



ADMINISTRATIVE OFFICE of PENNSYLVANIA COURTS

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Pennsylvania Supreme Court Creates Autism in the Courts Taskforce

HARRISBURG — Focused on making justice accessible for all Pennsylvanians, the Pennsylvania Supreme Court has created a taskforce focused on issues affecting justice-involved individuals with autism and intellectual disabilities.

Partnering with the Pennsylvania Courts' Office of Children and Families in the Courts and led by Justice Kevin M. Dougherty on behalf of the Supreme Court, 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.

A full list of the taskforce members is available [here](#).

“We learned so much from our listening tour – identified challenges, discussed experiences and committed to working together to find solutions but what we really learned is how much work there is to be done,” said Supreme Court Justice Kevin M. Dougherty. “By creating a taskforce and partnering with our Office of Children and Families in the Courts who work primarily with children and families in the dependency court system, we’re positioning ourselves to better assist those who need it before they enter the court system.

“If we can provide support to a child before they are court involved and put a plan in place to help that child and their family before they continue down a challenging path – that’s a life changed, and a family saved. The momentum created by the regional tours, amplified by the work of the taskforce will allow us to replicate what we learned within the entire court system.”

With one in 46 children and one in 59 Pennsylvanians diagnosed with Autism Spectrum Disorder*, judges hearing juvenile, orphans, and family court cases are sure to have individuals living with autism come before them. The new partnership with the Office of Children and Families in the Courts will allow the court to start with children, their families and bring together, judges, legal advocates and social service professionals all working to provide assistance.

“This taskforce brings together top thought leaders, advocates and practitioners from the courts, autism and intellectual disabilities communities, advocates and children and youth professionals so that we can continue working to develop a framework within the courts to assist those in need,” Dougherty said. “I couldn’t be more thrilled about this new partnership and our path for moving forward, but this is just the beginning. While we are starting with children and families in our dependency system to build a foundation, we will look to replicate this framework across the court system once the taskforce completes its work.”

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.

Through the listening tour, the Court and DHS heard first-hand about challenges faced in the system from medical professionals, service providers and individuals with autism alike as they sought access to justice.

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 the Autism and the Courts effort visit <https://www.pacourts.us/learn/autism-and-the-courts>.

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