

The 2016-17 Budget Request of Pennsylvania's Unified Judicial System

Mr. Chairman and committee members, on behalf of the Chief Justice of Pennsylvania, Thomas G. Saylor, we are pleased to appear before you and proud to represent the 1,027 jurists across the Commonwealth and many more state and county staff who comprise Pennsylvania's Unified Judicial System. We appreciate the opportunity to discuss with you the needs of Pennsylvania's courts for the next fiscal year.

The judiciary's core mission, as you know, is the delivery of fair, timely and accessible justice to Pennsylvanians. Our colleagues on the Supreme Court join us and the jurists and staff noted above in dedication to that mission. We believe we are meeting those goals effectively, but we also recognize the need for continuous improvement. Being here provides a healthy assessment of others' views.

Funding to fulfill the judiciary's mission derives from appropriations by the legislature and the governor. The judiciary submits budgets three times annually, first to the executive branch and later to the House and Senate, followed by participation in these hearings.

The judiciary's budget represents approximately one-half of 1 percent of the overall state budget. Our budget is largely personnel-driven, not "program"- driven. For instance, 86 percent of the judiciary's spending plan funds compensation, 60 percent of which is dedicated to judicial compensation prescribed by law and is constitutionally mandated.

As in the current year, the single largest cost driver comes from pension obligations, and the next largest is health care cost increases, the combination amounting to nearly two-thirds of this year's projected budget increase. The remaining one-third of the requested increase is primarily to fund judicial vacancies filled by election or potential appointment and for related staff.

The judiciary is aware of the need to seek economies where practical and, given its responsibility to collect fines, fees and costs, to maximize those collections as established by law. Over the past eight years, the judiciary has saved more than \$73.1 million through various measures, including rebidding contracts, adjustments to employee compensation, reviewing medical cost options, and magisterial district judge rightsizing.

On the revenue side, the Judicial Computer System has been effectively used to increase collection of fines, costs and restitution – more than \$4.1 billion over the past nine years. In 2015 alone \$464 million was collected, an amount which exceeds the judiciary's overall budget request. **PAePay**, a process developed in-house that allows online credit and debit card payments for assessments, including bail, is believed to have helped increase the judiciary's total collections. In 2015 **PAePay** processed 700,000 transactions totaling \$92 million – 20 percent more than in 2014.

By and large, these collections flow back to state and local governments (which also receive about 10 percent of this budget in grants) and to victims services programs.

Four programs that we would like to highlight are:

- Thanks to your \$1.5 million appropriation in the current year, the judiciary is helping Pennsylvania comply with state and federal requirements that interpreters be available for limited-english-proficiency individuals involved in the justice system. That funding is being used for a grant program that helps counties facing unexpected and large interpreter expenses for protracted and complex litigation or when an interpreter is not locally available.
- The one new line item request in the judicial budget this year (\$501,000) is to further work of the AOPC's Office of Elder Justice in the Courts. The office is responsible for implementing recommendations from the Elder Law Task Force to address issues related to guardianship, elder abuse and access to justice for Pennsylvania's large elder population. The office works with local courts to ensure compliance with guardianship case monitoring policies and procedures; identifies sources of funding for guardianship initiatives, including grants; and provides training and technical assistance for judges, court staff, attorneys and guardians.
- Data from the judiciary's Office of Children and Families in the Courts confirms that the number of children under the supervision of the courts and the child welfare system who are safely remaining at home or being placed with family members has increased by 38 percent over the past two years. Keeping children at home or with family eliminates time otherwise spent in foster care, saves taxpayer dollars and reduces potential emotional trauma.
- Veterans and those suffering substance abuse or mental health problems continue to benefit from more than 100 problem-solving courts statewide. These courts improve access to treatment, counseling and coping services for nonviolent eligible defendants and serve as an alternative to costly incarceration.

As we noted earlier, courts are expected to deliver fair, timely and accessible justice and we believe these types of programs add measurably in meeting that core mission.

In addition to the judiciary's extensive budget submission itself and this statement, part of the judiciary's presentation includes a handout that features budget and program highlights from 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 – a system of which we can all be proud.

We look forward to your questions and appreciate the opportunity to join with you today.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.