



ADMINISTRATIVE OFFICE of PENNSYLVANIA COURTS

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Pennsylvania Supreme Court, Department of Human Services Address Criminal Justice Reform for Pennsylvanians with Autism

HARRISBURG — Recognizing the importance of criminal justice reform for those with an autism spectrum disorder (ASD), the Pennsylvania Supreme Court, along with the Pennsylvania Department of Human Services (DHS), is taking steps toward addressing access to justice issues in northeast Pennsylvania.

“April is Autism Awareness month and these forums have brought to the surface evidence of the need for real and lasting criminal justice reform for people with autism,” Justice Kevin Dougherty said.

“Our goal here is simple – listen to those living in silence for too long, learn from their experiences and give power to their voices to educate those around us,” Justice Kevin Dougherty said.

“If we’re truly committed to reforming our system, we need to broaden our vision and open ourselves up to someone else’s reality – especially when it looks different than our own.”

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 to heighten the focus on helping judges better understand and communicate with individuals with an ASD.

Today’s discussion is the fourth in a five-part regional series aimed at learning about court experiences from individuals with an ASD. A statewide virtual kick-off event was held in Nov., setting the stage for the regional listening tour focused on listening, learning and educating.

Those participating in today’s virtual regional forum included:

- Justice Kevin Dougherty, Pa. Supreme Court
- Nina Wall, director, Bureau of Autism Services, Pa. Department of Human Services
- David Knauss, self-advocate living with autism
- Shelly Mattie, parent of a person with autism, Lycoming County
- Hon. Jennifer Rogers, Judge, Luzerne County Court of Common Pleas

- Hon. Vito Geroulo, Judge, Lackawanna County Court of Common Pleas
- Hon. Bonnie Carney, Magisterial District Judge, Wayne County
- Sam Sanguedolce, district attorney, Luzerne County
- Bob Moran, Esq., attorney, Lackawanna County
- Jennifer Williams, deputy mental health administrator, Carbon-Monroe-Pike Mental Health and Developmental Services
- Capt. Christopher King and Lt. Adam Reed, Pennsylvania State Police
- Leonard Namiotka, superintendent of Scranton Police Department

Through the discussion, the Court and DHS will hear first-hand about challenges faced in the system from medical professionals, service providers in the northeast Pa and from individuals with autism alike as they seek access to justice.

With nearly one in 59 children diagnosed with an ASD*, judges hearing cases in criminal, juvenile, orphans', family court, etc. are sure to have individuals living with autism come before them.

As part of this effort, during the COVID-19 pandemic, the courts have added information and resources for families supporting an individual with autism on the Pennsylvania Courts frequently asked questions [page](#).

For more information about this joint effort and services and support for individuals with autism visit ASERT (Autism Services Education Resources and Training) at <https://paautism.org/resource/justice/>.

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**Statistic from the Center for Disease Control and Prevention's Autism and Developmental Disabilities Monitoring (ADDM) Network, 2018*