



ADMINISTRATIVE OFFICE of PENNSYLVANIA COURTS

NEWS FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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Pennsylvania Supreme Court Celebrates Expansion of Sensory-Friendly Courtrooms during Autism Acceptance Month

HARRISBURG – Committed to court-reform for individuals with an autism spectrum disorder (ASD), Pennsylvania Supreme Court Justice Kevin Dougherty recognized the efforts of courts statewide to create autism-friendly environments for court users and their families.

“The courthouse setting can be an intimidating one, especially for children and individuals who are neurodiverse,” Dougherty said.

“The Autism in the Courts initiative is aimed at finding those gaps in the system where we can enact real and permanent change, to make the court experience more sensory-friendly for those who need it most.

“As we educated our county court judges, they were able to begin identifying areas where small changes would make a big difference – and they went to work.

“Today I’m pleased to announce that 22 counties have integrated sensory tools into courtrooms – including fidget toys, noise cancelling headphones, sunglasses and color packets for anyone to use during hearings. Additionally, a dozen counties have created dedicated spaces in the courthouse for sensory integration and emotional regulation to serve children with autism.

“Together we are creating judicial reform and changing lives.”

Sensory rooms provide a quiet and calm space away from the hustle and bustle of the courthouse where anyone, especially those with sensory processing differences and autism, can find some solace and peace. The rooms may include a white noise, a projector, weighted blankets and vests, I-Pads with neurodiverse apps specifically for autistic individuals, and other items designed specifically for such spaces.

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.

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.

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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Editor's Note:

Sensory rooms:

Allegheny, Bucks, Cambria, Centre, Clarion, Elk, Erie, Luzerne, Philadelphia, Snyder/Union, Westmoreland and York.

Sensory items:

Allegheny, Beaver, Butler, Cambria, Centre, Clarion, Clinton, Cumberland, Dauphin, Delaware, Erie, Fayette, Franklin/Fulton, Luzerne, Lycoming, Montour, Philadelphia, Pike, Potter, Somerset, Snyder/Union, Warren