

How Court Programs Impact the Commonwealth

Office for Children and Families in the Courts (OCFC) – Dedicated to improving outcomes for dependent children in the justice system by speeding their safe placement into permanent homes. Works with county family courts and child welfare officials statewide.

- Between 2006-2019, 5,241 children have been returned home or placed into other permanent quality living arrangements reducing the number of dependent days of placement by 1,138,060 days.
- From 2006 to 2022 there has been a reduction of 8,738 children in foster care. In SFY 2018-19 (most recent data available), the average cost of one child in foster care per year was \$27,740. If 8,738 additional children were in foster care today, it would cost an additional \$242,392,120 (by 2018-19 standards).
- In 2012 20% of children were placed in kinship care (someone the child knows). In 2022, 44% of children are placed in kinship care. Sixteen (16) counties have 50% or more children in kinship care. This includes the two largest judicial districts (Allegheny @ 61% and Philadelphia @ 52%). This statistic is important as it demonstrates the courts' focus on reducing trauma for children by placing them with relatives or kin. It also demonstrates how the courts are implementing Act 14 of 2019 (Family Finding).
- In 2018, 2,314 children were placed in in Congregate Care (highest, most restrictive, and most expensive placement for dependent children). In 2021, there were only 1,445 children in congregate care. This demonstrates a 38% reduction (2018 is the year OCFC's State Roundtable created a Workgroup to address Congregate Care)
- In 2006 there were no Comfort/Therapy/Court canine programs in dependency proceedings. Now there are 24 districts that have Comfort/Therapy/Court Canine programs in dependency proceedings which illustrates the court's focus on reducing trauma for children and parents.
- AOPC's Office of Children and Families in the Courts offer various online training and resource materials for judges, system partners, and attorneys (e.g., *An Attorney's Introduction to Pennsylvania's Dependency System*) which can be accessed at www.ocfcpacourts.us

Autism in the Courts - The Autism in the Courts initiative, spearheaded by Justice Dougherty, is focused on providing increased training opportunities for judges, helping further identify gaps in the system for individuals with autism and intellectual disabilities and creating a local roadmap to resources and services.

- 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 more about individuals with autism and the necessary evaluations required for diagnosis, treatment, and services.
- In 2020 and 2021, Justice Dougherty and other representatives from the justice, healthcare, social work, and advocacy communities held a series of virtual, regional discussions with an objective of learning about court experiences from individuals with an ASD and the challenges they face in seeking access to justice.
- This new initiative will continue the work to develop a framework within the courts to assist those in need.

How Court Programs Impact the Commonwealth

- More information can be found at www.pacourts.us/learn/autism-and-the-courts.

[Office of Elder Justice in the Courts \(OEJC\)](#) – Established in 2015, AOPC’s OEJC assists the Supreme Court in implementing recommendations contained in the 2014 *Elder Law Task Force’s Report and Recommendations*. Addressing issues related to guardianship, elder abuse, and access to justice, and in calling attention to the prevention of elder abuse, OEJC promotes best practices in the areas of guardianship, elder abuse/neglect and access to justice for the Commonwealth’s courts through education, trainings and presentations.

- As of December 31, 2021, there were 19,426 active guardianship cases that were entered into the Guardianship Tracking System (GTS) with the total amount of guardianship assets under court supervision at \$1.765 billion.
- One of the most significant accomplishment of AOPC and the Elder Law Advisory Council is the development and implementation of GTS. GTS is a comprehensive web-based system that is used by guardians, court staff, Orphans’ Court Clerks, and judges to file, manage, track and report on guardianships. It permits courts to better monitor active guardianships through a statewide uniform reporting process, which flags concerns of potential financial loss or neglect. Data-sharing with federal agencies (e.g., US Dept of Justice, Social Security Administration, and Department of Veterans Affairs) will provide a more holistic and inter-governmental approach to the protection of elders.
- The AOPC’s statewide Common Pleas Criminal and Magisterial District Judge systems also track criminal cases in which victims are 60 or older, leading to enhanced data collection as well as laying a foundation for study and formulation of solutions to crimes against elders.
- The Supreme Court’s Orphans’ Court Procedural Rules Committee overhauled the guardianship rules. Changes included, for example: a standardized expert report form to ensure the consistent quality of information for judicial determinations of capacity; requirement of criminal background checks and current credit reports; appointment of counsel when appropriate; and required timely filings of inventories and annual reports by guardians with monitoring by court personnel.
- OEJC, with the leadership of the Advisory Council, also ensures that a various of trainings for judges, court staff and attorneys are offered, along with resource and bench book materials. Equally important has been the focus of creating public awareness of elder abuse and available resources to prevent and report through brochures and social media campaigns.
- In an effort to protect and educate seniors and their families about the signs and dangers of financial scams, OEJC has partnered with the Departments of Aging and Banking to host virtual discussions on elder abuse awareness and financial exploitation. These events were hosted on Facebook live and made available on the Court’s website post-event.

[Language Access/Interpreter Certification Program](#) – Assists courts and court-related offices with providing limited English Proficient (LEP) or deaf/hard of hearing court users access to Pennsylvania’s court system.

- The Court adopted a Language Access Plan for the UJS in 2017 that provides a framework for the provision of meaningful access to the courts for those who are LEP, deaf or hard of hearing.

How Court Programs Impact the Commonwealth

Each judicial district has developed its own plan that addresses the resources available for its LEP communities and plans to improve access.

- Many improvements have been made in accordance with the UJS Language Access plan, including training/testing of bilingual employees, establishment of a grievance resolution process, signage and other useful notification methods for use of LEP court users, creation of a database to collect usage information that also assists the judicial districts in seeking reimbursement grants via state appropriation to the AOPC, various training and outreach efforts.
- AOPC has translated over 50 court forms which are posted on our [website](#) in over six different languages to better assist LEP court users.

AOPC also educates and certifies court interpreters to ensure that adequate interpretations are being provided during a judicial proceeding.

- Has certified 243 interpreters representing 38 different languages for the courts to use when needed. Also facilitates connections between the districts when rare language interpreters are requested.
- Currently piloting an interpreter scheduling dashboard for use by the courts to streamline the process of finding an available interpreter promptly and with ease.

A future initiative would be the development of a statewide Video Remote Interpreting Project, to facilitate the participation of interpreters, particularly in regions where it is difficult to secure an interpreter or in cases involving rare languages. The project would provide the necessary infrastructure and protocols to implement VRI, as other state court systems have successfully done.

Problem-Solving Courts - The goal of problem-solving courts is to supervise the treatment and rehabilitation of carefully screened and selected defendants to try to change their behavior. Instead of a jail sentence, defendants are given counseling, treatment for their addictions or illnesses, educational assistance, and healthcare support.

- Types of Treatment Courts: Drug Court, DUI Court, Mental Health Court, Veterans Court, Domestic Violence Court, Sexual Offender Court, Prostitution Court. (129 Problem-Solving Courts as of December 31, 2021.)
- In 2020, 62 percent of all discharged participants graduated successfully from mental health treatment programs and among those graduates, there was a 113 percent increase in employment.
- Graduation Rates for other Problem-Solving Courts in 2020:
 - Drug Court: 64%
 - Veterans Court: 75%
 - DUI Court 82%

Judicial District Security - Develops and supports initiatives to help make court facilities in Pennsylvania safe places for judges, court personnel, litigants, jurors, witnesses, victims of crime, and members of the public. Those initiatives include an electronic incident reporting system; court security manual and related resources; annual workshops and training for local court security committees; and funds to

How Court Programs Impact the Commonwealth

reimburse counties for the purchase of courthouse security equipment such as duress alarms, access control systems, magnetometers, package screening devices, and security cameras.

- In 2021, there were 800 reported security incidents involving the courts of common pleas and magisterial district courts.

PAePay - Allows people to conveniently make payments via the internet with a debit or credit card. Most of the money collected and distributed by the courts is sent to state and local governments and victims of crime; a small portion of the money is sent to various entities such as airports, parking authorities and libraries. Over the past 10 years, the judiciary has collected nearly \$4.6 billion in fines, costs and restitution.

- In 2021, Pennsylvania courts collected a total of \$422.9 million with a record \$164 million paid online through PAePay®, a 5 percent increase over the previous year.

Judicial Case Management Computer Systems - The judiciary's case management computer systems have helped the courts improve collections by:

- Partnering with PennDOT to identify people failing to pay traffic-violation costs
- Working with the Department of Revenue to recoup outstanding court-ordered obligations through interception of tax refunds and lottery winnings over \$2,500
- Facilitating a statewide, collection agency contract for counties and by providing case financial data directly to outside collection agencies, which are currently used by 50 counties.

Data, Statistics and Research - In addition to helping courts improve financial collections, the Judicial Case Management Computer System's Data Exchange Unit and the AOPC Research and Statistics Department work together to gather and disseminate statewide metrics on court activity.

- AOPC fulfills over 500 requests per year from legislators, government agencies, academic institutions, the media, and individuals seeking to inform public policy agendas. In many instances, the courts are the sole source of data on specific topics and are an essential source of public information, which is underscored by the Judiciary's public access policies and practices.

Judicial Education Toolkit

Recognizing the importance of civics education, the Pennsylvania Courts recently launched an educational [digital toolkit](#) aimed at helping students learn about the work and role of the state's judiciary. The project was spearheaded by the Pennsylvania Supreme Court's Commission on Judicial Independence and includes:

- Digital one-pagers on topics exploring the layers of the Pennsylvania court system, how the courts work, the importance of judicial independence, the role of a judge, how judges are elected, and how a case progresses through the system and much more;
- Videos to complement and further expand on topics, giving a visual aid to students and teachers;

How Court Programs Impact the Commonwealth

- 3D video offering tours of courtrooms, complete with interactive educational points to learn more about various aspects of the rooms; and
- Games for the younger audience including the Flat Judge project, modeled after the Flat Stanley project used by schools across the nation.

The toolkit continues to grow and evolve with the court system, with new chapters released recently focused on the 300th anniversary of the Supreme Court. As part of the release, the Court sponsored a coloring and essay contest for school age children which garnered more than 400 submissions statewide.

<https://www.pacourts.us/civics-ed>

Social Media Campaigns

The Court continues its focus on social issues including domestic violence, human trafficking and education around protection from abuse orders for victims and their families.

For the past two years, using federal STOP grant funds, AOPC has conducted awareness campaigns for each of these issues using social platforms as well as Google as a means to directly target information to media and the public.

The goal of each campaign is to educate about recognizing the signs of domestic violence and human trafficking and how to help – by positioning the PA Courts as a resource.

Community Engagement

The AOPC continues to offer opportunities for judges to more frequently engage with media and the public through various community engagement initiatives including visiting schools, participating in online discussions on social media platforms, engaging in programs directly impacting local youth such as Men on a Mission and the Color of Justice program.

The courts continue to highlight and promote the community and civic engagement efforts of members of the bench through awareness months and events, including Black History Month, Women’s History Month, Autism Acceptance Month, Read Across America week and more.