

AOPC^{ON}NECTED



Issue 2, 2026

In this issue

In this issue, read about how our courts celebrated national awareness months for treatment courts and elder abuse, recent judicial recognitions including an award to the AOPC for the Guardianship Tracking System, ongoing civics education, engagement and outreach efforts happening around the judiciary and more.

AOPC Receives PACM Innovation Award for Guardianship Tracking System

The AOPC's IT Department and Office of Elder Justice in the Courts (OEJC) have received the **2026 Pennsylvania Association for Court Management (PACM) Innovation Award** for their work on Pennsylvania's Guardianship Tracking System (GTS): Automated Criminal Matching project.

The award recognizes an innovative enhancement that automatically identifies when court-appointed guardians become involved in criminal, civil, landlord-tenant or other court proceedings and alerts the courts overseeing their guardianship cases.

Prior to the enhancement, courts often relied on guardians to self-report criminal activity through annual filings. The automated process now provides courts with near real-time notifications by matching guardian information with records in the Magisterial District Judge System (MDJS) and Common Pleas Case Management System (CPCMS).

The OEJC reviews every notification generated statewide and works directly with county guardianship stakeholders to ensure the information is evaluated and appropriate next steps are considered.

Since implementation, the system has identified hundreds of guardians involved in court matters, providing judges with critical information that has helped protect vulnerable Pennsylvanians and their assets. In several cases, courts have been able to quickly intervene and appoint successor guardians when concerns arose about a guardian's ability to safely fulfill their responsibilities.

"This change is a fulfillment of our original vision for GTS and further solidifies Pennsylvania as a national leader in guardianship monitoring innovation," OEJC

*"This award reflects the real value and impact of this work on court operations across Pennsylvania," Court Administrator **Andrea Tuominen** said. "The Guardianship Tracking System represents a major advancement in guardianship oversight for our courts and helps protect some of our Commonwealth's most vulnerable individuals. This recognition is a testament to the expertise and dedication of AOPC staff who helped bring this initiative to life."*

Director **Amy Whitworth** said. "I want to thank AOPC/IT Senior Leader **Soumya Krishnamurthi** and her team for their efforts on this project, and recognize the exemplary work of OEJC Analyst **Joan Bertone** as she works with counties to implement sound business practices around effectively reacting to the information provided through this new process."

Counties across Pennsylvania have expressed appreciation for the support provided by the OEJC, and numerous success stories demonstrate how the project has strengthened guardianship oversight and enhanced protections for some of the Commonwealth's most vulnerable citizens.



AOPC Deputy Court Administrator **David Price** and IT Director **Russel Montchal** accept the 2026 PACM Innovation Award.





PA Supreme Court Announces Winners of America 250 Coloring Contest

As the nation marks its birthday, Pennsylvania students were encouraged to join the celebration while learning about the work and role of the courts.

Through its focus on the importance of civics education, the Supreme Court Historical Commission launched the coloring contest in March inviting students to design their own judge.



"Civics education is the foundation of an informed and engaged citizenry. When students take part in opportunities focused on our courts, they gain a deeper understanding of the judicial branch and the role the courts play in protecting constitutional rights," said Justice **Sallie Updyke Mundy**. "The Historical Commission's initiatives invite young people to explore how our justice system functions."

The winners have been invited to attend an upcoming Supreme Court argument session where the Justices will officially recognize them at the beginning of session.

Pa Courts Celebrate National Treatment Court Month

Virtual Town Hall: Treatment Courts in PA

Recognizing May as National Treatment Court Month, Justice **Kevin Brobson** joined with legislators, law enforcement, treatment court professionals and graduates to discuss Pennsylvania's treatment court program.

In a recent virtual town hall event, Justice Brobson highlighted the critical need for treatment courts and recognized that the path through the program is not easy.

"Treatment courts are based on a powerful idea – that we can't incarcerate our way out of addiction, mental illness or trauma, but when we combine accountability with compassion through the treatment court program, lives are changed and saved, and communities are strengthened," said Justice Brobson.

In addition to hearing from program graduates with lived experience, Justice Brobson was joined at the live event by Luzerne County Judge **Joseph F. Sklarosky**, Montgomery County Judge **Steven O'Neill**, and Berks County Judge **Eleni Geishauser** along with President of PA Association of Treatment Court Professionals Nancy Butts and several other treatment court and criminal justice partners.

Full video of the discussion is available [on the PaCourts YouTube page](#).

VIRTUAL TOWN HALL

A 60-Minute Live Discussion on
Treatment Courts in Pennsylvania

MODERATED BY
Justice Kevin Brobson
Pennsylvania Supreme Court

 **THURSDAY**
May 28, 2026

 **12 PM**

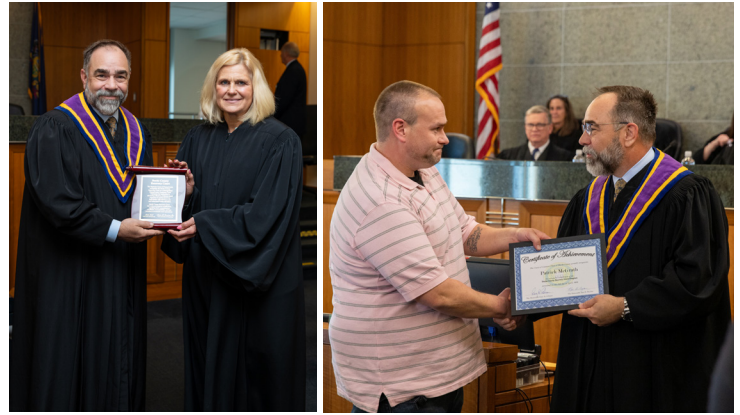
STREAMED LIVE ON
Facebook & YouTube

FEATURING VOICES FROM ACROSS THE JUSTICE SYSTEM
Treatment Court Judges · District Attorneys · Public Defenders
Law Enforcement · Legislators · Program Graduates



Bucks Recovery Champion Court

On April 9, Justice **Kevin Brobson** attended Bucks County's joint Recovery Court and Mental Health Court graduation, where he recognized Bucks County Recovery Court as a certified Champion Court.



Justice Brobson with Bucks County Senior Judge **Rea Boylan** (l) and a program graduate (r)



Justice **Kevin Dougherty** and Justice **Daniel McCaffery** along with **Angela Lowry**, treatment courts administrator of the AOPC, presented Montgomery County Judge **Steven T. O'Neill** with the Supreme Court certification.

Montgomery County Treatment Courts Celebrate 20th Anniversary

Montgomery County Treatment Courts reached important milestones this year with their 200th graduation ceremony on June 2 and the 20th anniversary of their Drug Treatment Court program celebration, which included a presentation of the Supreme Court Certification to the program.

Over the last 20 years, 892 individuals in Montgomery County have successfully completed treatment court programs.

(continued)

Chester County Treatment Courts Celebrate 29th Anniversary

Chester County recently celebrated 29 years of changing lives through treatment courts. Justice **Kevin Brobson** attended the ceremony where five graduates were recognized for successfully completing Drug Court, Recovery Court, Mental Health Court and Veterans Court – joining more than 2,300 graduates since the program's inception.



Justice Brobson with Judge Bret Binder and Judge Ann Marie Wheatcraft



Lancaster County Drug Court Celebrates 300th Graduate, Honors Founding Judge

Lancaster County's Drug Court recently celebrated its 300th graduate while also honoring retired Judge **David Ashworth**. As founder of the county's Drug Court in 2005, Judge Ashworth helped create a program that has transformed hundreds of lives by combining accountability with treatment and recovery.

The work continues today with dedicated team members alongside Judge **Jeffrey Conrad**, who now leads the program forward.



Wyoming/Sullivan Treatment Courts Recognize Treatment Court Month

In May for National Treatment Court Month, Wyoming/Sullivan Treatment Courts planted a tree to symbolize beauty, growth, new beginnings, hope and to always remember those who have lost their battle with substance use.



York Wellness Courts Celebrate Graduation

Throughout May, York County Adult Wellness Courts celebrated recovery, raised awareness and strengthened community partnerships during National Treatment Court Month and Mental Health Awareness Month.

Family, friends, treatment court team members and community stakeholders gathered to celebrate seven Adult Wellness Court graduates, while alumni returned to share their recovery journeys and inspire current participants. The team also participated in community outreach events to educate the public about the impact of treatment courts and joined partners across the county to help reduce the stigma surrounding mental health and substance use disorders.

(continued)



Judge Tully with a program graduate

Dauphin County Veterans Court Holds 33rd Graduation

Dauphin County Veterans Court celebrated four recent graduates at its 33rd graduation ceremony on May 29. Judge **William T. Tully** presided over the ceremony and the Veterans Court team welcomed back retired Adult Probation Officer Brian Wagner as the keynote speaker.



York County Treatment Courts Visit Local Providers

On June 16, team members from York County Treatment Courts visited Colonial House outpatient program, where many of their participants have received substance use treatment.



Luzerne County Drug Treatment Court Earns State Certification

Luzerne County Drug Treatment Court was officially certified by the Supreme Court during a ceremony at the Luzerne County Courthouse in early June, recognizing the program's commitment to meeting statewide standards for treatment courts.

Justice **Kevin Brobson** presented the certification plaque to Judge **Joseph F. Sklarosky Jr.** and Adult Treatment Court Coordinator **Danielle Goldowski**, praising the program as "one of the finest" in the state and recognizing Goldowski as one of the Commonwealth's top treatment court administrators.



*Judges **Jessica Brewbaker** and **Albert Masland** recognize the graduates.*

Cumberland County Treatment Court Recognizes Six New Graduates

Cumberland County held their third combined treatment court commencement ceremony at the end of April, where they proudly recognized the recent participants who have successfully graduated from the program.

PA Courts Mark World Elder Abuse Awareness Day with Educational Initiatives, Videos and Events

by **Robert Campbell** and **Amy Whitworth**, OEJC

Each year since 2006, World Elder Abuse Awareness Day (WEAAD) is observed on June 15th to raise awareness about abuse, neglect and financial exploitation of older adults. It serves as a global call to action to protect the dignity, rights and well-being of older adults. For this year's WEAAD, the Advisory Council on Elder Justice in the Courts and Office of Elder Justice in the Courts (OEJC) commemorated the day with multiple educational initiatives, videos for the public and in-person events.

On WEAAD, the OEJC released an educational panel video, ["Elder Abuse: Financial Exploitation and How Pennsylvanians Can Stay Safe."](#)

Hosted by Philadelphia Administrative Judge **Sheila Woods-Skipper**, the video features numerous other Advisory Council members and representatives, including Department of Aging Secretary Jason Kavulich, AARP Pennsylvania State Director Bill Johnston-Walsh, SeniorLAW Center Executive Director Karen Buck, Esq., the Office of Attorney General's Chief Deputy AG Elizabeth Schneider, Esq. and Senior Protection Unit Director David Shallcross. Additional video panelists included Christina Kotsalos from the Department of Banking and Securities, and OEJC Trainer Robert Campbell.

Meanwhile, the SeniorLAW Center hosted an in-person event, "A Conversation in Recognition of World Elder Abuse Awareness Day" at Chester County's



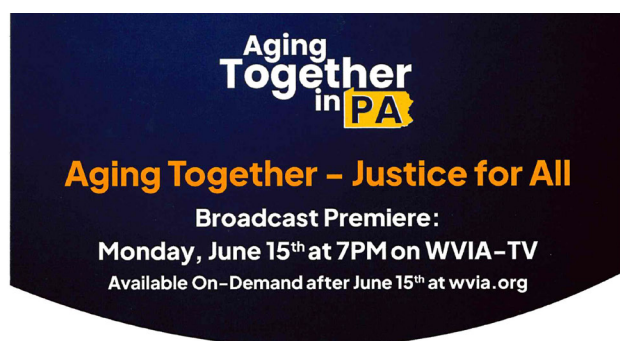
Stonecroft Center, which included a keynote address by Secretary Kavulich, and Director Shallcross delivered a keynote address at the Pennsylvania Crime Prevention Officers Association meeting in Harrisburg. Judge Sheila Woods-Skipper and the Philadelphia Courts also partnered with the Office of Attorney General, SeniorLAW Center and others to host an in-person event in Philadelphia.

While the Advisory Council and OEJC advocate and educate around elder justice matters year-round, WEAAD highlights a unique opportunity to make a statewide impact both virtually and in-person.

More information

For more information visit the OEJC's webpage: <https://www.pacourts.us/judicial-administration/court-programs/office-of-elder-justice-in-the-courts>

Aging Together Summit



In June, the OEJC participated in 'Aging Together: A Summit for Action on Elder Justice' in Scranton hosted by WVIA, the Pennsylvania Department of Aging, AARP and the Moses Taylor Foundation.

OEJC Director **Amy Whitworth** joined Secretary of Aging Jason Kavulich, AARP's PA State Director Bill Johnston-Walsh and Chief Deputy Attorney General, Elder Exploitation Section Liz Schneider, Esq. for a recorded panel discussion on elder abuse and financial exploitation protection, prevention and support for older Pennsylvanians.

The special program aired on WVIA-TV on World Elder Abuse Awareness Day.

See the [PaCourts YouTube channel](#) for videos.



Pennsylvania
Department of Aging



Franklin County PJ Receives Leadership Excellence Award

President Judge **Shawn D. Meyers** of the 39th Judicial District (Franklin and Fulton counties) was recently honored with the Hon. Linda K.M. Ludgate Excellence in Criminal Justice Advisory Board (CJAB) Leadership Award during the Pennsylvania Commission on Crime and Delinquency's (PCCD) 2026 CJAB Conference at State College at the end of April.

The award recognizes outstanding leadership in advancing collaborative, system-wide improvements in the justice system.

President Judge Meyers was recognized for his leadership as chair of the Franklin County CJAB, where he has championed strategic planning efforts and behavioral health initiatives aimed at improving outcomes for individuals involved in the justice system.

The award was presented during a two-day conference, which brought together more than 500 criminal



(l to r) Kristen Kenyon, Pennsylvania Commission on Crime and Delinquency executive director, President Judge **Shawn D. Meyers** and Jim Turner, Criminal Justice Advisory committee chair

justice and behavioral health professionals from across Pennsylvania.

In accepting the award, Meyers expressed gratitude to fellow judges and justice partners across the commonwealth, emphasizing that successful CJAB work depends on strong collaboration among courts, attorneys, law enforcement, corrections and behavioral health professionals.

Retired York County Judge Honored with Bucknell Humanitarian Award

Retired York County President Judge **John C. Uhler** has been named the recipient of Bucknell University's 2026 Service to Humanity Award, recognizing a lifetime of public service and commitment to improving the lives of others.

Judge Uhler has spent more than five decades serving the public as an assistant U.S. attorney, district attorney, common pleas judge, president judge and private trial attorney.

During his 25 years as a juvenile court judge, Judge Uhler established the Juvenile Mental Health Court – an innovative specialty court that brought together mental health professionals, educators, counselors, probation officers and families to support youth involved in the justice system.

He also played a key role in juvenile justice reform across Pennsylvania - contributing to the first *Juvenile Court Judges' Delinquency Benchbook*, serving on the



Judge John C. Uhler

Interbranch Commission on Juvenile Justice and being named Child Advocate of the Year by the Pennsylvania Bar Association's Children's Rights Committee in 2011.

Office of Children and Families in the Courts Welcomes New Leadership

The AOPC is marking a leadership transition in the Office of Children and Families in the Courts (OCFC) as longtime Director **Sandy Moore** retires at the end of July after more than 18 years of dedicated service.

Since becoming director in 2008, Moore has played a pivotal role in transforming Pennsylvania's juvenile dependency system. With the support of the Pa. Supreme Court and the leadership of the late Chief Justice Max Baer and Justice Kevin M. Dougherty, she helped advance initiatives that significantly reduced the number of children placed in foster care while promoting trauma-informed practices and evidence-based approaches throughout the dependency system.

Under Moore's leadership, OCFC partnered with courts and child welfare stakeholders across the Commonwealth to strengthen outcomes for children and families, leaving a lasting impact on Pennsylvania's judiciary. Her commitment, compassion and collaborative leadership have helped shape a more responsive and effective juvenile dependency system.

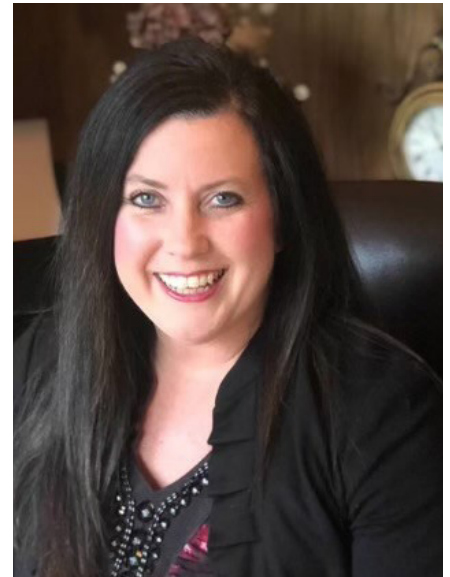
Upon Moore's retirement, **Christy Stanek** will succeed her as the new director of the OCFC. Bringing more than 30 years of experience in Pennsylvania's child welfare and dependency system, she has dedicated her career to improving outcomes for children and families across the Commonwealth.

Stanek began her career with Washington County Children and Youth Services before joining AOPC in 2011 as an analyst. Since being named OCFC assistant director in 2022, she has helped lead statewide educational initiatives for dependency attorneys and juvenile hearing officers while advancing efforts to strengthen family and kinship engagement in dependency cases.

As Stanek assumes leadership of OCFC, AOPC extends its sincere gratitude to Moore for her years of dedicated service and lasting contributions to Pennsylvania's children, families and courts, and wishes her all the best in retirement.



Sandy Moore



Christy Stanek

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



Miss an issue?

Check out our
[newsletter archive!](#)

Strengthening Cybersecurity Across the PA Courts

National Summit and Regional Workshops Help Courts Prepare for Evolving Threats



AOPC Director of Judicial District Security **Rob Granzow** and AOPC/IT Assistant Director **Wendy Hosch** presenting at the cybersecurity workshop held in Hershey in May.



Turning Awareness into Action

More than 100 judges, court administrators, information technology professionals, security personnel and county partners gathered this spring for a series of regional cybersecurity workshops designed to help our courts strengthen their preparedness against evolving cyber threats.

Hosted by the AOPC in Hershey, Pittsburgh and Blue Bell, the workshops emphasized that cybersecurity is not solely an IT responsibility – it requires coordinated planning, communication and collaboration across the entire court system.

Participants learned practical strategies for protecting personally identifiable information, recognizing emerging cyber threats, responding to ransomware and phishing attacks and maintaining court operations during cyber incidents. Presentations from AOPC's IT, judicial district security and operations departments – along with national cybersecurity firm Ironwall – highlighted how personal information can be exploited by malicious actors and offered tools to reduce digital vulnerabilities.

The workshops also featured county-to-county discussions allowing participants to share best practices, compare approaches to incident response and discuss ways to strengthen partnerships between courts, county government and technology teams.

During the program, hands-on, tabletop exercises challenged local teams to work through a simulated cyberattack, identify gaps in their response plans and reinforce the importance of coordinated decision-making during an incident. Additional sessions focused on continuity of operations planning (COOP), helping courts prepare to continue essential functions



even if technology systems become unavailable.

Feedback from attendees reflected the value of the collaborative approach. Participants said they planned to update their COOP plans, strengthen communication with county IT partners, conduct local tabletop exercises, review cyber insurance policies and reduce personal online exposure to better protect judges and court staff.

One district court administrator described the workshop as "one of the most thought-provoking and actionable trainings" they had attended in years, noting that bringing together court and county stakeholders generated meaningful conversations that continued long after the event ended.

As cyber threats continue to evolve, the workshops reinforce the judiciary's ongoing commitment to protecting court operations, safeguarding sensitive information and ensuring Pennsylvania's courts remain resilient and prepared to serve the public.

Helping Shape National Cybersecurity Efforts

Representatives from the AOPC recently joined court technology and cybersecurity leaders from across the country at the inaugural Conference of Information Technology Officers (CITOC) Security for Justice (S4J) Summit in Austin, Texas.

(continued)



Attendees at the CITOC 2026 Security for Justice Summit

The two-day summit brought together 53 court technology and cybersecurity professionals from 24 states and one U.S. territory to address evolving cyber threats facing courts and share strategies for strengthening cyber security.

Sessions focused on cybersecurity trends, risk management, governance, compliance, vendor security, tabletop exercises and the growing impact of artificial intelligence on the threat landscape. Attendees also shared lessons learned from recent cyber incidents and discussed practical approaches to integrating cybersecurity into

daily court operations.

The summit highlighted that protecting court systems requires more than technology alone. Strong cybersecurity depends on skilled personnel, effective policies and procedures, sound governance and layered security measures working together to prevent and respond to emerging threats.

Through participation in national forums like the Security for Justice Summit, Pennsylvania's courts continue to enhance efforts to safeguard court operations, protect sensitive information and maintain public trust.

AOPC Judicial Security Director Completes National Emergency Preparedness Program

Rob Granzow, director of AOPC Judicial District Security recently completed the Center for Homeland Defense and Security's Radiological Emergency Preparedness (REP) Executive Program at the Naval Postgraduate School.

The highly selective program brings together emergency management and preparedness professionals from across the nation to strengthen collaboration, strategic thinking and response capabilities related to radiological emergencies. Through the program, participants build valuable cross-sector partnerships and gain insights that help enhance preparedness efforts within their organizations and communities.



Rob Granzow

Granzow's participation reflects an ongoing shared commitment by Granzow and the AOPC to ensuring the safety and security of our courts.

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Supreme Court of Pennsylvania

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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

Longtime AOPC Employee Receives Lifetime Achievement Award

Congratulations to AOPC Judicial Programs Administrator **Rick Pierce** on being honored with the Pennsylvania Association of Court Management's (PACM) Lifetime Achievement Award.

For 37 years, Rick demonstrated an unwavering commitment to strengthening the courts, advancing professional development for court personnel and supporting the administration of justice.



Rick recently retired from the AOPC at the end of June, but his leadership has left a lasting impact on colleagues, including his tenure as President of the National Association for Court Management (NACM) in 2024.

Stay Tuned: Faces of the PA Courts

Behind every court program, initiative and service are dedicated professionals working to support the administration of justice across Pennsylvania. Starting in the fall, follow our new *Faces of the PA Courts* social media series as we spotlight AOPC and court staff through brief interviews that highlight their roles, career paths and the impact of their work.



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Around the Judiciary



On April 30, Pa. Supreme Court Justice **Daniel McCaffery** provided remarks during the Philadelphia Bar Association's Law Week program. *photo credit: Phila Bar*



Counsel to the Commission **Darren Breslin** speaking at the event

On May 13, the Pennsylvania Commission on Judicial Independence hosted a "Courts and Conversations" event focused on strengthening public understanding of the courts, the role of a free press and the importance of judicial independence.



On May 13, the Pennsylvania Judicial Center welcomed staff to a Wellness & Self-Care Fair focused on health, balance and well-being. Employees had the opportunity to participate in mini yoga sessions, chair massages, reiki and visits with therapy dogs while connecting with valuable resources on financial wellness, nutrition, chiropractic care, workplace ergonomics, employee assistance services and insurance benefits.



On May 6, the Allegheny County Bar Association hosted their Law Day celebration in partnership with the county's Court of Common Pleas Civil Division. During the program, students from local schools received a brief introduction to the U.S. and PA Constitution, took a short tour of the courthouse and ended the day with a game of Jeopardy reinforcing what they learned.



In May, Allegheny County Judges **Nicola Henry-Taylor** and **Oscar Petite** joined Superior Court Judge **Timika Lane** and community leaders in Pittsburgh for a "Why Courts Matter" forum focused on civic education and community engagement.



Superior Court Judge **Timika Lane** joined Montgomery County Common Pleas Judge **Lauren Hughes** along with MDJs **Denise Ashe**, **Hakim Jones** and **Todd Barnes** at Norristown High School where they talked with students about the role of the courts.



Montgomery County Judge **Daniel Clifford** and Luzerne County Judge **Tarah Toohil**, along with Pennsylvania Bar Association leadership and bill sponsors Representatives **Tim Briggs** and **Liz Hanbidge**.

Pennsylvania leaders recently gathered with Governor Josh Shapiro to mark the signing of Act 11, legislation that streamlines the Commonwealth's child custody statute by reducing the custody factors courts must consider from 16 to 12. The legislation originated from the Joint State Government Commission Advisory Committee, chaired by Judge Clifford, with Judge Toohil serving as a member.



As part of the 2025-2026 First Judicial District Shadowing Program, a group of local students spent the year gaining firsthand exposure to the courts, legal professionals and the administration of justice. A Certificate Ceremony was held on May 21 that included time spent with Philadelphia Court of Common Pleas President Judge **Nina Wright-Padilla** and Chair of the Pennsylvania Commission for Fairness and Justice, Leonard J. Rivera.



(l to r) Sam Butler, Esq., Judge **Marilyn DeLeon**, David Mischak, Esq. and Philadelphia Municipal Court President Judge **Francis Shields**

During the Philadelphia Municipal Court Judicial Conference in May, Arraignment Court Magistrate **Marilyn DeLeon** presented an important session on bail considerations, alongside attorneys David Mischak and Sam Butler.

Photo courtesy Philadelphia Municipal Court Judge **Jacquelyn Frazier-Lyde**



(l to r) **Heather Wetzel** (Adams County), **Rachel Schreck** (Adams County), **Selena Jones** (Philadelphia County), **Sarah Dugan** (Washington County), **Rebekah Reigner** (Franklin/Fulton), **Katie Conway** (Lancaster County), **Noah Lambert** (Washington County), **Kathryn Karam** (Luzerne County), **Fred Keller** (Philadelphia County)

A group of new court administrators toured the Pa. Supreme Court courtroom in May during their visit to Harrisburg.



Pa. Supreme Court Justices participated in a panel discussion on June 11 at the Special Court Judges Association of Pennsylvania Conference, engaging with judges from across the state on issues shaping our courts and communities.



Duquesne Kline School of Law students working in city, county and state-level summer positions joined Justice **Christine Donohue**, L'80, Judge **Jill Beck**, L'06 and Judge **Mary Jane Bowes** for their roundtable where they spoke about their paths to the bench and their work on Pennsylvania's appellate courts.



Superior Court Judges **Carolyn Nichols** and **Timika Lane**, alongside Philadelphia Common Pleas Judges **Genece Brinkley** (ret.) and **Natasha Taylor-Smith**, recently were presented plaques commemorating their volunteer work at Belfield and Mallery Recreation Centers in Philadelphia.



On April 27, Commonwealth Court Judges **Mary Hannah Leavitt**, **Matthew Wolf** and **Stella Tsai** joined two groups of 8th graders during their visit to the Supreme Court courtroom as Court Crier **Brian Minner** spoke to them about the history, work and role of the Court.



Butler County Common Pleas Judge **John Scialabba** swore in Butler County's Sheriff as the new Pennsylvania Sheriffs Association President on July 16.

Informational Video Now Available on Understanding Protection Orders for Respondents/Defendants

A short, easy-to-understand video explaining the basic requirements of Protection from Abuse (PFA) orders for defendants is now available to download, stream and share. The [video](#) is offered in English and Spanish and includes closed captioning. Courts are encouraged to play the video for defendants after the final hearing, giving petitioners time to leave the courthouse safely and avoid potential conflict.



<https://vimeo.com/1181626531/8a68b8937d>

Luzerne County Judge Appointed to State Advisory Committee on Domestic Relations Law

Luzerne County Common Pleas Judge **Tarah Toohil** has been appointed to serve as a member of the Joint State Government Commission's Advisory Committee on Domestic Relations Law.

Judge Toohil was nominated by committee chairman, Judge **Daniel Clifford**, and confirmed as a member. The Advisory Committee helps review and shape family law policy throughout Pennsylvania.

As a committee member, Judge Toohil will help review current domestic relations laws, such as those about divorce and child custody. The committee researches legal issues and

makes recommendations to improve and update Pennsylvania's family law system.

"It's an honor to serve on the Advisory Committee and help improve our domestic relations laws," Judge Toohil said. "This work helps protect families across Pennsylvania as we review legal standards to be sure they are fair, effective and responsive."

The Joint State Government Commission is the Pennsylvania General Assembly's nonpartisan research and policy agency. It studies key issues in the state and provides lawmakers with research,



Judge Tarah Toohil

recommendations and proposed legislation on many public policy topics. The Advisory Committee on Domestic Relations Law focuses on Pennsylvania's domestic relations laws, such as divorce, child custody and family law procedures.



New course helps court employees connect daily work to public trust

Every court employee shapes how the public experiences justice.

Reprinted with permission from the National Center for State Courts

Court leaders know that a trained, knowledgeable, and service-focused workforce serves the public well and builds public trust in the courts.

NCSC's new online course, *Working in Courts*, helps new employees see a connection they might otherwise miss: the link between their daily work and the court's broader mission of delivering justice that is fair, accessible, and trustworthy for everyone.

"Many people are drawn to working in courts out of a desire to help others," said Chris Robertson, NCSC curriculum developer and content development lead. "When courts connect their purposes and responsibilities to each employee's role, every employee's interaction with the public becomes a way to help others and build trust with the community."

The role of the court employee

The three-hour course builds a foundational understanding of courts and promotes purpose and pride in public service through four modules:

1. **Getting started:** Lays the groundwork for court employees' role in serving the public, upholding the rule of law, and supporting the judicial system.
2. **Introduction to the courts:** Traces the history and development of the U.S. court system and its place in American society.
3. **Purposes and responsibilities of courts:** Examines the core purposes, responsibilities, and foundational principles that enable courts to do their work.
4. **Public trust and confidence and the role of court employees:** Shows how each employee's role and daily interactions shape public perception of, and confidence in, the justice system.

Unique to the course are journaling opportunities that give employees a chance to pause and reflect on the meaningful work that comes with preserving trust, fairness, and equal access.

Supporting fair & impartial courts

The *Working in Courts* course, developed by NCSC with a grant from the State Justice Institute, advances NCSC's Strategic Agenda priority to support fair and impartial courts.

No registration or login is required. Access the free online course in [NCSC's learning management system](#).

York County Courthouse upgrades room for kids caught up in court cases

By Aimee Ambrose

Reprinted with permission from the York Daily Record

June 12, 2026

A new light shines from a corner of the York County Judicial Center — a brighter spot, softer, quieter, less intimidating for children heading through stressful paths in family court.

President Judge Michael Flannelly led a ribbon-cutting ceremony June 11 with fellow judges and court staff to open this corner, a room set aside on the courthouse's fourth floor to give children some space of their own while waiting through proceedings.

Flannelly said hundreds of children go through the judicial center in downtown York City each month, and many of them are part of dependency hearings where claims of neglect and abuse are involved.

"These children both need and deserve a safe and encouraging place to play or just hang out while they wait for court proceedings," he said.

This room already existed as a family space, originally designated the Children's Waiting Room, which Flannelly quipped had a pediatrician's office quality to it.

A recent project gave the room a makeover, as well as a new identity as Penny's Playroom.

The name memorializes the late Judge Penny Blackwell, who [left a significant mark on the local courts](#) during her career, particularly as an advocate for youth.

"Judge Blackwell herself was in the foster care system. And in her time on the bench, Penny



was a relentless watchdog of the interests of less-fortunate kids," Flannelly said.

The judge explained that the room had fallen into disrepair with walls covered in crayon marks and a carpet that was difficult to clean.

A photo provided by the York County Bar Foundation showed its previous state that also included some chairs, an activity table, some stocked shelves and cubbies, a small TV and fluorescent lighting.

The wear and tear was showing, according to Flannelly, and he sided with a court staffer's insistence that a change was needed.

"Once I saw it we agreed something needed to be done," he said.

He said he reached out to the Children's Aid Society to get advice on how to move forward. Opinions included installing vinyl flooring and adding more durable furniture and activity and sensory panels.

The upgrades wouldn't come cheap, Flannelly noted.

That's where the York County Bar Foundation stepped in. The organization maintains a memorial fund named for Henry Lenz, the county's first probation officer, as it carries on an account he started in the 1940s to aid juveniles with emergency expenses.

The account grew into a fund over the decades dedicated to addressing juvenile needs and juvenile delinquency, according to the Bar Foundation. The group granted money from that to the Penny's Playroom renovation,

which Flannelly estimated cost around \$8,000.

Other contributions aided the project as well. Flannelly noted his wife donated artwork that had hung in her office during her days as a high school guidance counselor. A ribbon-cutting attendee also quietly donated children's books for the new shelves.



The renovated room has wood vinyl flooring, a new paint job with a softer palette, softer lighting, new comfy children's furniture, toys and books.

Flannelly credited court facilities staff for their work in re-painting the room and hanging new activity and sensory panels on one of the walls.

The next step was coming up with a new name.

The idea to dedicate the room to Blackwell came from Judge Kelley Margetas, Flannelly said, calling her suggestion "a perfect and elegant solution."

Blackwell died in August 2023 at age 74, remembered and respected for numerous accomplishments over a 22-year career, including the [distinction of becoming the second woman to serve](#) as a York County judge.

But her history from childhood through adulthood is the key element in tying her legacy to the upgraded Penny's Playroom safe space for youths at the

courthouse.

Blackwell was born in 1948 to parents serving in the Armed Forces in Panama. But they died eight years later, and Penny and her three younger brothers were orphaned.

Her obituary in 2023 described that a court separated the children, and Blackwell was fostered by a family in Oregon. That decision created a goal within the girl to grow up, become a judge and bring more respect and kindness into courts, the obituary stated.

She pushed herself over about 30 years, working her way through college to earn her diploma and then her juris doctorate, while in between, competing in volleyball and racing motorcycles, according to the obituary.

While working as an attorney in York, Blackwell ran for judge in the 1980s, lost, ran again, and won in 1991.

As judge, she spent a lot of time in family law. She was remembered for her dedication to finding permanent homes for children in the foster care system, for her ability to interview children, and for being available after hours to hold emergency dependency hearings from her home.

On top of these, Blackwell was remembered for various pursuits that included advocating for expanding the county's court-appointed special advocates office, advocating for mediation in custody cases and creating a program to have therapy dogs in her court, to name a few initiatives.

Blackwell's husband, Dr. John Sanstead, gave his blessing to use his late wife's name for the new children's room, Flannelly said.

Sanstead wielded ceremonial large scissors to cut the blue ribbon that gave Penny's Playroom its new life.

The room is located on the fourth floor of the judicial center, 45 N. George St., in a quiet corner behind the elevators on the jury assembly room side of the floor.

A new plaque inscribed with Penny's Playroom welcomes children and caregivers to the site with its half door.