



ADMINISTRATIVE OFFICE of PENNSYLVANIA COURTS

NEWS FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

April 8, 2024

Pennsylvania Supreme Court Celebrates Autism Acceptance Month *Highlights the “Faces of Autism in the Courts”*

HARRISBURG – Committed to court-reform for individuals with an autism spectrum disorder (ASD), Pennsylvania Supreme Court Justice Kevin Dougherty, on behalf of the Court is once again promoting autism acceptance throughout the court system, highlighting those behind the important work being done statewide.

“Pennsylvania has a unique story to tell,” Dougherty said. Four years ago, we started ground-breaking conversations to identify where we could make lasting and impactful change within our court system for those with an ASD. Those conversations were driven by judges, community partners, court staff and self-advocates who were ready to work together to create a sensory-friendly court experience for those in need.

“Since this initiative began, we’ve focused on the work, the changes, the impact and the partnerships but this year, we’re focusing on the people making it happen – the faces of our Autism in the Courts initiative.

“Pennsylvania is the first state in the nation to focus on identifying and supporting the needs of neurodiverse families within the court system, creating lasting change for those with an ASD coming through the court system. The people behind the work and their passion for judicial reform has changed lives and the face of the court system. They have given self-advocates and their families a voice and in doing so, have positioned Pennsylvania as a leader among states.”

To highlight the people supporting the Autism in the Courts initiative, throughout the month, the courts will be sharing information about autism and resources, services and support available statewide through its social media channels (Twitter [@PaCourts](#), Facebook [@Pennsylvaniacourts](#)) and [website](#).

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 ASD. 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 professional, 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.

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 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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