

AOPC CONNECTED



Issue 5, 2022

In this issue

Read about how facility dogs are being used in Pennsylvania courthouses, the latest progress report and data on elder abuse and guardianship, hiring and retention challenges in the public sector, a department spotlight on AOPC Legal and staff appreciation events.

Welcoming Pennsylvania's New Courthouse Facility Dog Advisor



Jerri Rook and Ludo

Jerri Rook, executive assistant to Lycoming County President Judge **Nancy Butts**, is also the handler for Lycoming County's Courthouse Dog, Ludo.

In early summer of 2022, Jerri was appointed by the Courthouse Dogs Foundation to be the Pennsylvania State Coordinator of Justice Facility Dogs U.S.

Courthouse Dogs Foundation educates legal professionals about the benefits of using courthouse facility dogs, including information on reducing stress during legal proceedings and how to successfully implement a courthouse facility dog program using best practices in this field.

Jerri is currently working on compiling a list of working courthouse facility dogs and their handlers in the state, as well as organizations that may have a facility dog that works in a courthouse.

As a member of Courthouse Dogs Foundation, Jerri wanted to learn all that she could about courthouse facility dogs and provide training in the areas where she uses her facility dog, Ludo.

"The foundation and program have brought so many handlers together and long-lasting friendships are made through them," she said. "They also provide much needed support and training to the handlers. My hope is to someday have a statewide facility dog program to allow

our facility dogs to assist other counties where there are no current programs and to help facilitate programs in courthouses looking to start their own program."

Jerri previously worked for former Lycoming County Judge **Joy Reynolds McCoy**, who was the family court, dependency and juvenile delinquency judge. McCoy was instrumental in starting a dog program in their county.

In 2018, their first facility dog, Jedi, who was donated by Canine Companions, began working with children in the court system. They then started to work with victims in the criminal system, victims of domestic violence and treatment courts.

Jedi was diagnosed with lymphoma in September 2021. Although they started the chemo process, he was too weak to continue chemo and sadly passed away in November 2021.

In April 2022, Jerri was invited back to Canine Companions for a successor dog, and Ludo started working in June.

"I could go on and on about the dogs I've worked with. They have changed my life for the better, that's for sure," added Jerri. "I hope that in the future, all courthouses have a facility dog available for their visitors, staff, victims and children." ▲

Pa. Supreme Court Advisory Council Releases Latest Progress Report and Data on Elder Abuse and Guardianships

Focused on addressing critical issues confronting Pennsylvania's elders, the Pennsylvania Supreme Court's Advisory Council on Elder Justice in the Courts recently released its [latest progress report and data](#) on the status of guardianships statewide.

"The progress recounted in this report represents our ongoing effort to address the challenges facing our commonwealth's elders," Chief Justice of Pennsylvania **Debra Todd** said.

"As Pennsylvania's population ages, the court system faces an unprecedented challenge to monitor guardianships and protect our vulnerable adults from financial exploitation and abuse... The collective work of this council and our agency partners will become even more critical in changing and saving the lives and protecting the dignity of our elders,"
Chief Justice Todd said.

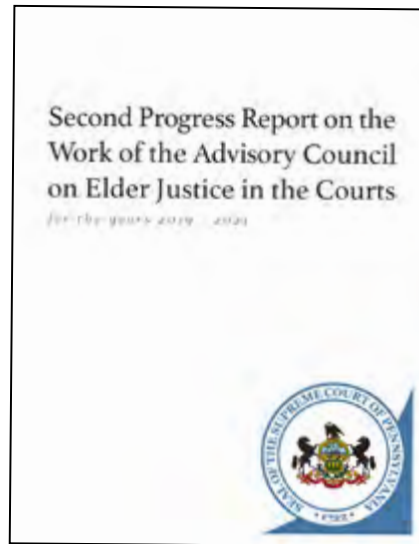
Since the Task Force report was released in 2014, from among the recommendations offered, the Council identified the need for a Guardianship Tracking System (GTS), which allows courts to better monitor active guardianships through a statewide uniform process.

"This report is a testament to the Pennsylvania Courts and their agency partners' commitment and dedication to Pennsylvania's older adults," Montgomery County Common Pleas and Orphans' Court Judge **Lois Murphy** said. "The collective accomplishments and initiatives continue to serve as a blueprint for courts and others to follow."

"As a result of the Council's work, including through the extraordinary challenges faced during the global pandemic, statewide guardianship data and other critical information is now available to guardians, interested organizations and the public," continued Murphy. "This will change and save lives."

Rolled out in 2018, the GTS permits courts to scrutinize red flags prompted on guardianship cases and respond to potential problems immediately, allowing better oversight and protection for persons under guardianship. The statewide data contained in GTS allows the Advisory Council to track guardians' compliance with filing mandated reports and take a data-driven approach to guardianship reform.

"The ability to generate accurate and comprehensive statistics from the data collected by GTS is critically important, as nationally there is a dearth of information



available on guardianship cases," said Advisory Council Chair, the Hon. **Paula Francisco Ott**.

"With the data and additional information available, we are better equipped to address the needs and challenges facing Pennsylvania's aging population and to improve and

protect access to justice for elders."

As of Dec. 31, 2021, there were more than 18,000 active guardianship cases in GTS, with 382 professional guardians and more than 19,000 non-professional (family/lay) guardians. The total amount of guardianship assets under court supervision was more than \$1.7 billion.

In addition to the new GTS data available, the Council has focused on efforts to educate judges, court staff, attorneys, guardians and the public about elder abuse and financial exploitation, including:

- Training programs, educational sessions and materials for judges, including the Pennsylvania Guardianship Bench Book and Pennsylvania Elder Abuse Bench Book
- Use of advanced communication technology as a means for homebound elders and long-term care residents to access essential support and court services, including participating in hearings
- Virtual town hall sessions focused on the prevention of and response to elder abuse and financial exploitation and on recognizing alternatives to guardianship
- Training programs and resources for family and lay guardians about their powers, duties and responsibilities. ▲

more information

<https://www.pacourts.us/judicial-administration/court-programs/office-of-elder-justice-in-the-courts>.

Caseload Statistical Data Updated for 2021

Caseload stats are updated annually, and the interactive data dashboards on the Pa. Courts website now reflect verified data for calendar year 2021.

Data dashboards are used to identify court trends and are heavily relied upon by judges and court staff to manage court operations. In addition to being a valuable resource for court management, the dashboards also help to assure court data is easily accessible and transparent.

The dashboards are a series of interactive, digital data visuals that simplify how users look up court data. They allow court staff, researchers, reporters and the public to quickly sift through caseload data and analyze and interpret court statistics at a glance.

A wide range of caseload data is accessible through the dashboards including civil, criminal, magisterial district court, orphans' court, custody and divorce, child dependency, paternity and support, juvenile delinquency, problem-solving courts and protection from abuse statistics.

Data are used by the judiciary in policy development, program evaluation and workload analysis – and also by organizations outside the judiciary including the Legislature and other county, state and federal agencies.

Caseload statistics are available both statewide and at the county level on the judiciary's website at www.pacourts.us under the "Research and Statistics" page. In addition, monthly preliminary data for 2022 are also now available and posted under the [caseload highlights tab](#). ▲



Sharpsburg judge sends a trauma-informed message with art and animals

By Abby MacKey

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Fox Chapel-area District Magisterial Judge **Matt Rudzki** knows those appearing in his, or any, court feel a sense of "helplessness."

Whether they're there to fight a speeding ticket, solve a landlord-tenant dispute, or, for juveniles, to defend themselves against accusations of vaping in school or truancy, those individuals — and those who support them — are stressed.

And for many, there's another layer of anxiety.

[Research shows](#) that 70 to 90% of youth offenders have experienced one or more types of trauma, and there's mounting evidence that childhood trauma exposure is likely a key risk factor for run-ins with the law.

That trauma can be triggered by knowing they are not in control, being confined to a small space (that some district magisterial courtrooms and waiting rooms are), having to face accusers or abusers, or even the colors on the wall.

"Most of the people coming into court are there on, what is likely, the worst day of their lives," he said. "We need to meet people where they are."

For Rudzki, who took the bench in January after one term as the mayor of Sharpsburg, that's achieved by acknowledging all the facets of trauma-informed justice.

He's one of only two Allegheny County district magisterial judges to offer night court — held on the last Thursday of every month — to allow citizens to avoid the stress of missing work or school. He covers his waiting room walls with locally created art stamped with positive affirmations. And he's the only magisterial judge in the county to invite therapy dogs and trained handlers.

"I think you get better responses from people when they're comfortable, and they know they're in a setting where they're being heard," he said. "It's intimidating to be in front of a judge in robes. I want to try to break down those barriers."



Judge Matthew V. Rudzki sits behind Bear, a 5-year-old therapy dog who works with Therapets. (Mattie Neretin/Post-Gazette)

Man's best friend

Animal Friends Therapets liaison Marcy Fenell didn't know what to expect when she brought a dog to Rudzki's courtroom for an experimental visit in April.

The organization's therapy dogs have experience inside Beaver County family courtrooms, but in Rudzki's case, they're asked to visit in the waiting room, once per month on days when juvenile cases are heard.

"It helps the kid in question, but also those around he or she," Fenell said. "It makes people a little bit nicer, chills them out a little bit, because you aren't focused on being the next one in the court."

Volunteer handlers of Therapets dogs are trained to only engage with individuals who seem willing, and to do so while essentially ignoring their environment — ask no identifying information and nothing about the reason for their presence.

Instead, they introduce their dogs, talking about funny things they do or what they like. Often, those visiting the courtroom will offer stories about their own pets.

But the dogs offer more than distraction: They're scientifically proven to lower stress hormones.

"The last few years have been tough for everybody," Fenell said. "When someone is going in to meet with the judge, I think if you're in a happier, better frame of mind, there's probably a better outcome for everybody."

Art with authority

Whether it's a juvenile day or not, those visiting Rudzki's courtroom need only look at the waiting room walls for a reminder that their current situation is impermanent and a shared experience.

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Summer intern Anna Ferris looks over at Luanne Snyder of Therapets, bringing in Bear, a five-year-old puppy to the courtroom. (Mattie Neretin/Post-Gazette)

Six pieces of abstract art emblazoned with messages such as “You matter,” “It’s OK to not be OK” and “You are not alone,” decorate the waiting room walls.

While the messages are meaningful, their backstory lends authority.

Katie Whysong was a Fox Chapel School District middle school student when she was diagnosed with depression. After hearing about a program where students and teachers decorated school restrooms with positive messages, she approached her art teacher, Nanci Goldberg, with a similar idea, thinking it was a way to reach kids battling mental illness, just like her.

Goldberg championed the idea, but then the COVID-19 pandemic hit.

Although Katie received unwavering support from her parents, Alisa and Todd Whysong, friends, doctors, medication and therapies, she took her own life 10 days after her 15th birthday in March 2021.

Soon after she died, her parents picked up a piece of mail meant for their daughter. It was a welcome packet from the Human Rights Campaign to which she’d donated her allowance money.

“She was really into advocacy for mental health, just any kind of marginalized community,” Ms. Whysong said. “She was really a little activist.”

To honor Katie’s legacy, they started the nonprofit Positive Painting Project. At events, which are held at community gatherings and in schools, individuals paint whatever strikes them onto canvases. After they dry, one of six “messages of hope” are screen printed on top of their art, and they’re hung in public spaces such as schools, businesses and, now, Rudzki’s courtroom.

“I think the extension of her interest in human rights to what Matt’s doing would please her, that she would feel

that’s exactly who she wanted to reach,” Mr. Whysong said. “We know that mental health is a huge part of what comes across Matt’s desk. So, being able to provide that support, that’s what the whole goal is.”

Compassion rules

Before Rudzki invited therapy dogs into his courtroom, he sought the approval of 5th Judicial District President Judge **Kimberly Berkeley Clark**, who was “very glad” to approve his request. Not only does it align with her own beliefs about trauma-informed court, but also she knows such initiatives are supported by the Pennsylvania Judicial Roundtable, on which she serves.

“Many people who have issues that lead them to court, they also have histories of poverty and trauma and a lot of other things,” she said. “What we want to do is at least do no additional harm, and really understand how trauma impacts everything.”

While night court, art and therapy dogs are all appreciated, those are just part of how sensitivities are displayed.

“The physical space is part of being trauma-informed, but I’m not sure it’s the first part of it,” Clark said. “A lot of it



The paws of Bear, next to the start mark of the waiting room seating area. (Mattie Neretin/Post-Gazette)

is the atmosphere the judge creates, being respectful of people, being understanding and patient.”

Issues such as space in magisterial district courtrooms and waiting rooms, lease agreements in those buildings, budgets, and concerns about allergies or phobias of dogs all factor into why some jurists choose not to partner with therapy animal programs or other more demonstrative gestures of trauma-informed justice, she said.

And there are those with even more robust programs. In the 5th Judicial District’s Family Division, led by Administrative Judge **Kim D. Eaton**, trauma-informed measures are unmistakable, with a playground, wellness center, sensory room, wiring to dock kids’ electronic devices and decor in therapeutic colors.

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Other measures include Clark's years-old initiative to adopt time-specific hearings rather than forcing defendants and families to wait for unknown amounts of time — a policy that continues to spread to other jurists. In the future, she'd like to adopt hospital-like progress screens for juvenile cases, where defendants are assigned numbers instead of having cases paged on a loudspeaker.

But no matter how implicit or overt the efforts, they express compassion that can permanently alter how citizens interact with the legal system.

"I can make all the right decisions, but if I deliver the

message in a way that's disrespectful or not trauma-informed, litigants may perceive that the system is not fair," she said.

Although trauma-informed court may not require the existence of hope-inspiring art or therapy animals, there are benefits to such obvious displays, as Rudzki sees it: "I think people want change, and people can see I'm implementing that change on the bench."

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New Director of Juvenile Court Judges' Commission

On July 16, 2022, **Robert J. Tomassini** was appointed executive director of the Juvenile Court Judges' Commission (JCJC).

Mr. Tomassini began his career back in 1987 as a juvenile probation officer in Adams County where he was later promoted to deputy chief juvenile probation officer in 1991.

In 2008, Mr. Tomassini was recognized by the JCJC as Juvenile Probation Supervisor of the Year and two years later, he was promoted to the position of director of juvenile probation services in that jurisdiction, where he remained until 2013.

It was then when Mr. Tomassini was hired by the JCJC as director of administration and grant programs, overseeing the agency's operating budget as well as management of the agency's Juvenile Probation Services Grant Program, which provides nearly \$18 million of state funding to juvenile probation departments across the commonwealth.

Mr. Tomassini was later promoted to the position of director of the JCJC's Center for Juvenile Justice Training and Research (CJJT&R) in 2015 located at Shippensburg University of Pennsylvania.

In 2016, Mr. Tomassini was promoted to the position of deputy director of the JCJC.

In this role, Mr. Tomassini also served as the project coordinator of Pennsylvania's Juvenile Justice System Enhancement Strategy (JJSES) – a statewide initiative to



JCJC Executive Director Robert J. Tomassini

implement evidence-based practices at every stage of the juvenile justice process.

Additionally, Mr. Tomassini currently serves in a leadership role with a team of statewide juvenile justice stakeholders participating in the Pennsylvania Reducing Racial and Ethnic Disparities in Juvenile Justice Certificate Program delivered by Georgetown University's Center for Juvenile Justice Reform. ▲



Legislative Roundup

by Damian J. Wachter, Esq.

As of this writing, the legislature is halfway through its fall 2022 voting session days – the House has three and the Senate has six voting days remaining prior to the General Election. It is expected several pending bills will advance to the governor’s desk during this time.

On Nov. 8, all 203 House seats and 25 Senate seats (even-numbered districts) are on the ballot. The current balance of power in the legislature slants heavily to the GOP. The Republicans control the House 113-88 (two vacancies) and the Senate 29-21.

Amendments to Article V (Judiciary)

At least 12 proposed constitutional amendments seeking to amend Art. V have been introduced this session. One amendment, district elections for appellate court judges, passed in the prior legislative session (2019-20). An outside possibility exists that this amendment could be considered this fall.

The others – establishing term limits for appellate jurists, requiring all jurists to stand for reelection, creating a legislative role in procedural rulemaking, requiring the election of common pleas president judges in counties with three or more judges, establishing appellate court merit selection, repealing the judicial compensation clause, establishing six-year terms for all jurists, and requiring Supreme Court justices to run for reelection every four years – have not passed previously nor were they considered in enough time this session to meet the constitutional deadline for publication *three months before the next general election*.

Determinate Sentence in Summary Traffic Cases

[House Bill 521](#), [Senate Bill 1031](#) and [House Bill 2106](#) allow a court to impose a determinate sentence for a summary violation under Title 75 when the maximum sentence of total confinement imposed is 90 days or less. The bills remove current sentencing ranges enumerated in [75 Pa.C.S. § 1543](#) (driving while operating privilege is suspended or revoked).

Each of the three bills include other provisions in addition to the determinate sentencing changes. The bills are at various points in the process, with HB 521 the furthest along having passed the House 143-58 and reported from Senate Transportation 11-3.

MDJs and Referral to Collection Agencies

[Senate Bill 1208](#) is a reintroduction of previously vetoed legislation, [Senate Bill 516](#). The bill amends Title 42, prioritizing Crime Victims Act costs in the order of payment

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of monies that remain after restitution is paid. Additionally, the bill allows MDJs to turn delinquent accounts over to a private collection entity if the defendant fails to appear for the hearing. In those circumstances, the defendant may request a new hearing, and upon such request, collection activities must cease. Collection activities may resume if the defendant fails to appear at the new financial determination hearing. Finally, the legislation allows for the waiver or reduction of fines and costs, except those levied pursuant to the Crimes Victim Act, if the defendant is found unable to pay. The legislation has passed all chambers and is awaiting action by the governor.

Suspension of Operating Privilege

[House Bill 987](#) amends Title 75, requiring PennDOT to update driver records to address an active sanction imposed for a conviction of any controlled substance offense under law, changing the record to indicate the active departmental sanction has ended.

The bill repeals provisions imposing a suspension of operating privilege upon receipt of a certified record of conviction, adjudication of delinquency or admission into a preadjudication program for misrepresentation of age to secure liquor or malt or brewed beverages, purchase, consumption, possession or transportation of liquor or malt or brewed beverages and carrying a false identification card. The legislation has passed all chambers and is awaiting action by the governor.

Indigent Defense Advisory Committee

[Senate Bill 1317](#) amends the Pennsylvania Commission on Crime and Delinquency (PCCD) Law, establishing the Indigent Defense Advisory Committee within PCCD comprised of five non-voting and 20 voting members. The committee consists of *ex officio*, and members appointed by legislative leaders, the governor and the chief justice. The seven chief justice appointments include three criminal court judges, a county chief public defender from recommendations of the Public Defender Association of Pennsylvania (PDAP) and three public defenders from specific classes of counties from recommendations of PDAP.

The legislation requires the committee to work with the AOPC and Juvenile Court Judges' Commission on data requests involving cases involving public defenders. Finally, the bill establishes the Indigent Defense Grant Program, funded from appropriations and transfers from the general fund and special funds, federal funds and other sources made available. Passed the Senate unanimously.

Guardianship Reform

[Senate Bill 1333](#) amends Title 20, requiring courts to appoint counsel to represent alleged incapacitated persons

(AIPs) in any matter for which counsel has not been retained by the AIP, including subsequent proceedings to consider, modify or terminate a guardianship.

Additionally, the bill requires petitions seeking to have an individual declared incapacitated to include facts demonstrating that less restrictive alternatives were considered, and reasons why the alternatives were insufficient – courts must make specific findings of fact as to the insufficiency prior to ordering a guardianship. Lastly, the bill mandates certification of individuals seeking guardianship of three or more persons. The bill was reported unanimously from the Senate Judiciary Committee.

Uniform Deployed Parents Custody and Visitation

[House Bill 2287](#) amends Titles 23 and 51, repealing current provisions governing child custody proceedings during military deployment and adding a new chapter, Uniform Deployed Parents Custody and Visitation. The legislation is based on a model law developed by the Uniform Law Commission. Similar laws have been adopted in 16 states.

Broadly, the bill defines numerous terms, adds subchapters governing custodial responsibilities during deployment and judicial procedure for granting custodial responsibility during deployment. The legislation passed the House unanimously and was referred to Senate Judiciary.

Select Committee on Law and Order

[House Resolution 216](#) establishes the Select Committee on Restoring Law and Order to investigate, review and make findings and recommendations concerning rising rates of crime, law enforcement and the enforcement of crime victim rights, with a heavy focus on Philadelphia. The resolution was adopted 114-86 by the House, and Senate action is not required. Representatives John Lawrence (R-Chester), Wendi Thomas (R-Bucks), Torren Ecker (R-Adams), Amen Brown (D-Philadelphia) and Danilo Burgos (D-Philadelphia) serve on the committee.

[House Resolution 227](#) holds Philadelphia DA Larry Krasner in contempt for failure to comply with a subpoena issued by the select committee. Under the resolution, "[a]ny act of the House of Representatives or the Speaker of the House of Representatives to enforce the contempt shall proceed at such time as authorized by an additional vote of the House of Representatives." The resolution was adopted by the House 162-38, and Senate action is not required.



{Damian Wachter, Esq.
is the acting director of
Legislative Affairs.}

PAJIRS 2.0 to Debut in 2023



The Pennsylvania Judicial Security Incident Reporting System (PAJIRS) provides judges, court administrators, judicial staff and county sheriffs with the ability to advise the AOPC/Office of Judicial District Security of security events occurring within Pennsylvania's 60 judicial districts.

While this innovative application has served Pennsylvania courts for almost two decades, AOPC/Judicial District Security is spearheading an initiative to enhance technologies that simplify the log-on process, streamline reporting and enable greater analytical capabilities of reportable events.

"The transition to the new PAJIRS 2.0 system will be intuitive for new and existing users and enable security incident reporting with unprecedented ease and speed to readily report security incidents to the AOPC," said **Rob Granzow**, Judicial District Security administrator.

Although the product's official debut is set for January 2023, plans are underway to ensure the upcoming transition is well-communicated to Pennsylvania's judicial districts and sheriffs' offices.

"While the original PAJIRS application has served the AOPC well since its inception in 2005, we are truly excited to provide judicial districts with PAJIRS 2.0. The new application will implement the same security incident reporting system being used by many government agencies across the United States," stated **Kyle Ramberger**, Judicial District Security assistant administrator.

"Common Pleas Courts and Sheriffs' offices will be able to access the reporting form by simply clicking on an Incident Reporting icon located on the AOPC/Judicial District Security's webpage, while Magisterial District Judges and their staff will find the 'Incident Reporting' icon on their Magisterial District Judge System portal," added Ramberger. ▲

more information

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Addressing recruitment and retention issues in MDJ offices

By **Michael Passiment**,
AOPC Judicial District Operations and
Programs administrator

The COVID-19 pandemic has brought about significant changes in how our economy and job market function, and employers are finding it exceedingly difficult to fill vacant positions as prospective employees are being more selective in terms of job pay, benefits and perks.

Anticipated retirements are accelerating as well, placing a greater impetus on employers to fill the talent gap.

According to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, from January 2020 – just prior to the pandemic – to January 2022, the government sector lost more than 600,000 workers – more than manufacturing, wholesale trade and construction combined.

The magisterial district courts in Pennsylvania are no stranger to this growing problem. Across the commonwealth, court administrators are seeing MDJ office staff leave in large numbers.

A common refrain for why staff are heading for the exit is low wages. In some counties, MDJ offices are competing with private sector businesses who can offer a more competitive wage, more flexible work hours, and other fringe benefits that the courts cannot.

Traditionally, the perception has been that while public sector employers tend to offer below-market compensation, they make up for this with job security, a robust retirement plan, great health insurance and a sense of public service.

While these values still hold up for some, they are being challenged by a younger workforce with different values. This younger workforce seeks greater flexibility in work environment and structure, more opportunities to advance and exercise entrepreneurship and employers who promote their well-being.

To assist judicial districts in navigating these challenging times for recruiting and retaining



Shelly Forte, director of enterprise recruitment for the Commonwealth of Pa., speaking on public sector hiring challenges

employees in the MDJ courts, AOPC/Judicial District Operations and Programs recently hosted a Minor Court Administrators' Workshop on Sept. 28-29 in Harrisburg to connect administrators with human capital management experts.

Bob Oglesby, Strategic Advisor at NEOGOV, a government software solutions company that assists public sector organizations in attracting and retaining top talent, presented 'The Data You Need to Know – How to Reach, Attract, and Retain Talent.'

His presentation gave attendees a comprehensive overview of the challenges facing public sector recruiters across the country and high-level solutions on how the courts in Pennsylvania can try new methods for reaching pools of talent in their communities.

NEOGOV conducted extensive surveys with nearly 300 public sector HR directors to gather firsthand insight into the hiring situation. Some notable results included the following:

- 83% of respondents identified voluntary turnover as the biggest driver of job openings in the public sector
- Increased competition in the job market, higher salaries elsewhere and remote work/flexible work arrangements were the most significant reasons given for this turnover
- Public sector organizations are contending with significantly fewer applicants per job opening, with the number of applicants per open job down 56% in the last year for the public sector
- Lower paying jobs received the biggest drop in applications, dropping nearly 40% in the last year

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- The struggle to fill vacant positions is placing greater strain on existing employees – 82% of those surveyed identified staff burnout as a significant challenge in the workplace.

After outlining the hiring crisis in the public sector, Oglesby segued into addressing what employers can do to combat this difficult job market.

Identifying what motivates workers in the public sector is critical to combating the hiring crisis. Surveying showed job security, attractive benefits packages and opportunity to do meaningful work were the most common motivators. These motivators were found equally important in retaining existing employees.

Another possible solution to boost employee recruitment is to improve the job application process. As Oglesby explained, “across all age groups, job seekers find that the process for getting a job is too cumbersome and slow.”

Many prospective employees were deterred from pursuing employment in some public sector agencies because of the negative experience in applying.

He explained that there is plenty of room for improvement in how employers facilitate the hiring process, starting with the application process. A challenge for employers is to make job descriptions clear, concise and responsive to those elements that attract job seekers.

Job advertisements should be:

- ✓ Transparent – communicating expectations, processes and outcomes expected of the successful job candidate
- ✓ Open and honest about pay
- ✓ Include day-to-day information about what the job looks and feels like

Job postings should also be seen as promotions or advertisements needing to be sold, with top motivators evident in the description and the most appealing aspects of the job marketed to a rapidly diversifying workforce.

Shelly Forte, director of Enterprise Recruitment with the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania, provided an overview of public sector hiring challenges here in the Keystone State, as well as her department’s efforts to make the Commonwealth an employer-of-choice.

Forte’s presentation served as a perfect segue into the hiring challenges and needs of the county courts.

She identified several challenges in talent management in state government, including inconsistent, delayed and outdated efforts to reach applicants, a persistent wage gap, a restrictive civil service system and a need to create more opportunities for diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI) in the workforce.

Forte explained some of the extensive employee recruitment and retention reform efforts that have been underway since the start of the Wolf Administration.

Some innovative ideas suggested:

- ✓ Recruitment videos using real employee testimonials
- ✓ Branding the Commonwealth as an employer at high schools, colleges and community organizations
- ✓ Greater usage of professional networking sites like LinkedIn, Indeed and Handshake

In addition to these suggestions, workshop attendees were provided examples of how to rewrite and promote job postings using dynamic and attention-grabbing language.

Workshop attendees expressed great interest in taking these ideas back to their judicial districts and several expressed their desire to reframe difficult to fill jobs with an eye toward what motivates prospective employees.

In the open discussion and peer learning session following the speakers, administrators across the state shared challenges they saw in their specific districts. While some judicial districts had unique challenges, the commonalities became abundantly clear.

While these challenges seem intractable, attendees from across the commonwealth, as well as AOPC staff, agreed that there were many recruitment ideas to take back and try in their districts.

As the job market continues to evolve in these uncertain times, the camaraderie and professionalism among all in attendance offers hope that many possible solutions exist to ensuring the courts are staffed and ready to meet the needs of their communities. ▲

Lawrence County Treatment Court Launches Veterans Treatment Track



Lawrence County recently added a Veterans Treatment Track as part of its long-running Treatment Court Program.

The Veterans Track is a specialized track targeting justice-involved veterans charged with qualifying offenses who may be suffering from addiction, mental health issues and other combat-related disorders.

The new track falls under the existing Treatment Court Program and is a partnership between the Court of Common Pleas, the Lawrence County District Attorney's office, local defense counsel, Lawrence County Adult Probation & Parole, Lawrence County Drug & Alcohol Commission, the U.S. Department of Veterans Administrations (VA) and the Lawrence County Veterans Affairs Office.

A crucial addition to the partnerships between agencies is the relationship between a veteran participant and their assigned veteran mentor. These volunteer veterans engage and empower the veteran participants to change their lives while providing camaraderie and vet-to-vet support, as well as assistance navigating through the services available to them at the local, state and federal levels.

Veterans Treatment Courts and Tracks divert qualified cases of justice-involved veterans, offering treatment for substance use disorder, mental health conditions and any other appropriate services as an alternative to traditional prosecution and case disposition. This particular structure works closely with the VA, specifically collaborating regularly with the Veterans Justice Outreach Coordinator to determine appropriate treatment levels as well as other services available to address the unique needs of the specific individual while protecting public safety concerns.

The Veterans Track in Lawrence County was established in January 2022. Currently, there are four active participants in the program at different stages in their journey to recovery and stability.

Nationwide, since 2021 there are 511 active Veterans Treatment Courts since the first one launched in Buffalo, NY in 2008. In the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania, there are 25 active Veterans Treatment Courts with a 76% successful completion rate. ▲

Divorce and Children: Helping Kids Deal with the Effects

Excerpt reprinted with permission from BHS Focus 2022



How Divorce Affects Children

Researchers have filled volumes studying and analyzing the effect of divorce on children. Studies examining the children of divorce have found that most suffer a sense of loss that can manifest in many different ways, depending on the children's ages and unique personalities, as well as on how parents handle the divorce themselves.

Younger children may regress in areas such as sleeping and toilet training, or throw more tantrums. School-age and teenage children may show symptoms of depression, rebel against discipline, or change their eating and sleeping habits. Recent research has shown that adult children of divorce have higher divorce rates than adults with parents in stable marriages -- and even those who remain married report they are have less trust for their spouses than people whose parents have remained married. As a parent, you can take an active role in easing your children's pain and reducing negative feelings and behaviors.

How to Help Your Children Cope with Divorce

The single most important way that you can help your kids during a divorce is to have a cooperative relationship with your ex and keep conflicts to a minimum. Especially if your kids are still young, it's important to reassure them repeatedly that you both love them, that the divorce was not their fault, and that they will always have two parents. It's also crucial to provide your kids with the practical information they'll want to know, like who will be driving them to school and where they will sleep. But the proof is in the pudding. To provide

them with the assurances they need, you will have to be a model of maturity. Here are some tips on how to do this:

Process, don't vent. You don't have to hide the fact that you are stressed or that the divorce brings up difficult feelings for you. It's fine to talk about those things in general ways, without burdening the kids with the details. In fact, airing some of these feelings and encouraging the children to reciprocate by sharing their own feelings may help them lose some of the fear and anger they may harbor about the divorce. Even years after the divorce, make sure you are available to listen to your kids express their feelings whenever they want to talk. As they grow and develop, they may need new information or want to express differing perspectives. Depending on their ages and personalities, you may need to encourage them to continue to talk about their feelings about the divorce.

Keep children out of the middle. If the children are teens or even adults when you divorce, be especially careful not to drag them into the fray by confiding too many details or enlisting them as negotiators in your divorce. Be sure to address any nagging issues directly with your ex-spouse -- either alone or with the help of a mediator -- rather than using the kids as messengers or sounding boards.

Keep free of venom. Don't express bitterness towards your ex -- and don't in any way imply that your former spouse isn't a good parent or that your kids are wrong to want a relationship with their other parent. Instead, continue to support and foster their relationship in every way you can so that the kids can be free of

guilt and ambivalence mental health conditions.

Establish new traditions. Remember that it isn't only young children who may feel a sense of loss around holidays and special times. Many adult children become angry and confused about losing family rituals (even if they once groused about them). Be flexible in establishing new traditions, especially around holidays and celebrations of special events, such as birthdays. Be sensitive about incorporating new individuals into family groupings, and look for fun activities to help relieve stress and encourage building or rebuilding relationships.

Be vigilant. Divorce is stressful for kids of any age. Even if your child has generally had a positive spin on things, keep an eye out for rough patches. Arrange for counseling or encourage your children to seek help if you see serious signs of emotional fragility.

If Your Children Are Young

If you have young children, your post-separation life will involve coordination and cooperation as parents. It's a good idea to anticipate parenting issues by spelling out guidelines and ground rules in a written parenting plan that goes beyond the cursory custody terms that might have been spelled out in a divorce agreement. A parenting plan for young children of divorcing parents can cover:

- responsibility for medical and dental care
- the times your children spend with each of you
- holiday arrangements

(continued on page 15)

- how to handle schooling, discipline, and extracurricular activities, and other specific issues that likely to come up, especially related to child-rearing.

If Your Children Are Adults

Even adult children may face thorny issues when parents divorce, particularly concerning the changed relationship they will have with each parent. Just like younger kids, adult children often go through a sort of grieving process when their parents divorce -- complete with anger, confusion, and despair.

Foster sibling bonding. One unexpected phenomenon related to divorce is that it often brings adult children emotionally closer to one another, even if they were not close as younger children. Do what you can to foster such relationships -- and resist the temptation to view them as threatening or divisive. Realize that your children, with their shared past and experiences, are often natural sources of comfort and support for one another.

Encourage them to seek support from outsiders. The overwhelming emotion adult children report when

they learn their parents are divorcing is loneliness. Support groups in which they can talk with those experiencing similar feelings may be especially helpful in easing this pain. A number of such groups operate online.

Please note: The information provided in this document is intended for educational purposes only. Readers with questions or a need for further assistance are strongly encouraged to contact BHS at www.BHSONline.com

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Civic Engagement and Education in Franklin and Fulton Counties

On Sept. 16, 2022, the 39th Judicial District celebrated the adoption of the U.S. Constitution and ratification of the Bill of Rights in a ceremony at the Franklin County Judicial Center. The ceremony was live-streamed to Fulton County Courthouse as well.

President Judge **Shawn Meyers** opened the ceremony by welcoming attendees and explaining his pursuit of civic engagement and education with the citizens of Franklin and Fulton Counties, by holding these ceremonies.

President of Dickinson College, and former federal judge John E. Jones III, spoke about the Constitutional Convention held by our framers during the summer of 1787. He spoke not only of the differing viewpoints, but also of the challenges of the blistering summer weather, crowded living conditions and perilous travel to hold the convention in Philadelphia that summer.

The achievement of the framers to overcome physical and financial hardship and to compromise to create our Constitution reminds us that in today's climate of political polarization the need for civil discourse is paramount to preserving our democracy and principles of the Constitution. ▲



top: Former Federal Judge John E. Jones III
bottom left to right: Former Federal Judge John E. Jones III and President Judge Shawn Meyers

Staff Appreciation Events

On Oct. 12, the Pennsylvania Judicial Center held a staff appreciation fun fest event that was open to all PJC occupants, as well as staff from the Philadelphia and Pittsburgh offices.

After enjoying the food trucks and some delicious milkshakes from the Dairymen's Association, some employees played outdoor games including Jumbo Jenga, while others participated in a cornhole tournament, chili cookoff or pumpkin decorating contest.

Also present were some sweet treats via the candy and caramel apple stations, and some free therapy in the form of comfort/service animals visiting from Speranza Animal Rescue.

(continued on page 17)



AOPC/IT in Mechanicsburg also celebrated staff on Sept. 21 at their Makin' Waves event with picnic style food, live music, bocce ball, ladder golf and the annual cornhole tournament.

Throughout the year, the 10-member organizing committee planned activities for the big day and organized fundraising events such as raffles, silent auctions, bake sales and online cooking classes.

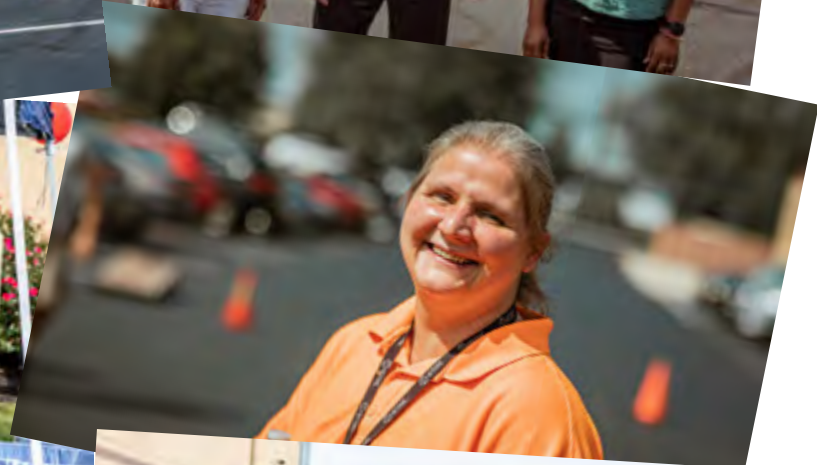
The morning of the event was quite a sight with over 30 IT staff working with the organizing committee to setup tents and tables. Staff volunteers grilled burgers, veggie burgers, bratwursts and hotdogs.

The event gives employees a chance to unwind and socialize with coworkers in a relaxed atmosphere.

A great time was had by all! ▲

MAKIN' WAVES VI

If there's a will, there's a wave



DEPARTMENT SPOTLIGHT: AOPC Legal

Primarily located at the Pennsylvania Judicial Center in Harrisburg, with offices in Philadelphia and Pittsburgh, attorneys in the legal department provide advice and counsel to the Pa. Supreme Court, the state court administrator, state court judges and judiciary personnel on legal, administrative and policy matters.

John Witherow assumed the role of chief counsel in 2022, after having served for 24 years as the lead staff attorney for Chief Justice Emeritus **Thomas Saylor** throughout his tenure on the Pa. Supreme Court.

With the AOPC since 1998, **David Price** serves as the AOPC's deputy chief counsel.

AOPC/Legal comprises three primary units:

The **litigation unit**, supervised by Assistant Chief Counsel **Geri St. Joseph**, represents Pennsylvania courts, boards and committees of the Supreme Court and other judicial entities; judicial officers; and state-paid court personnel in litigation matters, predominately in federal court. Litigation counsel also provides advice and guidance on a variety of topics, including labor and employment matters, court access issues and constitutional issues. The litigation unit does not provide representation in criminal or disciplinary actions.

The **transactional unit**, supervised by Senior Counsel **Timothy McVay**, negotiates contracts and prepares and reviews documents respecting competitive procurements. They are also responsible for managing AOPC's leasing portfolio.

The **information technology unit**, under the leadership of David Price, participates in the planning, development, implementation and maintenance of the various statewide case management systems and related programs, ensuring that the systems comply with all applicable laws and legal procedural requirements.

Counsel in that unit also serves as the primary point of contact with other agencies, organizations and departments that work with AOPC to obtain information and data from AOPC's various case management systems. In addition, counsel assists legislative affairs with review of legislation affecting the Pennsylvania judiciary and provides guidance on issues related to the public's access to court case records. ▲



left to right: (back row) John Witherow, Daryl Walker, David Price, Geoffrey Weyl, Brandon Shepherd and Joseph Crowley (front row): Kimberly Warner, Jennifer Love



left to right: (back row) Lydia Hilliard, Tracy Blake, Danielle Goodwin, Michael Daley, Robert Krandel; (front row) Nicole Feigenbaum, Geri St. Joseph, Megan Mallek, Caroline Liebenguth (not pictured)



Timothy McVay

Stepping Out of Your Comfort Zone to Inspire Your Future

By **Darren Breslin**, assistant director, AOPC/Judicial Education

Ever since adolescence, I wanted to learn the martial arts. As a teen I dabbled, but life and work and family took priority. Then, somewhere in my forties, I decided to put aside insecurity and finally learn. This was the same time I took up ballroom dancing, but that's a story for another time!

The decision to walk through the dojo doors wasn't easy. Everyone inside was young and fit and looked both elegant and powerful! But in I walked with as much confidence I could muster; a decision that literally changed and enhanced my life!

Martial arts has opened up many opportunities, introduced me to now-cherished friends and enabled some of the most rewarding and meaningful experiences in my life.

Throughout my journey, I've studied several martial arts, including kenpo, modern arnis, small circle jujitsu and others. I have earned first and second dan (degrees of black belt) ranks in several of those arts. I will be a student for life, but I also teach at diverse levels.

While I love teaching both children and adults, helping them grow and realize their potential, probably the most rewarding teaching experiences are my "kenpo kids" classes.

These classes are given to small groups of children and young adults with unique needs and/or on the autism spectrum. Working with these amazing young men and women is simply incredible. In my experience, martial arts study in quiet focused settings allows these amazing individuals to really flourish. Seeing the elation on my students' faces when they grasp a move or technique, or when they

are promoted to a new rank, to hearing the gratitude and seeing the tears of delight of parents fills me with overwhelming pride and joy.

Another source of pride through martial arts occurs when I have the opportunity to train with and help instruct some members of law enforcement. A few of my training partners are police, probation and corrections officers or have other jobs in law enforcement. Occasionally I've been invited to assist in training law enforcement officers in Maryland and Virginia.

Whenever I have the opportunity to train with or help teach these brave men and women, I am always aware that what I am showing or helping them learn may literally save a life someday: their own, or someone else's.

What a profound and rewarding opportunity to help others through an art I have learned to relish. I get a similarly rewarding experience when I can show my friends some simple but effective self-defense techniques.

When this happens, my protective nature is sated. I am so grateful knowing that sharing my passion may help prevent injury or worse.

As I mentioned earlier, the study of martial arts has changed my life. Embarking on this journey has been one of the most meaningful decisions I've made. I have improved my physical and mental well-being and learned practical self-defense; I have relished in the gratitude from parents and peers for teaching; I have enjoyed knowing that I help others in achieving their martial arts goals; I've written on the study of martial arts; and, I have taken great pride in knowing I may provide potentially life-saving self-defense skills to many.

On top of all of this, I have made international friendships that I will cherish and cultivate for the rest of my days. I'm glad I stepped out of my comfort zone a few years ago and enabled this inspired future. ▲



A closer look at statewide PFA filings

What is a PFA?

A protection from abuse (PFA) order is a civil court order to help protect victims of domestic violence, providing relief from abuse by an intimate partner, family or household member.

In 2021:

38,765 new petitions requesting relief under the PFA Act (Title 23, Chp. 61) were filed

90% of temporary PFAs filed (valid until a final hearing) were granted

In 2021, the number of PFA's filed increased by 12% from 2020.



A PFA can order an abuser to:



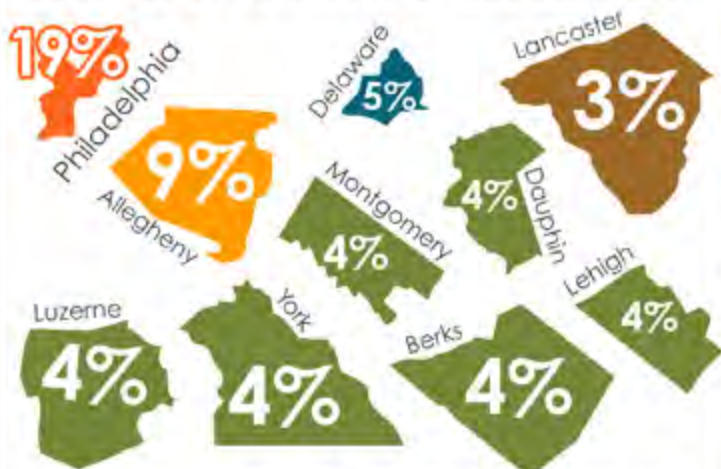
- Have **no** contact with the victim or victim's children including: no texting, no calling, no communication via social media



- Leave the home where the victim lives

- Relinquish any weapons

Top 10 counties with highest number of new PFA cases in 2021:



Percentages given reflect the percent of total state filings.

PFA case outcomes:

	processed cases	% of total
Plaintiff did not appear in court	9,469	(25%)
Withdrawn by plaintiff	8,544	(23%)
Final order granted	7,165	(19%)
Agreement reached between parties	6,183	(16%)
Temporary order dismissed/denied	4,351	(11%)
Final order denied	1,962	(5%)
Case transferred/other dispositions	231	(1%)

Total # of PFA cases disposed in 2021: **37,905**

Magisterial District Judge Brings Courtroom to Local Classrooms

By Katherine Mansfield, Observer-Reporter - Reprinted with permission from the Observer-Reporter

Magisterial District Judge **John Bruner** brought the courtroom to fourth- and fifth-grade classrooms last week at Trinity South Elementary School.

"When I became a magistrate, I noticed ... that some of the school misbehaviors can lead a student into the courtroom. Truancy, vaping, underage drinking, smoking, bullying, harassment – these types of things often ... take that child in front of a magistrate judge," said Bruner, who launched Classrooms Versus Courtrooms earlier this year.

"The purpose of this is to educate (students) in their classrooms, versus having to officially preside over a case in my courtroom. Education and prevention is the purpose."

Together with principals at McGuffey and Trinity school districts, Bruner wrote a crash course in U.S. government, tailored to students on the cusp of teenage-dom.

Classrooms Versus Courtrooms covers America's beginnings, highlights three important documents that serve as our government's foundation, explores the judicial branch and sets the tone for students' futures.

"I love having the kids realize the founding documents do set up everything for daily life," said fifth-grade teacher Karen Huff, whose class welcomed Bruner on Friday. "He focused a lot on what they need to know: How to handle peer pressure and how that will affect them in their lives."

Aided by a creative SmartBoard presentation, Bruner taught students about the Declaration of Independence, the U.S. Constitution and the Bill of Rights. Huff's class learned the Pennsylvania Supreme Court predates the U.S. Constitution; the Constitution was signed in 1787; and the Constitution's birthday is Sept. 17.

"Let's give a thumbs up to the Constitution," Bruner said. "It's 235 years old. It's one of the oldest constitutions in the world. A lot of other countries have used our constitution to create theirs."



Fifth graders at Trinity South wave their U.S. Constitutions high in the air Sept. 16. Karen Huff's class welcomed Magisterial District Judge John Bruner Friday, and learned about U.S. law, the judicial branch, the role of judges and peer pressure.

Bruner also took students on a judicial journey. He explained court levels, talked about who judges are and what they do, and briefly recounted his own career.

While the Bill of Rights and U.S. law are important subjects, the heartbeat of Classrooms Versus Courtrooms is Bruner's candid discussion of impulse control and peer pressure.

"You want to know the secret to life?" Bruner asked a class full of attentive Trinity Hillers. "It's choices. Choices define who you are."

The former police officer engaged students in a game of Good Choice, Bad Choice, and explained the role of magistrates in bad choices. He talked about truancy, vaping and other issues, and why they're categorized as "bad choices."

"Students can be cited under Pennsylvania law. And I do have cases in front of me that involve sixth graders," Bruner said. "Truancy – it's something that every year, the numbers get higher. Staying at home and not wanting to come to school ... is not a good idea."

Neither is vaping, Bruner said, noting the Centers for Disease Control labeled teenage vaping a national epidemic.

(continued on page 22)

"Being addicted to something is bad because you can't stop when you want to stop," Bruner said. "We want to educate you ... so you never start."

An informal survey revealed Huff's class knows vaping is bad for their lungs and finances, and Bruner explained it can lead to court appearances, community service and eight-hour Smokeless Saturday classes. Why, then, do children vape?

"Peer pressure," Bruner said.

He taught students the perils of giving in to peer pressure and helped them practice saying "No" to things they know are bad for their health and future. The judge also offered alternatives to the high associated with drugs: Set and accomplish goals, and be kind.

"It's OK to not care what other people think, if you're making the right choice," he said. "Keep practicing saying 'No!' to the wrong things."

The program ended on a light note, with volunteers shrugging into judges

robes. Students inked their names on a copy of the U.S. Constitution, flipped through booklets containing the full text, and recounted the program with friends.

"I learned not to say 'yes' to peer pressure," Mackenzie Hull said.

And that's what Bruner is getting at. He said kids who get in trouble grow into adults who get in trouble, and he hopes to help establish healthy habits early. He wants students to know why law exists, how the U.S. government works and how to set themselves up for future success.

"I thought it was a great opportunity not only to hear about the judicial system and the different levels of government, but also on a career perspective, on what he does," said Trinity South principal Pete Keruskin, who worked with Bruner to bring Classrooms Versus Courtrooms to the district. "I think students today, especially at this level, going in to middle school, need to know as you grow older, there's more responsibility.

It's good for students to hear that from someone other than educators ... someone in the community, who can really reinforce what we're saying here in school."

Keruskin already plans to invite Bruner back next year, and the detective-turned-judge looks forward to sharing his message often. He first presented Classrooms Versus Courtrooms to McGuffey elementary and middle schoolers in May and hopes to bring the program to students within his jurisdiction.

Bruner said Classrooms Versus Courtrooms is a team effort and, ultimately, the goal is to spread awareness for the law and encourage students to establish healthy habits.

"The fear of feeling lonely is peer pressure," Bruner said. "Sometimes doing what is popular isn't the right choice. Saying no to peer pressure takes courage."

[MDJ John Bruner is from Washington County.]

New data: Courts cleared more criminal cases in 2021 than were filed

Reprinted with permission from the National Center for State Courts newsletter – @ the Center.



State courts cleared far more criminal cases—especially felonies—than they received in 2021, according to extensive preliminary data provided from the case management systems of state courts in 19 states. The data provide insight into how courts nationwide have successfully prioritized clearing criminal dockets that were built up in 2020, when public health considerations prevented some courts from constituting juries and the pandemic forced courts to slow some proceedings.

The figures come [from a just-released report](#) from the Court Statistics Project, a joint project of NCSC and the Conference of State Court Administrators, which collects comprehensive, aggregate caseload

data from state courts annually.

Across the 16 states providing outgoing caseload data, about 350,000 more criminal matters were resolved in 2021 than were filed that same year, reflecting the urgency that state court systems have placed on upholding the constitutional right to a speedy trial. Additionally, courts cleared 25% more felony cases and 9% more misdemeanor cases in 2021 than in 2020, the year in which the pandemic presented the biggest challenges to justice systems across the country.

Overall, the number of new court filings across the 19 states was down 24% from the last pre-pandemic year of 2019. The number of incoming felony cases in 2021 was virtually the

same as in 2019. Interestingly, there is little variation in the types of filings across the last three years' worth of data. Traffic cases represented 53% of all new filings, the exact same percentage as in 2019. Meanwhile, civil cases constituted 19% of all filings in each of 2019, 2020, and 2021, though there were one million fewer contracts cases filed in 2021 compared to 2019. The figures also reveal that only one case type—probate and estate cases—saw more new filings in 2021 than in 2019.

The 19 states reporting include many of the nation's largest—including North Carolina, Ohio, Pennsylvania, and Texas—and account for nearly 40% of the total population. Complete reporting on all 2021 data will be released later this year.

Around the Judiciary



*left to right:
Judge Anthony
Scirica, U.S. Court
of Appeals for the
Third Circuit and
Chief Justice of
Pennsylvania,
Debra Todd*

On Wed., Sept. 21, 2022, the University of Pittsburgh School of Law honored Chief Justice **Debra Todd** with the 2022 Judge Ruggero J. Aldisert Distinguished Jurist Award.



On Oct. 21, 2022, the Orphans' Court Procedural Rules Committee thanked Judge **Emil A. Giordano** (ret.) for his leadership and service as chair.

left to right: Christy Donofrio, Latisha Bernard Schuenemann, Dianne C. Magee, Judge Lois Murphy, Judge Emil A. Giordano (ret.), Thomas J. Dempsey, Jr., Pam Walker, Kimberly Warner