting in cumulative savings of \$14.1 million. Savings of \$4.5 million have also resulted from the judiciary's examination of the need for each of the more than 500 magisterial district court judgeships. Eighteen courts have been closed; another 10 will close by 2018. A similar evaluative process is being developed for review of the Common Pleas Court complement, currently at 451, and should be available for collaborative use later this year.

Overall in the past six years, the judiciary has saved about \$45.8 million through various means.

On the revenue side of the budgetary equation, the Judicial Computer System has been effectively used to facilitate collection of fines, fees, costs and restitution. **PAePay**, a process developed in-house as part of the Judicial Computer System, allows online, credit and debit card payments for assessments including bail. With \$63 million collected in 2013, **PAePay** shows considerable promise.

Effective collection of fines, fees, costs and restitution is, of course, not just about dollars, but also significantly about justice fulfilled and lives restored. It is also true though that annual collections by the judiciary (\$468.6 million in 2012) exceed the branch's overall budget request.

Two legislative initiatives with budgetary implications are proposed for fiscal year 2014-2015: a phased plan contained in SB 1215 to transition county clerks of courts and prothonotaries and their key deputies to state judicial employment, and a requested \$1.5 million appropriation request to support court interpreter services in counties.

By abandoning a 19th century operating structure, the first initiative will fully integrate the functions of these offices into the Unified Judicial System, similar to the transfer to state service 14

years ago of district court administrators. Increased efficiencies and long-term cost savings are anticipated.

Endorsed as a priority by the County Commissioners Association of Pennsylvania, the proposal is mostly funded by shifting part of counties' annual state-funded court operating grants for this purpose. A majority of Pennsylvania Association of Prothonotaries and Clerks of Courts members support the proposal.

The \$1.5 million grant request reflects state and federal law mandating interpreters' availability while acknowledging that counties can be faced with unexpected and large interpreter expenses for protracted and complex litigation or when an interpreter is not locally available.

Under the Supreme Court's guidance, the judiciary continues to implement ways to cope with the management challenges inherent in a large court system. Five highlights are:

- During 2014-15 the judiciary will expand the rollout of a series of publicly accessible "dashboards," most of which will use Judicial Computer System data to help local courts determine areas of effectiveness or needed improvement in case management.
- Also aimed at ensuring timely and accessible justice, the chief justice has directed local courts to develop plans this year to reduce civil case inventories that analysts have identified in some counties.
- With the assistance of legislative leaders, reforms to Philadelphia's traffic court continue, as do other systemic reforms throughout Pennsylvania's First Judicial District.
- The Office of Children and Families in the Courts' measurable progress to curb the dissolution of families continues, with 7,200 fewer children in the dependency system since 2006 and an annual savings of \$117 million estimated last year by the state Department of Public Welfare.
- Veterans and those suffering substance abuse or mental health problems continue to benefit from nearly 100 problem-solving courts statewide. Cost savings and lower recidivism rates are additional benefits. The effectiveness of these courts will begin to be tested this year with a newly developed data-gathering system.

In addition to the judiciary's extensive budget submission itself and this statement, part of the judiciary's presentation includes a handout that describes the diverse activities of Pennsylvania's court system. We hope that it will further convey the serious work and significant contributions of judges and staff to foster a fair, timely and accessible court system for all of the Commonwealth's citizens.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.