

Preface
from the
Court
Administrator

To: The Honorable Chief Justice of Pennsylvania and Honorable Justices of the Supreme Court of Pennsylvania and to the Citizens of the Commonwealth

I am pleased to present this Report of the Administrative Office of Pennsylvania Courts for calendar year 2002. Our goal is to provide a general reference document that reflects the hard work and dedicated service of the boards and committees of the Supreme Court of Pennsylvania as well as of the Administrative Office of Pennsylvania Courts.

Additionally, this report represents an historic record of enormous accomplishments of the judiciary's rule-making and administrative processes.

We have attempted to outline the array of programs and services that provide the framework of the Commonwealth's judicial system. This report also serves to highlight noteworthy accomplishments in the administration of justice that took place during what was both a very busy and productive year.

Among the most significant actions during the year was the issuance of realignment guidelines by the Supreme Court for reshaping Pennsylvania's magisterial districts. Significant in that process was the public review and comment on each county's realignment plan.

The constitutionally required realignment takes place every ten years to determine how to best continue serving the needs of Pennsylvania's residents and to further enhance the administration of justice at the minor court level.

Accompanying that action was a reshaping of the justice system in one of Pennsylvania's more populous areas -- Allegheny County. The Fifth Judicial District was realigned and a study also was engaged to look at the feasibility of transitioning Pittsburgh Magistrates Court into the Commonwealth's district justice system. All appointments to vacancies on Magistrates Court were suspended while sitting magistrates continued to serve through the expiration of their terms

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under an order issued by the Supreme Court. Elected district justices within Pittsburgh’s city limits filled gaps left by the vacancies. The number of district justice seats within Allegheny County was consolidated from 55 to 48.

Allegheny also was the site of another noteworthy judicial accomplishment: the launching of a pilot program to promote the prompt resolution of family court matters. Berks, Lackawanna and Philadelphia counties also participated in the pilot program. The program was designed to ease and expedite matters by creating time limits on certain proceedings; outlining a specific framework for the scheduling of hearings and trials and authorizing local Domestic Relations Sections of Common Pleas Courts to facilitate agreed-on custody orders.

Pennsylvania’s Supreme Court amended administrative rules governing campaign speech-making for judicial candidates to address First Amendment concerns raised by the U. S. Supreme Court in a case from the state of Minnesota. The court’s thoughtful adjustment struck a careful balance between concerns with protecting the integrity in the judicial process and some of the more practical considerations attending campaigns.

Also of note during the year was the first systematic look at security issues in Pennsylvania’s Unified Judicial System. It began in earnest with the hiring of a new judicial security administrator who was charged with helping initiate a plan and assessment efforts with state and local court and county officials. The hiring dovetailed with the Judicial Council of Pennsylvania’s earlier work in directing an initial look at security concerns around the state.

Court-related fees were adjusted for the first time in a dozen years to provide a reliable funding source for the continued development and implementation of judicial automation and to boost the availability of civil legal services for indigent Pennsylvanians. The funding was overwhelmingly approved by the General Assembly and signed into law by the governor in the spirit of intergovernmental collaboration with the judicial branch of government. In part, the adjustment was made to fees on convictions in criminal courts and on civil court case filings.

The fee adjustment ensures continued work on the automation of Common Pleas criminal courts. Court automation has been shown to ensure uniform administration of justice in Pennsylvania’s 67 counties while making the administration of justice even more efficient by reducing costs, delays and labor-intensive paperwork.

New safety initiatives and collection procedures enhanced safety and yielded record revenue growth in Philadelphia Traffic Court in 2002. The dramatically improved collection rate benefited city as well as state treasuries.

A new judicial careers Web site was launched during the year to “court” jobseekers interested in opportunities within the judicial branch of government. Designed to complement existing information about the judiciary already on the Internet, the new Web site enhanced access to information about a variety of employment listings within the judicial branch – from technical to legal positions. It has proven to be both popular and successful as a recruiting tool.

The Supreme Court also issued new rules for the use of advanced communication technology in certain pre-trial proceedings during the year. The rules change established, for the first time, uniform statewide procedures to be used to conduct preliminary arraignments and arraignments. The changes ensure statewide consistency in the use of such video linkups while protecting the constitutional rights of defendants.

Another noteworthy action during the year was the creation of a new speakers’ bureau launched by the Pennsylvania Conference of Trial Judges with the assistance of the Judicial Services Department of the AOPC and the Pennsylvania Association of Court Management. The “Pillar of Justice” speakers bureau is designed to maintain public trust and confidence in the judiciary.

Finally, an historic law clerk placement program launched in Pennsylvania was broadened during the year to provide more experience and opportunities for minority and/or economically disadvantaged law students. The innovative program was designed and developed in Pennsylvania to maintain a national reservoir of talented and motivated law students from minority and economically disadvantaged backgrounds who have the skills needed after graduation from law school to serve as judicial law clerks in state and federal courts nationwide.

The judiciary takes great pride in demonstrating to you through this report the challenges faced by the courts and how they are being met through our efforts to provide effective service, access and justice for all Pennsylvanians.

Sincerely,



ZYGMONT A. PINES

Court Administrator of Pennsylvania

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