



ADMINISTRATIVE OFFICE of PENNSYLVANIA COURTS

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Pennsylvania Supreme Court, Department of Human Services Address Criminal Justice Reform for Pennsylvanians with Autism

HARRISBURG — Recognizing the importance of criminal justice reform for those with an autism spectrum disorder (ASD), the Pennsylvania Supreme Court, along with the Pennsylvania Department of Human Services (DHS), took steps toward addressing access to justice issues in central Pa and the Susquehanna Valley.

“The goal here is simple – listen to those living in silence for too long, learn from their experiences and give power to their voices to educate those around us,” Justice Kevin Dougherty said. “That’s the way you work together to bring about real and lasting change for people in need.

“These forums have sparked invaluable conversations with more than 1,000 people across Pennsylvania – and we’re just getting started. The message is clear -- if we’re truly committed to reforming our system, we need to broaden our vision and open ourselves up to someone else’s reality – especially when it looks different than our own.”

In 2020, the Supreme Court signaled its commitment to Pennsylvanians with autism by forming a first-of-its-kind partnership with the Department of Human Services to heighten the focus on helping judges better understand and communicate with individuals with an ASD.

Today’s discussion is the third in a five-part regional series aimed at learning about court experiences from individuals with an ASD. A statewide virtual kick-off event was held in Nov., setting the stage for the regional listening tour focused on listening, learning and educating.

Those participating in today’s virtual regional forum included:

- Justice Kevin Dougherty, Pa Supreme Court
- Nina Wall, Director, Bureau of Autism Services, Pa Department of Human Services
- Tom Hassell, Self-advocate living with autism, Cumberland County
- Kylie Stauffer, Parent, Cumberland County
- Mike Piecuch, Centre County District Attorney
- Hon. Stephen Minor, President Judge, Potter County Court of Common Pleas

- Hon. John Foradora, President Judge, Jefferson County Court of Common Pleas
- Hon. Paula Aigner, Magisterial District Judge, Blair County
- Laval Miller-Wilson, Pa Health Law Project Attorney
- Lt. Adam Reed, Pennsylvania State Police
- Dr. Lucas Malishchak, Director of the Psychology Office for the Pa Department of Corrections
- Scott Shea, Deputy Chief Juvenile Probation Officer, Cumberland County
- Dr. Ashley Yinger, Dauphin County CIT/Co-Responder Program

Through the discussion, the Court and DHS will hear first-hand about challenges faced in the system from medical professionals, service providers in the central Pa and the Susquehanna Valley and from individuals with autism alike as they seek access to justice.

“Education and awareness are critical to ensuring we are providing for the needs of all court users, especially those with an ASD,” Dougherty said. “The more we learn, the more we grow as a system and as a community, but most importantly in our ability to be part of the type of positive change that will impact Pennsylvania families.”

With nearly one in 59 children diagnosed with an ASD*, judges hearing cases in criminal, juvenile, orphans’, family court, etc. are sure to have individuals living with autism come before them.

As part of this effort, during the COVID-19 pandemic, the courts have added information and resources for families supporting an individual with autism on the Pennsylvania Courts frequently asked questions [page](#).

For more information about this joint effort and services and support for individuals with autism visit ASERT (Autism Services Education Resources and Training) at <https://paautism.org/resource/justice/>.

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**Statistic from the Center for Disease Control and Prevention’s Autism and Developmental Disabilities Monitoring (ADDM) Network, 2018*

