

Supreme Court of Pennsylvania
Senate Appropriations Committee Hearing Statement
February 26, 2019

On behalf of Chief Justice Tom Saylor and our colleagues we appreciate the opportunity to join you here today.

Jurists and staff of the Unified Judicial System (UJS) work hard to ensure that Pennsylvania's courts are accessible and just. As a core function of state government we are guided by centuries of tradition, yet we foster innovation as well. Either way we are mindful of the need to use public resources effectively in the administration of justice.

Significant accomplishments of the UJS in 2018 include the roll-out of an automated statewide Guardianship Tracking System (GTS) and work preparatory for implementation of the Clean Slate law. The GTS will help ensure the security of elder Pennsylvanians; Clean Slate, as enacted by the legislature, will offer Pennsylvanians opportunities that might otherwise have been out of reach.

Both the GTS and Clean Slate rely on information available through the Judiciary's computer systems; absent that information neither GTS nor Clean Slate is possible.

Expansion of problem-solving courts, our long-standing successful focus on permanency placement for dependent children, and emphasis on language accessibility in the courts continue to serve Pennsylvanians in tangible ways. Starting last July, use of the Judicial Needs Assessment data to better ensure that judicial resources are effectively utilized and distributed statewide shows promise of lasting benefits as well.

As this committee is aware, the judiciary is funded in three ways – general fund appropriations (state dollars) and statutory surcharges for operation of the judiciary, and certain fines, fees and costs collected by the UJS for judicial automation.

Similar to the General Assembly, the judiciary's funding represents approximately one-half of one percent of the overall state budget. Included in the Judiciary's budget proposal in Fiscal Year 2019-20 are costs associated with seven new Court of Common Pleas seats mandated by the legislature and 41 vacant appellate, common pleas and magisterial seats to be filled in the 2019 elections.

While these expenses are unavoidable, the judiciary's estimated cumulative savings are more than \$102 million over the past 11 years, including more than \$10 million in the current fiscal year in areas including:

- Realignment of magisterial judicial districts -- \$5.46 million;
- Ongoing savings from benefits changes -- \$3.4 million;
- Ongoing savings from contracts -- \$1.29 million; and
- Other/Personnel (reduction in Commonwealth Court senior judges) -- \$440,000

Veteran committee members may recall that more than \$483 million in fines, fees, costs and restitution were collected last year through the Judicial Computer System. Throughout the last decade that number tops \$4.65 billion, the majority of which does not flow directly to the judiciary but to state and local governments and victims of crime.

In order to meet its general budgetary needs this coming fiscal year, the judiciary is seeking a modest increase of 4.5% in state funds over the current year. As in past years, the majority of this request would cover fixed personnel costs. While we have been operating flat-funded budgets for the past two years, an increase in general fund dollars is important to achieve balance between tax and user fee funding streams.

A different funding challenge confronts the Judicial Computer System (JCS) as a result of passage last year of Act 42 of 2018. Act 42 diverted \$15 million of restricted revenue earmarked for the JCS – one third of overall JCS funding-- to assist in funding a school safety initiative *and* provides like diversion each succeeding year.

When the JCS's trial court case management system was implemented in 2006 media statewide lauded the importance of agencies being able to share critical data. The *Allentown Morning Call* wrote: "...uniform automation.....will give law enforcement agencies more tools to apprehend suspects, find fugitives and track important criminal history data." The JCS has fulfilled that mission and more.

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As always, we appreciate the opportunity to appear before the committee today. We understand and respect the difficulty of the task before the General Assembly and on behalf of the Supreme Court and our judicial colleagues and staff, look forward to discussing the work and the positive impact of the Unified Judicial System.