



NEWS FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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Pennsylvania Autism in the Courts Initiative Celebrates Five-Year Anniversary of Advancing Justice for Individuals with Autism

HARRISBURG – The Pennsylvania Supreme Court Autism in the Courts Initiative marks its five-year anniversary this month, celebrating its groundbreaking work in improving the court experience for individuals and their families on the autism spectrum.

The initiative, which was developed to better equip courts and law enforcement professionals to recognize and accommodate individuals with autism, has made significant strides in fostering understanding, inclusivity, and fairness in the judicial system.

“Five years ago, we became the first state in the nation to start a conversation about autism in our courts, to address the tough questions that would lead to important and lasting change within our system for court-involved, neurodiverse families and their children. On their behalf, we felt a shared responsibility to fix the gaps in the system,” Pennsylvania Supreme Court Justice Kevin Dougherty said.

“We’ve been hard at work alongside our partners in the law enforcement, legal, medical, state and local government and advocacy communities these past five years. We’ve accomplished so much and lit a fire within the system to continue growing and expanding the breadth and depth of this important work across Pennsylvania.

“Each family and each face has a story and we’re committed to listening, learning and educating within our system, until justice truly is accessible for all.”

Since the launch of this key court initiative, advances and accomplishments within courts across the state include:

- Extensive training provided for judges, legal professionals, law enforcement, state and local government officials and advocacy organizations;
- Creation of a roadmap to services and support for court-involved families and their children;
- Development of sensory/calming rooms in 12 Pennsylvania counties, with two additional in the early phases;
- Collaboration with states across the nation on best practices and efforts launched in Pennsylvania, making Pa a leader in this effort;
- Use of sensory bags/sensory items for court users in 30 counties across the state; and

- Since 2022, nearly 600 individuals have self-identified to the courts as a neurodivergent individual, allowing the courts to work with them to ensure justice was accessible and met their needs during their court appearance.

“According to the latest numbers from the U.S. Centers for Disease Control, one in 36 Pennsylvania children and more than five million adults nationwide are diagnosed with autism,” said Dougherty.

“As the number continues to grow, so does our commitment to ensuring Pennsylvania’s courts are prepared to recognize, accept and meet the needs of all court users and their families.”

In 2020, the Supreme Court signaled its commitment to Pennsylvanians with autism by forming a first-of-its-kind partnership with the Department of Human Services (DHS) to heighten the focus on helping judges better understand the necessary evaluations required for diagnosis, treatment and services for individuals with an autism spectrum disorder. More than 200 judges attended the first in-person training session held that year, indicating the interest and the need for the courts to focus on ASD.

Committed to moving the initiative forward, Dougherty and DHS developed a statewide virtual listening tour to hear first-hand about challenges faced in the system from medical professionals, service providers and individuals with autism alike as they sought access to justice. More than 1,200 individuals attended the virtual tour and heard from more than 60 justice system professionals, self-advocates, parents and service providers statewide.

As part of this ongoing effort the courts have added information and resources for families supporting an individual with autism on the Pennsylvania Courts [frequently asked questions](#) page. Additional information about the initiative is available [here](#).

Since that time, Justice Dougherty has partnered with the Pennsylvania Courts’ Office of Children and Families in the Courts to create a taskforce known as the Autism in the Courts Taskforce. The taskforce is focused on providing increased training opportunities for judges, helping further identify gaps in the child welfare system for individuals with autism and intellectual disabilities and creating a local roadmap to resources and services.

For more information about the Autism and the Courts effort visit <https://www.pacourts.us/learn/autism-and-the-courts>.

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