



**P**ennsylvania's judicial system forms a hierarchal structure that can best be illustrated in the form of a pyramid, as presented in Figure 2.2.1 below:

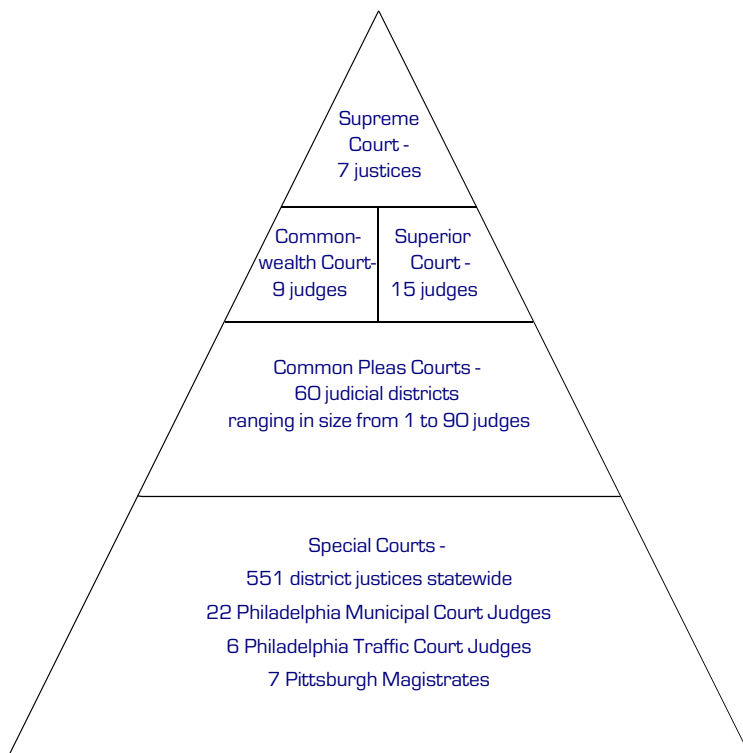


Figure 2.2.1

Special courts form the foundation of this system, followed in turn by the Courts of Common Pleas; the Commonwealth and Superior Courts; and the Supreme Court, the Commonwealth's court of last resort. A description of each level of the judiciary, beginning with the special courts, follows.

The  
Structure  
of  
Pennsylvania's  
Unified  
Judicial  
System

## Special Courts

Special courts, also called minor courts, constitute the "grass roots" level of Pennsylvania's court system. For many Pennsylvanians these are the first, and often the only, courts they will ever encounter. The special courts include 551 district justice courts, Philadelphia Municipal Court, Philadelphia Traffic Court and Pittsburgh Magistrates Court.

### *District Justice Courts*

District justices preside over the district justice courts in all counties but Philadelphia. They have authority to:

- issue warrants
- hold preliminary arraignments and preliminary hearings in criminal cases
- fix and accept bail except in cases involving murder or voluntary manslaughter
- adjudicate summary criminal cases
- adjudicate landlord-tenant matters and other civil actions in which the amount claimed does not exceed \$8,000
- accept guilty pleas to misdemeanors of the third degree in certain circumstances.

District justices are not required to be lawyers, but if they are not, they must complete an educational course and pass a qualifying examination before they can take office. They must also complete one week of continuing education each year in a program administered by the Minor Judiciary Education Board. (For more information on the Minor Judiciary Education Board see page 81.)

### *Philadelphia Municipal Court*

One of two special courts in Philadelphia County, Municipal Court is Pennsylvania's only court of record at the minor courts level. Its full complement of judges numbers 22 and all must be lawyers.

Municipal Court judges have the same jurisdiction as district justices with the following exceptions:

- jurisdiction includes all criminal offenses except summary traffic offenses that are punishable by a term of imprisonment not exceeding five years
- they may enter judgments in landlord-tenant matters that do not exceed \$5,000.

Municipal Court judges elect from their ranks a president judge who oversees the administration of the court. The president judge serves one five-year term, but may be reelected after a one-term interlude.

### *Philadelphia Traffic Court*

Philadelphia Traffic Court's jurisdiction covers all summary offenses under the Motor Vehicle Code as well as any related city ordinances.

Six judges sit on this court. As with district justices, the judges need not be lawyers, but must complete the certifying course and pass the qualifying examination administered by the Minor Judiciary Education Board.

Unlike the president judges in the Common Pleas and Philadelphia Municipal Courts, the president judge of Traffic Court is appointed by the governor.

### *Pittsburgh Magistrates Court*

The city of Pittsburgh has seven police magistrates in addition to the district justices who serve throughout Allegheny County. These magistrates, who are not required to be lawyers, sit on the Pittsburgh Magistrates Court. As members of Pennsylvania's only nonelective court, each magistrate is appointed by Pittsburgh's mayor to a four-year term.

Pittsburgh Magistrates may:

- issue arrest warrants
- preside at arraignments and preliminary hearings for criminal offenses occurring within the city
- preside over criminal cases brought by Pittsburgh police for violations of city ordinances and other specified offenses
- handle all summary offenses under the Motor Vehicle Code and any related city ordinances.

The special courts in Pennsylvania hold no jury trials. In summary cases, the district justice hears the case and reaches a decision on its merits. In misdemeanor and felony cases, the district justice first holds a preliminary arraignment at which charges are formally brought. Following the preliminary arraignment the district justice also holds a preliminary hearing, unless that hearing has been waived by the defendant to Common Pleas Court, the next level of the judicial pyramid. During the preliminary hearing the district justice determines whether sufficient evidence exists for the case to be tried in Common Pleas Court.

At some point in this process the district justice will also hold a bail hearing to determine what security is appropriate to ensure the defendant's appearance at later court proceedings.

Appeals of judgments made by special court judges may be taken to Common Pleas Court where the case is heard *de novo*, or anew.

## Common Pleas Courts

Common Pleas Courts are Pennsylvania's courts of general trial jurisdiction. They have original jurisdiction over all cases not exclusively assigned to another court and appellate jurisdiction over judgments from the special courts. They also hear appeals from certain state and most local government agencies.

The courts are organized into 60 judicial

districts which generally follow the geographic boundaries of the Commonwealth's counties; however, seven of the districts are comprised of two counties. They are: Perry-Juniata, Union-Snyder, Franklin-Fulton, Wyoming-Sullivan, Columbia-Montour, Warren-Forest and Elk-Cameron. Each district has from one to 90 judges.

Each district also has a president judge to administer the affairs of the court. In districts with seven or fewer judges, the judge with the longest continuous service holds this position. In districts with eight or more judges, the president judge is elected to a five-year term by his or her peers. The president judge may not serve consecutive terms, but may serve nonconsecutive ones.

## Appellate Court System

Pennsylvania's appellate courts form a two-tiered appeals system. The first, or intermediate, level has two courts: the Superior Court, which has 15 judges, and the Commonwealth Court, which has nine. At the second level is the seven-justice Supreme Court, the highest court in Pennsylvania.

In general, appeals of Common Pleas Court decisions are made to one of the two intermediate appellate courts.

### *Commonwealth Court*

The Commonwealth Court was created by the Constitutional Convention in 1968 as not only a means to reduce the workload of the Superior and Supreme Courts, but as a court to hear cases brought against and by the Commonwealth. It has, therefore, both original and appellate jurisdiction.

The court's **original** jurisdiction encompasses:

- most civil actions brought against the Commonwealth
- civil actions brought by the Commonwealth
- matters involving the Election Code.

Its **appellate** jurisdiction includes:

- appeals relating to decisions made by state administrative agencies
- civil or criminal appeals from Common Pleas Courts involving the Commonwealth or its administrative agencies
- interpretation of General Assembly acts
- interpretation of home rule charters
- interpretation of local ordinances or legislative acts governing local governments
- appeals from local administrative agencies
- matters relating to non-profit corporations and eminent domain proceedings.

### *Superior Court*

Because the Superior Court's main function is as an appeals court, its original jurisdiction is limited. Such jurisdiction includes mainly matters of *mandamus*, i.e., requirements by the Court for public officials to perform specified official acts or duties, and applications made by the attorney general and district attorneys under the Wiretapping and Electronic Surveillance Control Act.

As an appeals court, the Superior Court's jurisdiction is less specialized than the Commonwealth's; therefore, it hears a wide variety of petitions, both criminal and civil, from Common Pleas Courts. Such petitions include all manner of cases from child custody to armed robbery to breach of contract to property disputes.

### *Supreme Court*

Since the Supreme Court was established by the Pennsylvania Provincial Assembly in 1722, the Commonwealth's highest court has undergone several major changes that have

helped shape its composition today. The most far-reaching of these changes was the 1980 expansion of the Court's authority that allowed it to not only better administer the entire judicial system, but to devote greater attention to cases holding significant consequence for the Commonwealth and its citizens.

The Supreme Court's jurisdiction encompasses four main areas: original, appellate, exclusive and extraordinary.

The Court's **original** jurisdiction is nonexclusive and includes cases:

- of *habeas corpus*, cases involving detention of a party and determination of whether that party has been denied liberty without due process
- of *mandamus*
- prohibited to courts of inferior jurisdiction
- of *quo warranto*, questions of authority concerning any officer who has statewide jurisdiction.

The Court's **appellate** jurisdiction includes those cases it hears at its own discretion and various types of cases heard as a matter of right. These latter cases include appeals of cases originating in Commonwealth Court and appeals of certain final orders issued by either the Common Pleas Courts or specific constitutional and judicial agencies.

The Supreme Court has **exclusive** jurisdiction of appeals from the following boards/commissions:

- Legislative Reapportionment Commission
- Court of Judicial Discipline (under limited conditions)
- Minor Judiciary Education Board
- Pennsylvania Board of Law Examiners
- Disciplinary Board of the Supreme Court (attorneys).

The Court also has exclusive jurisdiction of appeals from Common Pleas Court involving the

death penalty. Such cases are automatically appealed to the Supreme Court.

Finally, the Court possesses **extraordinary** jurisdiction to assume adjudication of any case pending before a lower court involving an issue of immediate public importance. This it can do on its own or upon petition from any party and is known as King's Bench power.

As with president judges in lower courts having seven or fewer judges, the chief justice attains office by virtue of having the longest continuous service among the seven Supreme Court justices.

For a list of Pennsylvania's judges and their jurisdictions, please refer to The Directory 1996, beginning on page 101. 