



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), today took steps toward addressing access to justice issues in western Pennsylvania.

“Our forum in western Pa signals the end of our listening tour, but the beginning of our mission to bring about lasting criminal justice reform for individuals with autism,” Justice Kevin Dougherty said.

“In Nov. we committed to virtually crossing the state to 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. “While our virtual tour is coming to an end, our work has only just begun.

“Early on, we said we were committed to reforming our system, to broadening our vision and opening ourselves up to someone else’s reality – especially when it looks different than our own. Hearing the stories and learning about the lives lived and lessons learned from our friends and neighbors with autism has only increased our resolve to make lasting and positive change.”

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 last 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 include:

- Justice Kevin Dougherty, Pa. Supreme Court
- Nina Wall, director, Bureau of Autism Services, Pa. Department of Human Services

- Kate Hooven, justice system project coordinator for ASERT (Autism Services, Education, Resources and Training)
- Michelle Middlemiss, self-advocate living with autism, Allegheny County
- Rep. Jessica Benham, Legislator, Allegheny County, and self-advocate living with autism
- Jamie Upshaw, parent of a person with autism, Allegheny County
- Lu Randall, Autism Connection of PA
- Sandra Moore, director, Office of Children and Family in the Courts
- Hon. Judge William F Ward, retired Judge, Allegheny County Court of Common Pleas
- Hon. Rita Hathaway, President Judge, Westmoreland County Court of Common Pleas
- Hon. Susan Strohmeier, Magisterial District Judge, Erie County
- Tamara Siegert, Esq., attorney, Allegheny County
- Jesse Torisky, Esq., Autism Society of Pittsburgh, CEO and president; and brother of a person with autism
- Janet Pawlowski, licensed psychologist and provider, Erie County
- Capt. Christopher King, Capt. Joanne Reed and Lt. Adam Reed, Pennsylvania State Police
- Cristyn Zett, commander of Pittsburgh Bureau of Police

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

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*