

# AOPC<sup>CONNECTED</sup>



Issue 1, 2025

## In this issue

In this issue, read about recent president judge transitions, enhancements to the Guardianship Tracking System, AOPC trainings and initiatives, county court highlights and more!

# President Judge Transitions

Several leadership transitions have taken place in courts across the state, with the following counties welcoming new president judges in recent months.

## Lawrence County

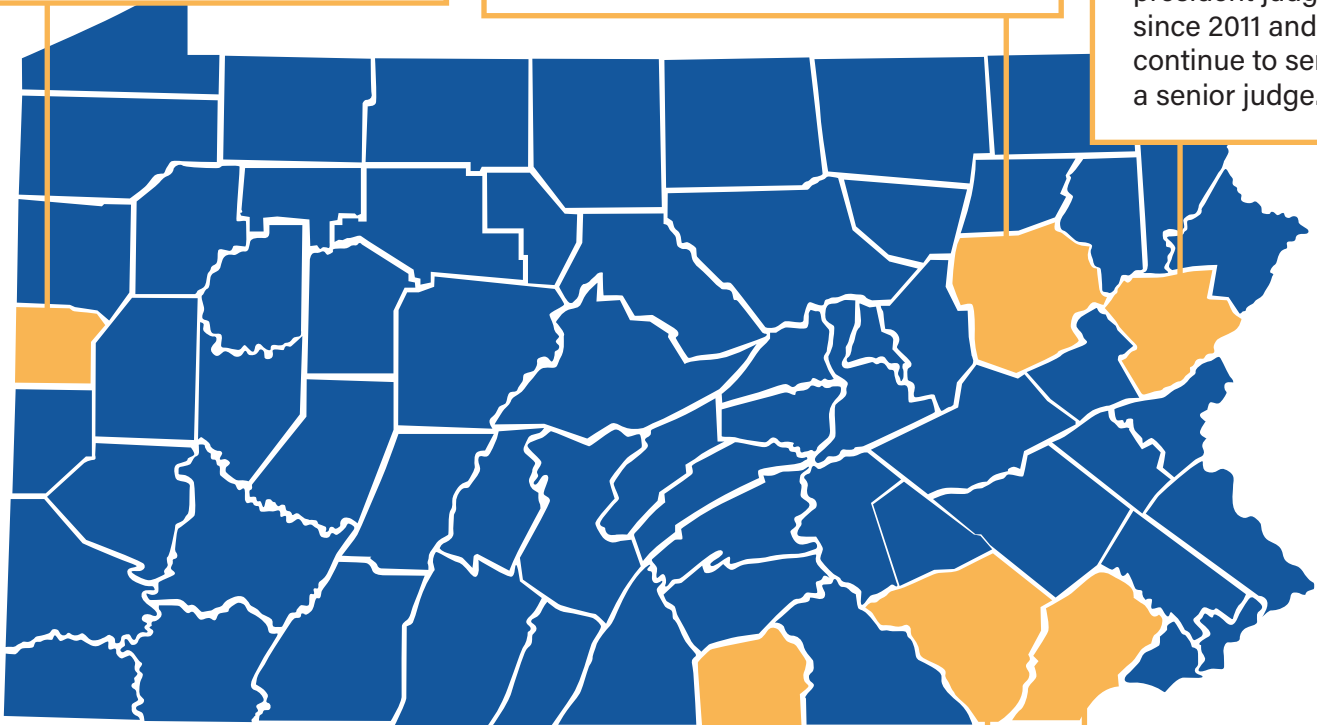
Judge **J. Craig Cox** became the county's new president judge following the retirement of former President Judge **Dominick Motto**, who will transition to senior judge after 30 years of service.

## Luzerne County

Judge **Stefanie Salavantis** was sworn in as the first female president judge in the county's history at the end of December, replacing former President Judge **Michael T. Vough**, who served on the bench since 2011.

## Monroe County

Judge **Arthur Zulick** succeeded former President Judge **Margherita Patti-Worthington**, who served as the county's first female president judge since 2011 and will continue to serve as a senior judge.



## Adams County

Judge **Thomas Campbell** assumed the role of president judge following the retirement of former President Judge **Michael George**, who sat on the bench since 2002 and will transition to senior judge.

## Chester County

Judge **Ann Marie Wheatcraft** recently took over as the county's president judge succeeding former President Judge **John Hall**, who served on the bench since 2003.

## Lancaster County

Former President Judge **David Ashworth** swore in Judge **Leonard Brown III** as the county's new president judge following the end of his five-year term. Serving since 1999, Judge Ashworth will remain on the bench.

# Improving Guardianship Accountability: The Latest GTS Enhancements

The Guardianship Tracking System (GTS), created by AOPC's Information Technology (AOPC IT) department and first introduced in 2018, is used by Pennsylvania's guardians and courts to facilitate guardianship reporting and improve guardianship monitoring in the Commonwealth.

Through grant funding, the Office of Elder Justice in the Courts (OEJC) and AOPC IT are working together to implement GTS enhancements intended to improve compliance and accuracy of data entry, improve the reliability of data received from the judicial districts and clerks' offices and increase interoperable functionality.

The OEJC, AOPC IT and the Advisory Council on Elder Justice in the Courts worked in collaboration with the Pennsylvania Disciplinary Board (D Board) to establish a data feed that enables the GTS to provide notifications to courts regarding attorneys who receive a disciplinary action or updated practice status from the D Board and are active on a guardianship case in their county.

This feature serves to notify the courts of any change in an attorney's practicing status

and allow the courts to take appropriate action at their discretion.

Building upon this important court notification functionality, the OEJC and AOPC IT are implementing a GTS enhancement which will identify any active guardians in GTS who have been charged with a crime.

Currently, any guardian who is newly appointed on a guardianship case is required to submit a Pennsylvania State Police Criminal Background Check within six months from the date of the appointment. Any criminal charges against the guardian after this initial background check are required to be self-reported by the guardian via the annual reports.

This GTS enhancement will eliminate the courts' reliance on the guardians' self-reporting of new criminal charges. In conjunction with a prior GTS enhancement developed under the grant requiring the guardians to provide key identifying information, GTS guardian data will be compared to the AOPC's statewide criminal database on a recurring automated basis to identify and match any guardians active on a case who have been recently charged with a crime.

## PENNSYLVANIA COURTS



## GUARDIANSHIP TRACKING SYSTEM

Once implemented, GTS will notify all courts of any matches in their county and allow the courts to handle these specific instances at their discretion.

Guardians assume a very important role in maintaining the personal and/or financial affairs of someone who the court deems is otherwise unable to do so. Unfortunately, this level of responsibility can also lead to negative outcomes if left in the hands of the wrong person.

The ability for this GTS enhancement to monitor the entire guardian repository for the entire lifecycle of the case not only ensures better guardianship monitoring, but also protects incapacitated persons across the Commonwealth.

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## Have a photo or story idea?

We are always looking for story ideas or photos of staff and judges out and about in the community. Send us an email with the scoop!  
[CommunicationsOffice@pacourts.us](mailto:CommunicationsOffice@pacourts.us)



## Miss an issue?

Check out our [newsletter archive!](#)

# Pennsylvania Courts Represent at NSCS's eCourts

Court professionals from Pennsylvania joined over 1,100 attendees at eCourts 2024 in Las Vegas in December to address pressing issues such as cybersecurity, data management and the transformative role of artificial intelligence (AI) in the justice system.

Cybersecurity emerged as a central theme at the conference, with a spotlight on the experience of Pennsylvania courts. **Russel Montchal**, director of AOPC's Information Technology department, shared lessons learned from the 2024 cyberattack that targeted the Commonwealth's judicial website.

In his remarks, Russel emphasized the need for robust cybersecurity education, mandatory staff training and the adoption of practices like multifactor authentication and phishing simulations. "These measures are now critical components of Pennsylvania's layered cybersecurity approach," he said.

Montchal's candid discussion underscored the importance of building a "human firewall" as a key defense against future attacks. His perspective added a practical dimension to discussions of cybersecurity at the conference, demonstrating Pennsylvania's leadership in navigating modern threats.

Another highlight of the event was the keynote address by Professor Hany Farid of the University of California, Berkeley. In his talk, *Artificial Intelligence: A Primer for Legal Practitioners*, Professor Farid explored how AI is reshaping industries, including the legal field. He emphasized AI's dual nature as both a risk and an opportunity, particularly in areas like misinformation, digital evidence validation and facial recognition.

"AI is both terrifying and exciting at the same time," Farid said, urging courts to embrace digital forensic techniques to strengthen the reliability of digital evidence. His insights resonated with Pennsylvania attendees, who are already grappling with AI's implications for judicial processes.



*Russel Montchal presents at NCSC's eCourts 2024*

Attendees also showed interest in new tools presented by NCSC to tackle data challenges. NCSC experts Andre Assumpcao and Miriam Hamilton introduced tools like the Duplicate Recognition Tool and the Equity and Inclusion Assessment Tool, designed to enhance efficiency and decision-making. The duplicate recognition tool automatically matches and consolidates duplicate records across systems. Race imputation estimates an individual's race/ethnicity using geographic statistical information. This helps provide initial insights when the data lacks this information. These resources offer practical solutions for courts striving to balance technological advancements with equitable access to justice.

As a flagship event for the NCSC, eCourts continues to drive innovation and collaboration within the justice system.

# Judge Jodie Richardson Inspires Graduates as Millersville University's 2024 Keynote Speaker

Millersville University proudly welcomed Lancaster County Magisterial District Judge **Jodie Richardson** as the keynote speaker for their 2024 commencement ceremony in December. A distinguished alumna of Millersville University, Judge Richardson returned to campus to share her insights and experiences with students, faculty and alumni.

Before her judicial appointment, Judge Richardson built an impressive career at Millersville University, dedicating 23 years of service across multiple divisions, including University Advancement, Academic Affairs and Student Affairs.

During her keynote address, Judge Richardson emphasized the importance of perseverance, service and education in shaping both professional and personal success. Drawing on her own career trajectory, she encouraged current students to embrace challenges and work towards the goal of serving others.

"It is my hope that the graduating students were inspired by my keynote address," she said. "I hope that they were moved to take action by making service a priority, building a solid network and having the courage to conquer any fear."

She encouraged graduates to serve others graciously as they pursue their dreams, whether by volunteering, mentoring or offering support to those in need. Service, she explained, not only enriches the lives of others but also brings personal growth and fulfillment. Additionally, she highlighted the importance of fostering

inclusivity and mutual respect in all spaces, creating environments where everyone feels a sense of belonging.

Judge Richardson's reflections were deeply personal, rooted in her upbringing and career milestones. Growing up as the youngest of seven children, she was inspired by the service-oriented example set by her grandmother, parents and siblings.

*"I have learned and experienced that one of life's greatest rewards comes from the impact you make on the lives of others," she shared.*

She also spoke of the courage she gained through her own network of support. "Through building relationships and networking, you gain some of the most valuable resources in life; you build a community that will sustain you in both triumph and adversity."

Judge Richardson left graduates with a series of important lessons to carry into their futures. Among them, she stressed the value of adaptability, flexibility and a growth mindset in an ever-changing world.

"It is critical that they know and feel they are seen, heard and valued," she said. Recognizing



Judge Jodie Richardson

the unique gifts and talents of each individual, she encouraged graduates to persevere with integrity and prioritize their mental health and well-being.

Her words resonated deeply with the audience, drawing from her own educational journey and career achievements. "In life, my education and career, I have learned that there will always be something new to learn," she noted. "Through obstacles and mishaps, I continue to grow, develop, learn and mature."

Judge Richardson's visit was a powerful reminder of the lasting impact of Millersville University on its alumni and the broader community. Her journey from dedicated staff member to esteemed judge serves as an inspiration for all Marauders, showcasing the boundless potential of hard work and determination.

# PA Courts Celebrate Black History Month

In recognition of February as Black History Month, the AOPC has produced two short videos honoring the Black jurists on Pennsylvania's appellate courts. One [video](#) acts as a timeline that walks viewers through the history of the state's appellate courts, recognizing those trailblazers who have paved the way for the next generation. The other [video](#) is a digital mural of Black judges across Pennsylvania.



Pennsylvania Courts Launch Human Trafficking Campaign to Raise Awareness

The image displays a social media campaign for human trafficking awareness. On the left, a smartphone shows a Facebook post from "PA Courts" with the text: "Child coercion is a sign of human trafficking. Employers may use force, threats of harm or other abusive tactics to keep victims from leaving. #StopPATrafficking". To the right, five social media posts are shown, each with a different image and text: 1. "STOP PA Trafficking Resources available Know the signs and get help"; 2. "Learn the signs and risk factors Resources available Know the signs and get help"; 3. "Victims can be any age, race or gender. Resources available Know the signs and get help"; 4. "Learn the signs and risk factors Resources available Know the signs and get help"; 5. "Human trafficking takes many forms Resources available Know the signs and get help".

In recognition of Human Trafficking Awareness Month in January, the Pennsylvania Courts recently launched a social media campaign to educate Pennsylvanians about the signs and risk factors of the many forms human trafficking can take and the resources available for victims of human trafficking.

There is no way to identify a trafficking victim. Human trafficking victimization is complex and can present in numerous, unique ways – sometimes even in a courtroom when a victim or offender is brought up on multiple, unrelated charges.

Produced by the Administrative Office of Pennsylvania Courts, the campaign uses its social media platforms and website to illustrate a variety of human-trafficking misconceptions and the tactics traffickers may use to manipulate individuals.

More information about the campaign is available on [Facebook](#), or by visiting the [PA Courts website](#).



# Legislative Roundup

by Damian J. Wachter, Esq.

Members of the House and Senate were sworn in on Jan. 7 to commence the legislative session that will run through Nov. 30, 2026. The partisan makeup of the Senate is 27-22 in favor of the GOP, with one vacancy. In the House, the makeup is 101-101, also with one vacancy. The House Democrats maintained their majority after the 2024 election, but a member has since passed away. Special elections are scheduled for March 25 for both vacancies.

Unlike the start of the 2023-24 session, both chambers were able to organize, adopt rules, appoint chairs and members of committees, and debate and consider legislation during the opening two weeks of session. Legislation of interest is discussed below.

## Judicial Vacancies

The governor appointed and the Senate confirmed nominees to fill vacancies in nine common pleas seats and one MDJ seat. The vote on the common pleas package was 44-4; the vote on the single MDJ nominee was 48-0. The package included:

County	Court	Nominee	Former Jurist/Other
Allegheny	Common Pleas	Alyssa Cowan	Kim Berkeley Clark
Allegheny	Common Pleas	Simquita Bridges	Alexander Bicket
Chester	Common Pleas	Louis Mincarelli	William Mahon
Chester	Common Pleas	Mackenzie Smith	Act 58
Columbia/Montour	Common Pleas	Anthony McDonald	Act 58
Huntingdon	Common Pleas	Ray Ghaner	Act 58
Lackawanna	Common Pleas	Mark Powell	Julia Munley
McKean	Common Pleas	Michele Alfieri-Causser	Christopher Hauser
Westmoreland	Common Pleas	Matthew Schimizzi	Rita Hathaway
Allegheny	Magisterial	John Kearney	Anthony Saveikis

## Budget

The Governor presented his 2025-26 budget to a joint session of the General Assembly on Feb. 4. The Governor's proposed budget includes the entirety of our requested budget submitted in October. Justices Christine Donohue and Kevin Brobson, along with Court Administrator Andrea Tuominen appeared before the House Appropriations Committee on Feb. 26 to present a budget which includes a 7 percent increase in state funding and relies on \$57.9 million in Act 49 augmenting revenue. Act 49 must also be reauthorized as a part of the budget as it expires on July 31.

## Venue: Civil Actions for Human Trafficking

House Bill 277 amends Title 18, expanding the venue in which a victim of the sex trade may bring a civil

action to include where any of the alleged violations occurred. Reported from House Judiciary 26-0 and tabled.

## Streamlining the Custody Factors

House Bill 378 amends Title 23, consolidating and updating the factors by which courts determine the best interest of the child in custody cases. Reported from House Judiciary 26-0 and pending second consideration.



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

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# AOPC Welcomes New Deputy Chief Counsel

Earlier this year, **Kathleen (“Kat”) Kotula** joined the AOPC Legal team, stepping into the role of deputy chief counsel.

“In my previous role, I collaborated with the court administrator and other AOPC staff on various projects. I have the utmost respect for this organization and its mission,” Kat said.

*“I am passionate about public service, and when this position became available, I recognized it as an opportunity to continue my commitment to public service with a team dedicated to making a positive impact. I look forward to working with the chief counsel and the other attorneys and staff in the AOPC Legal Department to provide top-notch legal services to Pennsylvania’s judicial branch and support the judiciary in its mission to promote access to justice for all.”*

Kat brings an abundance of senior-level legal experience from her time at the Pennsylvania Department of State, where she oversaw a team of nearly 75 attorneys and more than 50 other personnel. Together, they provided legal services to the Secretary of the Commonwealth and various bureaus within the Department of State, as well as to the 29 professional licensing boards and commissions.

“I worked at the Department of State for over 17 years, steadily advancing through the ranks. While I truly enjoyed my role there, sometimes great opportunities arise, and accepting this position with AOPC was one of those moments,” she said.

During her time at the Department of State, Kat served both as a trial and appellate counsel, handling a variety of high-profile issues of public importance. Her years of collaboration with the AOPC and judiciary on related issues further demonstrate her readiness to excel in this new role.



Kat Kotula

Kat earned her Bachelor of Arts from Lehigh University and her Juris Doctor from the Dickinson School of Law at Pennsylvania State University. She began her legal career as a judicial law clerk for Northampton County Court of Common Pleas Judge **F.P. Kimberly McFadden**.

We are excited to welcome Kat to the AOPC and look forward to her contributions to our organization.



# Remembering a Pennsylvania Icon

Judge **Sylvia Rambo**, a longtime judge and a pioneer for women in law, sadly passed away at the end of December.

Judge Rambo's career has left an enduring legacy in both state and federal courts, with her impactful service in Pennsylvania's state courts laying the foundation for her trailblazing contributions to the judiciary.

Judge Rambo began her legal career as a public defender in Cumberland County in 1973, where her dedication to protecting the rights of the accused quickly earned her recognition.

She was later appointed to a vacancy on the Cumberland County Court of Common Pleas in 1976, becoming the first female judge in the county's history.

Her time in state courts demonstrated her exceptional ability to navigate complex legal challenges while maintaining a focus on fairness and equity, establishing her as a leader within the legal community.

Her accomplishments in the state judiciary paved the way for her historic appointment to the U.S. District Court

for the Middle District of Pennsylvania by President Jimmy Carter in 1979.

Her contributions to the judiciary have been recognized with the naming of the Sylvia H. Rambo U.S. Courthouse in Harrisburg, a testament to her profound impact on the legal profession and her unwavering dedication to justice.

## Chester County Courts Introduce New Interactive Kiosks

In February, the Chester County Courts were pleased to introduce new, interactive information kiosks at the Chester County Justice Center and in two of their magisterial district courts.

These kiosks, the first of their kind in the commonwealth, are designed to streamline public access to court information and essential services.

Powered by Artificial Intelligence (AI), the kiosks feature touchscreen and voice-activated technology, enabling users to conveniently retrieve court forms, locate services and courtrooms and process payments for fines, costs and bail using a credit card.

Additionally, the kiosks provide direct video connections to the Chester County Human Needs Network (988 and 211), various county departments and community partner organizations. While currently available in English, a Spanish language option is set to be introduced soon.

Chester County President Judge **Ann Marie Wheatcraft** emphasized the importance of leveraging technology to enhance court accessibility.

"Technological advances continue to provide opportunities for the courts to communicate more effectively and meaningfully with more people. Artificial intelligence is the latest example, and we intend to use its capabilities to our benefit. By installing AI-driven kiosks in key locations, we are making court resources more accessible and reaffirming



our commitment to improving services for Chester County citizens," she said.

The kiosks are strategically placed in the Justice Center lobby, Chester County's Court Administration Office, Family Court and Magisterial District Courts in Kennett Square and Phoenixville. Plans are also underway to expand the program to Chester County Library and Henrietta Hankin Branch Library.

"In Chester County, we believe that everyone seeking court services should have multiple options to obtain the information they need. The kiosk system is a valuable tool for delivering that information efficiently and effectively," said Chester County Court Administrator **Patricia Norwood-Foden**.

Funded through Chester County's American Rescue Plan Act funds, this project demonstrates the county courts' commitment to ensuring public access to judicial information is as seamless and efficient as possible.

# Dependency Benchbook 4<sup>th</sup> Edition Released

By **Christy Stanek**, Deputy Director Office of Children and Families in the Courts

In February, the 4th edition of the Dependency Benchbook was released and presented to dependency judges at the Pennsylvania Conference of State Trial Judges (PCSTJ) mid-annual meeting.

Pennsylvania Supreme Court Justice **Kevin M. Dougherty**, an original Benchbook Committee member who helped create the 1st edition, opened the session.

“The Dependency Benchbook is designed to help new and experienced judges understand the intricacies of dependency proceedings and to assist judges in their efforts to provide timely permanency, promote strong families, protect children and promote child well-being,” Justice Dougherty said.

Members of the Benchbook Committee, including the Committee Chairperson – Clinton County President Judge **Craig P. Miller**, Luzerne County Judge **Jennifer L. Rogers**, Beaver County Judge **Mitchell P. Shahn** and Berks County Judge **Tina M. Boyd** joined the PCSTJ presentation.

New information presented addressed:

- Educational success and truancy
- Best practices in family finding and Family Group Decision-Making
- Best practices in child welfare and safety
- Best practices related to courtroom observations
- New bench cards for:
  - Autism
  - CPCMS Reports
  - Engaging Children
  - Removal Considerations
  - Stages of Change in the Recovery Process

The Benchbook Committee is comprised of Pennsylvania trial court judges who oversee dependency proceedings. President Judge Miller acknowledged the work and dedication of his fellow jurists on the Benchbook Committee, commending the many hours they committed to updating the

## Pennsylvania Dependency Benchbook



Office of Children and Families in the Courts  
Administrative Office of Pennsylvania Courts

Benchbook while maintaining their daily judicial responsibilities.

In addition, Judge Miller announced the dedication of the Dependency Benchbook 4th edition to the late Hon. **Michael H. Sholley**, Court of Common Pleas of Snyder/Union Counties, who was a Benchbook Committee member since 2019.

Judge Miller expressed the Committee’s sincere appreciation, saying, “Judge Sholley was committed to creating an excellent Benchbook. He spent many hours working on revisions and creating new content for this edition before his passing in September 2024. We are grateful for his work and his friendship. He is missed.”

## more information

For an online copy of the Dependency Benchbook, you can visit [www.ocfcpcacourts.us](http://www.ocfcpcacourts.us).



Judge Elizabeth Kelly and her family

## Learning Under the Northern Lights

Erie County Senior Judge **Elizabeth Kelly** recently demonstrated how technology is transforming the way the judiciary stays informed by participating in a Continuing Judicial Education (CJE) program from the Arctic Circle, highlighting not only her dedication to professional development but also the growing accessibility of distance learning.

"Being from Erie County, I know firsthand the challenges of travel, especially during the winter months," Judge Kelly shared. "Having access to CJE courses remotely has been a game-changer, making it so much easier to stay up-to-date and continue increasing judicial education for everyone across the state."

Logging in from the Arctic Circle came with unique challenges – and some surprising advantages.

"Participating remotely felt just like being in my chambers – it was seamless, with no issues

connecting. In fact, I was shocked by how clear the connection was," she said. "The seminar ran from 3-5 p.m. local time, but in the Arctic Circle, there is a six-hour time difference, so it was from 9-11 p.m. – and pitch black by 2 p.m."

"Despite living in an area where the locals are so off-grid they only use modern technology to track their reindeers, the accessibility is impressive. I've even had reliable connections during trips to remote regions like Patagonia. This just shows how far we've come in ensuring access to high-quality judicial education, no matter where you are."

The CJE program only took up a short part of her trip and Judge Kelly was able to spend the rest of the time unwinding with her family.

"I visited the Arctic Circle at the suggestion of my twin sister. We were scheduled to travel to the Arctic Circle in March of 2020, but we were waylaid by the pandemic.

By the time 2024 arrived, we talked my other sister and brother (and spouses) into a family trip and had a great time."

"I would strongly encourage the use of remote CJE courses," she said. "They have not only helped me continue my education but have also enriched my life in ways I couldn't have imagined."

"Our mission has always been to make judicial education available to every judge across Pennsylvania, no matter where they are," said AOPC Judicial Education Specialist **Jim Beeghley**.

"From Philadelphia to Erie, we dreamed of reaching all corners of the state, but never imagined we'd be connecting judges from places as far as the Arctic Circle. It's a reminder of how far technology can take us in expanding the possibilities for lifelong learning," he said.

# Trafficking, Trauma and The Justice System

By **Jamie Pizzi**, STOP Grant Consultant



(l to r) Judge Viktoria Kristiansson, Jamie Pizzi, Heather Castellino, Anastasia Byler and Zozan Kucukaydin

On Jan. 30, the STOP Violence Against Women Grant Program hosted *Trafficking, Trauma and The Justice System: Virtual Panel Presentation* in honor of Human Trafficking Prevention Month.

Just under 200 justice-system stakeholders, including superior court judges, common pleas judges, magisterial district judges, court administrators, court personnel, interpreters and other aligned professionals took part in this training.

Philadelphia County Common Pleas Judge **Viktoria Kristiansson** opened the training by explaining how she uses a litany of trauma-informed techniques to improve outcomes for participants in Philadelphia's WRAP ("Working to Restore Adolescents' Power") Court, which is aimed at helping adolescents who are at risk of or who are a victim of commercial sexual exploitation and human trafficking.

The judge provided an example of how she schedules participant hearings in WRAP Court for every half hour, instead of all at once, to be more accommodating. She also demonstrated the importance of working with a team of trauma-informed professionals, including advocates and probation officers, to meet the needs of victim-survivors.

Another panelist, Heather Castellino, who heads the newly

formed Human Trafficking Section at the Attorney General's Office, gave a detailed overview of Pennsylvania's human trafficking laws, which were recently updated to better address the demand for commercial sex and cheap labor that perpetuates trafficking.

She also explained the importance of educating not only those who work in the justice system about the realities of trafficking, but the public as well, citing the additional burden placed on the prosecution to convince juries that human trafficking is not necessarily like what is portrayed in the movies and on social media.

The next panelist was Anastasia Byler, who participated as a victim-witness in two federal human trafficking cases in Pennsylvania. She recounted her experience testifying in court against her exploiters and echoed the need for greater education about the realities of human trafficking, the significance of connecting victim-survivors with advocates throughout the court process and not requiring victim-survivors to cooperate with law enforcement/prosecution to obtain services.

Anastasia advocated for law enforcement to be more trauma-informed in their interactions. She spoke candidly about how she interacted with law enforcement on several occasions, but was

never made to feel comfortable enough to ask for help.

Finally, Zozan Kucukaydin, who provides training and technical assistance about human trafficking throughout the commonwealth for the Pennsylvania Coalition to Advance Respect, gave insight into several risk factors and possible indicators of trafficking.

Zozan described the pitfalls of using only 'red flag' lists to identify trafficking victim-survivors, as many of those points of concern are rooted in stereotypes and do not exemplify the full extent of exploitive situations. As trafficking victim-survivors are extremely unlikely to self-identify, asking questions such as, "how have you been caring for yourself when you're hungry or need somewhere to stay?" can be a more efficient way to help determine if someone is in a trafficking situation.

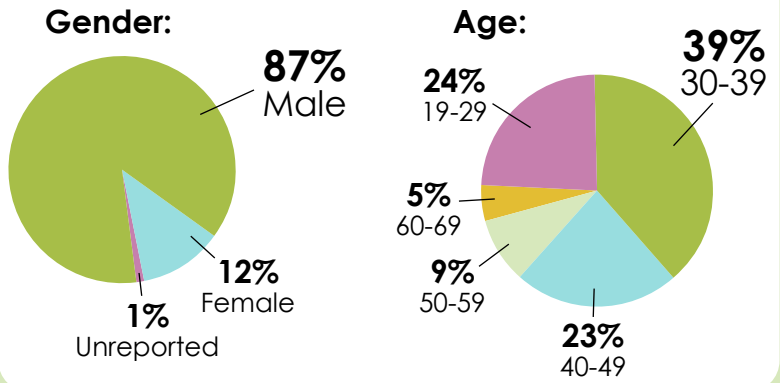
After two hours of valuable discussion, it was clear the panelists promoted taking a multidisciplinary team approach when working with trafficking victim-survivors to ensure they are able to fully participate in the court process without becoming retraumatized.

View the training on their [Vimeo page](#), or sign up for the [STOP Newsletter](#) to learn about future training opportunities.

# Human Trafficking in Pennsylvania

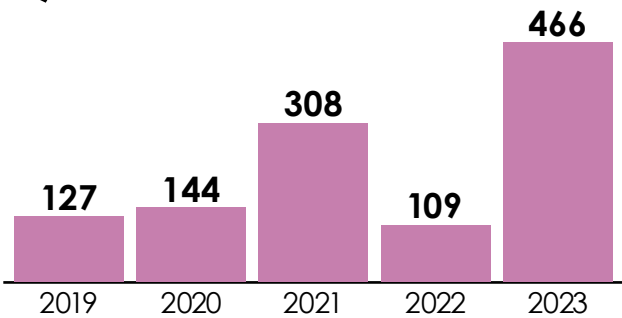
**Human trafficking** is a type of human rights abuse where people profit from the exploitation of others – mainly through the use of **force, fraud or coercion** to manipulate victims into engaging in sex acts or labor/services in exchange for something of value. Those under age 18 who exchange sex for something of value are human trafficking victims, regardless of whether force, fraud or coercion is involved.

## Demographics of defendants convicted:



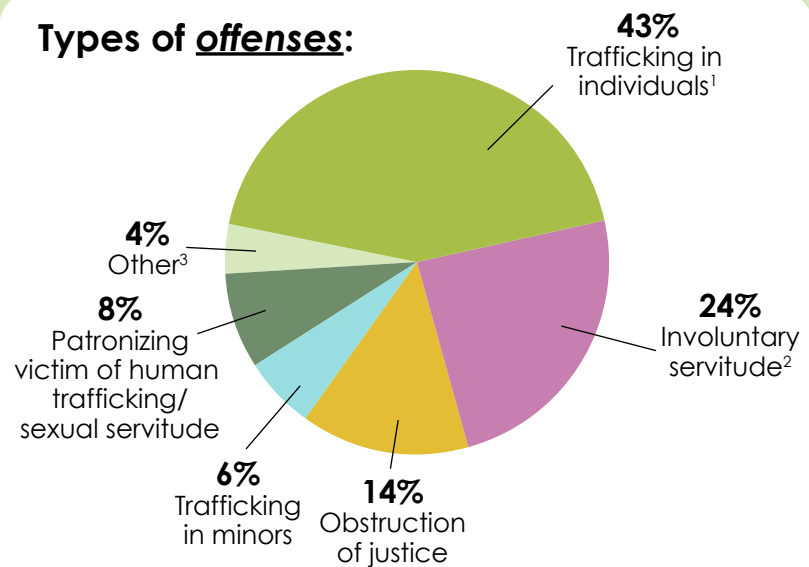
**366** human-trafficking cases were filed over the past five years.

**1,235** total human-trafficking offenses were filed:



Please note, there is a large increase in offenses filed from 2022 to 2023. This is due to a case filed in Franklin County with 200 human trafficking offenses and a case in Dauphin County with 39 human trafficking offenses.

## Types of offenses:



<sup>1</sup> recruits/entices/solicits

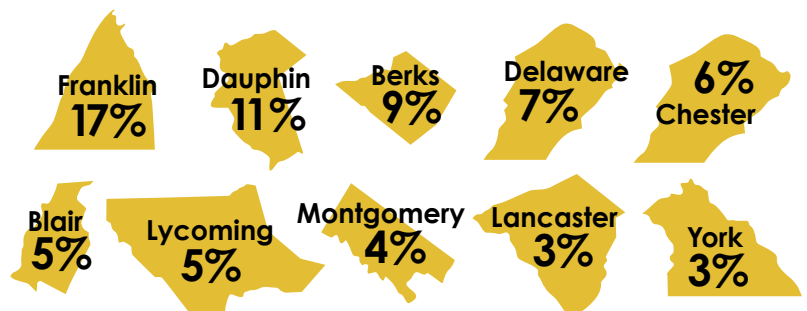
<sup>2</sup> duress through force, debt coercion, physical restraint, etc.

<sup>3</sup> unlawful conduct, nonpayment of wages

## Victims of human trafficking may:

1. Not have access to their own **travel or ID documents**
2. Not be in control of their own **financial records, money or bank account**
3. Have very few **personal possessions**
4. Work excessively **long/unusual hours** with little or no pay
5. Not able to clarify **their address/living situation**

## Counties with highest number of human-trafficking offenses filed:



# From Mock Trials to Real Courtrooms

Wyoming County President Judge **Russell Shurtleff** beams with pride when discussing the intern working in his office, Serena Mokhtari.

Their connection began last year when Judge Shurtleff presided over a mock trial competition in Scranton, where the Abington Heights High School team, including Serena, earned first place.

Judge Shurtleff, a longtime volunteer judge for the mock trial program, was impressed by the team's performance, which led them to national success in Delaware, marking Pennsylvania's first-ever win at the national level.

Inspired by the team's achievements, Judge Shurtleff reached out to the team's attorney advisor, asking if any students would be interested in interning at his office.

Serena, who was a first-year participant in the mock trial, was excited to apply, and after her high school graduation in June, she officially joined the Wyoming County judicial office as an intern.

Shurtleff has praised Serena for being a quick learner, noting that



*(l to r) President Judge Russel Shurtleff, Serena Mokhtari, Justice Sallie Updkey Mundy*

she quickly became involved in key tasks, such as opening court and managing exhibits.

Serena, who had no prior experience in the courtroom, found the internship both challenging and rewarding. She has enjoyed the hands-on learning experience, especially in understanding courtroom procedures and decision-making.

Shurtleff also acknowledged the Wyoming County Commissioners for supporting internships, which he sees as a valuable way to nurture young talent.

Serena began her studies at the University of Scranton this year where she is majoring in political science, and she hopes to eventually pursue a law career.

FOR MORE INFORMATION ABOUT PENNSYLVANIA'S COURTS, VISIT:



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[@pennsylvaniacourts](https://www.instagram.com/pennsylvaniacourts)

# CLE Board Hosts Provider Conference

This past fall, the Pennsylvania Continuing Legal Education Board hosted a conference for providers of Continuing Legal Education (CLE) that was attended by 90 people from 72 different organizations.

The CLE Board used this conference to unveil its latest educational initiative, "Professionalism in the 21st Century." This 1.5-hour ethics training program is an interactive facilitator-led experience where participants explore how they would react as bystanders in various workplace situations.

The program was expertly facilitated by current Pennsylvania Bar Institute (PBI) President, Nancy Conrad and former PBI President, Jay Silberblatt. This free course is made available by the CLE Board to accredited providers so they may work it into their training curricula.

The second half of the conference applied a learn-by-doing approach as participants utilized artificial intelligence to help create more effective CLE training. Angeline Evans and Jenica Jones from d'vinci Interactive led a hands-on training in which participants leveraged AI technology to uncover different learning personas and create tailored experiences to help reinforce learning objectives.

This session connected traditional teaching methods with modern tools to help build meaningful continuing legal education.

Current CLE Board Chair Tuan Samahon and CLE Board Administrator **Dan Levering** also offered remarks and thanked Pennsylvania's CLE provider community for their ongoing efforts to develop engaging CLE opportunities for lawyers.



Dan Levering, Nancy Conrad, Judge Clyde Waite (current CLE Board member) and Jay Silberblatt

## Open-Source Intelligence at Work: Protecting Pennsylvania's Judiciary

**Shannon Schoedler**, AOPC Security Analyst, recently passed her McAfee Open-Source Intelligence (OSINT) Analysis Certification.

"One of my primary responsibilities focuses upon identifying threats against judicial officials," Schoedler said.

"In an effort to bring a higher level of protection to our judiciary, our office launched a 'Risk Vigilance' program in 2023, which seeks to identify threatening language on social media that specifically targets Pennsylvania judges or courthouses."

"By using various technologies and open-source research methods, we are now able to detect threats to judges at the earliest possible moment and before more serious events might transpire."

The OSINT Analysis Certification demonstrates expertise in gathering, analyzing and applying publicly available information for intelligence purposes.

OSINT involves sourcing data from accessible platforms, including the internet, social media, public records and news outlets. This sought-after credential is widely recognized among professionals in cybersecurity, law enforcement, intelligence, journalism and corporate security.



Shannon Schoedler

This certification equips her with knowledge, skills and abilities to perform cyber research related to Pennsylvania Judicial Incident Reporting System (PAJIRS) cases.



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## AOPC Holds Dual Donation Drives

This winter, the AOPC held simultaneous donation drives at the PJC and Ritter Road to support a couple of local charities and foster a spirit of giving among employees. Staff were given the option to donate to the Humane Society of Harrisburg Area, which provides essential care and shelter for animals in need across Dauphin, Cumberland and Perry Counties – or the Downtown Daily Bread, a walk-in resource center that offers food, shelter and support to individuals experiencing hunger and homelessness in the Harrisburg community. Upon delivery, both organizations expressed heartfelt gratitude for the donated items and monetary contributions. **Thank you to everyone who participated!**

All content is collected, written and edited by the AOPC Communications Office unless noted.

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**Supreme Court of Pennsylvania**

*Debra Todd*  
Chief Justice of Pennsylvania

*Christine Donohue*  
Justice

*Kevin M. Dougherty*  
Justice

*David N. Wecht*  
Justice

*Sallie Updyke Mundy*  
Justice

*P. Kevin Brobson*  
Justice

*Daniel D. McCaffery*  
Justice



## Pennsylvania Judges Celebrate Valentine's Day with Wedding Marathons



*Berks County weddings*



Two Pennsylvania judges marked Valentine's Day in a truly special way – by dedicating their courtrooms to love.

In both Berks County and Franklin County, judges set aside their usual caseloads to officiate wedding ceremonies, giving happy couples an extra special anniversary date.

In Reading, Magisterial District Judge **Eric Taylor** continued his heartfelt Valentine's Day tradition by transforming his courtroom into a wedding venue and officiating 10 weddings throughout the day.

"As a judge, almost every matter before me has opposing parties, and these cases can be quite

contentious," said Judge Taylor. "Officiating wedding ceremonies is one of the happiest things I do because both parties agree with what I am doing – uniting them in marriage."

"Valentine's Day symbolizes love, and I think the best way to celebrate this day is by uniting couples who love each other in marriage," he added.

Meanwhile, in Franklin County, Common Pleas Judge **Todd Sponseller** spent the morning officiating weddings, ensuring that more than a dozen couples could begin their new journey together on the most romantic day of the year.

"It is always a privilege to unite couples in marriage, and there is no better way to spend Valentine's Day than helping couples start this exciting new chapter in their lives," Judge Sponseller said. "Each of these couples has a unique story, and it's an honor to be part of such a special moment."

With both judges embracing the spirit of love and commitment, these Valentine's Day wedding marathons have become cherished traditions in their respective counties, bringing joy to couples and their families year after year.



*Franklin County weddings*



# Around the Judiciary

## Swearing-In Day at the Capitol



As the House convened for its 209th legislative session, Chief Justice of Pennsylvania **Debra Todd** swore in the chamber's lawmakers, which included 16 new legislators.



Pa. Supreme Court Justice **Sallie Updyke Mundy** swore in Senator Kim Ward, who was reelected as President Pro Tempore of the Pennsylvania Senate as the chamber began its 2025-26 legislative session on Jan. 7.



Superior Court Judge **Jill Beck** (top) administered the oath of office to the Senate Democratic members while Indiana County Common Pleas Judge **Gina Force** (bottom) swore in the Senate Republican members.



Superior Court Judge **Timika Lane** administered the oath to Rep. Joanna McClinton, who was reelected as Speaker.



On Jan. 7, the Lancaster County Court of Common Pleas held a "Passing of the Gavel" ceremony welcoming **Leonard G. Brown, III**, who succeeds **David L. Ashworth** as president judge.



On Jan. 23-24, the First Judicial District’s Mental Health Collaborative Symposium brought leaders together to reimagine justice reform in Philadelphia. Inspired by Miami-Dade’s nationally-recognized program, attendees explored ways to reduce recidivism, improve public safety and support individuals with behavioral health challenges.



(l to r) Superior Court Judicial Protection Officers – **Rich Ruffolo, Brian Leventhal, Sean Brennan, Chris Culver**

The Superior Court said farewell to a valued member of its security team in December as they wished a happy retirement to Judicial Protection Manager Sean Brennan, who had been with the Court since 2017.



Congratulations to Allegheny County Common Pleas Judge **Joseph K. Williams, III** (ret.), who was honored with the Drum Major for Justice Award by the Allegheny County Bar Association at their MLK Prayer Breakfast on Jan. 20.



On Feb. 18, President Judge **Maria Musti-Cook**, Judge **Joseph Gothie** and Judge **Michael Flannelly** oversaw the joint graduation ceremony of 16 graduates from York County’s Wellness Courts, celebrating their success across the county’s DUI, Drug, Veterans, and Mental Health Courts.



AOPC staff at the PJC celebrated National Hot Chocolate Day at the end of January by getting together and sharing a warm drink.



To kick off Women's History Month, Chief Justice **Debra Todd** was honored to join the York County Bar Association's Women in Law Committee for an inspiring discussion on the past, present, and future of women in law.



On March 12, Pa. Supreme Court Justice **Daniel McCaffery** spoke at the Delaware County Naturalization Ceremony.

On Feb. 19, Judge **Jessica Brewbaker** presided over the graduation of four participants from Cumberland County's TOMS Court.

Judge **Thomas M. Caffrey** oversaw a special ceremony celebrating the graduation of seven participants from Lehigh County Drug Treatment Court at the end of February.



Judge **Mary Jane Bowes**, Judge **Judy Olson** and Judge **Victor Stabile** sat in the historic Lackawanna County Courthouse this week for a special session. Judge **Margaret Moyle** explained the historical significance of the courtroom to the Superior Court judges.



For Dr. Seuss Week, Luzerne County Judge **Tarah Toolhil** had the pleasure of reading to a 2nd grade class at Dr. David W. Kistler Elementary School.

# Women Lawyers and Judges Making Pennsylvania History

by Kathleen D. Wilkinson

*This article has been reprinted from [The Pennsylvania Lawyer](#) with the permission of both the author and the Pennsylvania Bar Association.*

In 1987, Congress declared March National Women's History Month. Since women began entering law school in the 1860s, women lawyers and judges have been making history in Pennsylvania. According to the ABA Profile of the Legal Profession 2024 – Women in the Legal Profession, as more male lawyers retire from the practice of law, women lawyers are finally achieving greater representation in the legal profession.

## Statistics

According to the American Bar Association (ABA) 2024 Profile, 41 percent of lawyers in the United States are women. The report notes that while 56.2 percent of law school students are women, only 28 percent of partners in law firms were women. The ABA report notes that Pennsylvania ranks as the sixth largest state in number of lawyers, at 47,519, with women comprising 38.4 percent of lawyers in the commonwealth. The Pennsylvania Bar Association (PBA) Commission on Women in the Profession (WIP) 29th Report Card (2023-24) corroborates that number, stating that women lawyers comprise 39.6 percent of Pennsylvania's attorney population. **The WIP Report Card has a section on women by gender and race and/or ethnicity, shown below:**

The ABA Commission on Women in the Profession has highlighted persistent racial and gender disparities, particularly for women of color, who comprise 13 percent of associates but fewer than 3.5 percent of partners and only

2 percent of equity partners, a percentage that has remained unchanged for two decades.

## Earliest Women Lawyers

In 1648, Margaret Brent of Maryland became the first woman lawyer in the United States. The ABA created an award in her name for women attorneys.

In Pennsylvania, women lawyers and judges have made their mark. There are many women to acknowledge for their "firsts," but here are a few highlights.

Although she initially was denied admission to the University of Pennsylvania Law School, Dr. Caroline Burnham Kilgore was the first woman to become a Pennsylvania lawyer, in 1883, and the first woman admitted to the Supreme Court of the United States.

In 1921, Dr. Sadie Tanner Mossell Alexander was among the first three Black women in the United States to obtain a Ph.D. from the University of Pennsylvania. In the fall of 1924, she entered the University of Pennsylvania Law School and was the first Black woman to graduate from that institution, as well as the first Black woman admitted to the Pennsylvania bar, in 1927. She worked for her husband's law firm, became a Philadelphia city solicitor and was later appointed a Philadelphia County Court of Common Pleas judge.

In 1994, the PBA WIP created an award named after Anne X. Alpern, the first woman to hold the positions of Pennsylvania attorney

general (1959-61) and justice of the Pennsylvania Supreme Court (1961-62). Juanita Kidd Stout was appointed to the Philadelphia Municipal Court in 1959 and later served on the Philadelphia County Court of Common Pleas. With her appointment to the Supreme Court of Pennsylvania in 1988, she became the first Black woman justice to serve on any state Supreme Court. Justice Stout's name is memorialized on the Criminal Justice Center in Philadelphia, the building renamed in her honor in 2012.

In the federal courts, there have been many trailblazers. Norma Shapiro, who was very active in the WIP, was the first woman appointed to the U.S. District Court for the Eastern District of Pennsylvania. She had been in line to become the first woman chancellor of the Philadelphia Bar Association when she accepted the nomination to the court in 1978. In 1979, Sylvia Rambo became the first woman to serve on the U.S. District Court for the Middle District of Pennsylvania, and first chief judge, serving until 2024. Her name is now on the new federal courthouse in Harrisburg. In 1982, Carol Los Mansmann was the first woman appointed to the U.S. District Court for the Western District of Pennsylvania and, in 1985, she was elevated to the U.S. Court of Appeals for the Third Circuit.

## Women Judges As Leaders

The first woman chief justice of Pennsylvania in the Pennsylvania Supreme Court's 300-year history, Debra Todd, was sworn in on



***"... in striving for success, there is no reason to be anything other than who you are in order to make it in what is, admittedly, a tough profession ..."***

*Chief Justice of Pennsylvania Debra Todd*

Oct. 1, 2022. She was elected to the Supreme Court in 2007, after serving on the Superior Court from 2000-07. In 2024, for the first time, all three Pennsylvania appellate court president judges were women: Chief Justice Todd, Superior Court President Judge Anne Lazarus and Commonwealth Court President Judge Renée Cohn Jubelirer.

When asked what is like to be the chief justice, Chief Justice Todd stated: "It is an honor and a privilege to serve as the chief justice of Pennsylvania. We do live in politicized and polarizing times. However, I always remind the public that we are not Republican or Democrat justices. We are justices of the Pennsylvania Supreme Court, and politics are not a part of our decision-making."

When asked for advice for women entering the legal profession, she said: "Many years ago, when I chose to enter the legal profession, it was a man's world. Thankfully, that has changed, and women are now law firm partners, general

counsel, judges and Supreme Court justices. That is not news to you. But I want to point out that in striving for success, there is no reason to be anything other than who you are in order to make it in what is, admittedly, a tough profession where assertiveness and tenacity reign supreme. You can be tough without being a bully. You can be kind without being weak. There was a book published in 2004 entitled *Nice Girls Don't Get the Corner Office*. Well, as the first female chief justice of Pennsylvania, I am here to tell you that 'Nice girls do get the corner office.'"

Chief Justice Todd observed that when she became an attorney in the early 1980s, it was not common to see women lawyers in the courtroom. She practiced as a trial lawyer and a commercial litigator for 18 years before her judicial career. She commented, "My biggest challenge as a young woman lawyer was knowing that some male lawyers, and even judges, tended to underestimate me. I addressed that challenge by working hard, winning cases and proving them wrong."

Superior Court President Judge Anne Lazarus, in addressing her role presiding over the busiest appellate court in Pennsylvania, said, "On the Superior Court, the president judge [PJ] is elected, and the elections have, in the past, been somewhat contested. I made it a point to meet with each and every colleague and let them know why I wanted to be the PJ, and what I hoped to accomplish." She further stated, "Being the face of the judiciary these days demands introspection and understanding."

The state judiciary is probably the one place that will stand for the rule of law." She explained, "I still only have one vote among the 13 other Superior Court judges. But

since I was unanimously elected, I do have some sway. I find that I am constantly reminding my colleagues of the value of collegiality and respect for each other's positions. In addition, as the face of our court, I am always mindful of ethical considerations, budgetary constraints and efficiency. It is a balancing act, to be sure."



***"Being the face of the judiciary these days demands introspection and understanding."***

*Superior Court President Judge Anne Lazarus*

Being a Superior Court president judge brings challenges. President Judge Lazarus observed: "I face vacancies that impact the workload of each judge, budgets that are, for the most part, salaries, aging equipment, and recently, security issues that we have rarely had to deal with in years gone by. In my first week as PJ, we were the victim of a cyberattack."

President Judge Lazarus believes "social media is of great concern," as is artificial intelligence. She also is the go-to person for each judge when they have a problem, and her colleagues like to call her first even though she has a wonderful staff. The Superior Court currently

has 12 women judges, two male judges and three senior male judges.

Commonwealth Court President Judge Renée Cohn Jubelirer notes that she presides over a court “unlike other courts; we are both an appellate and trial court. We are unique in the country.” See “How the Commonwealth Court Is Prepping for the 2024 Election Season,” *Legal Intelligencer*, March 18, 2024. The Commonwealth Court is also unique in the number of women on the bench, with seven women judges, two senior women judges and two male judges, and in its handling of litigation involving commonwealth entities and appeals from state agencies.

Theresa Ficken Sachs was appointed counsel to the Pennsylvania Supreme Court in 2019 after serving as shareholder and co-chair of the appellate group at Marshall Dennehey. She says she feels “lucky to be in my current role at a time when I can look to so many amazing women who have achieved the status of firsts.” She notes that upon law school graduation in 1984, “Women made up nearly half of my law school class, and I assumed that my time in practice would continue to reflect that balance, yet over time, the proportion of women active in the practice of litigation noticeably decreased.”

Sachs credits women like Chief Justice Todd, President Judge Lazarus and President Judge Cohn Jubelirer for reversing that decline. She says, “They exhibit not just professional excellence, but a distinct commitment to high visibility in the legal community. They have truly led by example, and their many successes have demonstrated to all of us what is possible.”

## Women in Law Firm Leadership Roles

Women lawyers hold many law firm management roles today. Morgan Lewis & Bockius LLP, with headquarters in Philadelphia, has been led by Jami McKeon since 2014. McKeon spoke about being a leader at one of the country’s largest law firms at a PBA Large Law Firm CLE Program in 2023: “Leadership starts with being a truly outstanding lawyer, development of your skills, delivery of exceptional client services and the development of a practice.” She said, “Being a respected member of your organization is job No. 1. A lot of good things flow from others having the opportunity to see you as terrific in whatever role you occupy. In my case, it was being a trial lawyer. But whatever kind of law you practice, your first and most important job, should you ever aspire to leadership, is being outstanding at what you do.” See “Firm Leadership Begins With Being a Good Lawyer, Seizing Opportunities,” *Pennsylvania Bar News*, Dec. 18, 2023.

## Women Bar Leaders

The number of women holding leadership roles in bar associations continues to grow. Roberta Cooper Ramo, a New Mexico lawyer, was the first woman to serve as the ABA president, in 1995. Paulette Brown, a New Jersey lawyer, became the first woman of color to lead the ABA, in 2015.

In the PBA, Leslie Miller was the first woman president, followed by Gretchen Mundorff, Sara Austin, Sharon López (the first Latina president), Anne John, myself and Nancy Conrad. In May 2025, Kristen Hamilton will be the 8th woman PBA president. As of January 2025, 12 women chancellors will have led the

Philadelphia Bar Association, and the Allegheny County Bar will have been led by 11 women presidents. Across Pennsylvania, the number of women presidents of county bars continues to grow.

PBA President Nancy Conrad, a partner at the White & Williams LLP Lehigh Valley office, served as the president of the Bar Association of Lehigh County, a woman governor on the PBA Board of Governors and held other bar leadership roles. She offered the following advice to women lawyers: Your journey in the profession of law will be a long one with many twists and turns. Consider the following practices:

- Work hard, attend to the details and produce quality work.
- Identify a trusted mentor who can provide an objective view, kind support and wise counsel.
- Show respect to all, no matter the circumstance.
- Be available and set proper boundaries to maintain your well-being.
- Define your path to success and enjoy it all.

Stephanie Latimore, assistant director of the Legislative Reference Bureau of Pennsylvania in Harrisburg, is the current woman governor to the PBA Board of Governors. She has held many leadership positions in the Pennsylvania and Dauphin County bar associations, including on the Minority Bar Committee and the Commission on Women in the Profession. Latimore advises women entering the profession, “It will all work out [...] try and spend less time stressing and more time living. That is my advice to my younger self.” For women attorneys of color, Latimore recommends “finding an environment that you can thrive in, not just any position.” In describing



***"... try and spend less time stressing and more time living. That is my advice to my younger self"***

*Stephanie Latimore, assistant director, Legislative Reference Bureau of Pennsylvania*

the biggest changes she has seen in her over 33 years in the profession, she says, "We started in an era when I believe we felt like we had to do it all to be successful and accomplished in our careers. Now [...] I see us accepting help and putting our mental health first. We are no longer afraid to say no! We take advantage of the technology and services out there to make our load a little lighter." She also counsels that as women attorneys, "we insist that there is room at the table for us and that we speak up."

Women have made and continue to make excellent contributions in the legal profession and in the judiciary. There are many women lawyers and judges who are role models through their actions and words and who demonstrate outstanding leadership. We all should aspire to their examples of professionalism and civility. Bar associations will continue to play an important role in helping women lawyers succeed while trying to balance quality of life, wellness and well-being.

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*Kathleen D. Wilkinson is a partner at Wilson Elser, where she is a litigator handling complex litigation. She was the Pennsylvania Bar Association president from 2021-22 and served as the chancellor of the Philadelphia Bar Association in 2013.*

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