

# PENNSYLVANIA COMMISSION FOR FAIRNESS & JUSTICE

ANNUAL NEWSLETTER  
2025

**CELEBRATING  
WINS**

**RECOGNIZING  
CHALLENGES**



# PCFJ COMMISSIONERS

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# 2025

## PCFJ BY THE NUMBERS

**10**

EXTERNAL  
SPEAKING  
ENGAGEMENTS

**6**

COMMUNITY  
ENGAGEMENTS

**24**

COMMISSIONERS

**7**

EXTERNAL  
WORKGROUPS  
ON WHICH  
STAFF SERVE

**2**

PCFJ STAFF  
MEMBERS

**65+**

HOURS OF INTERNAL  
COMMITTEE AND  
COMMISSION  
MEETINGS

**20**

PA COUNTIES  
REPRESENTED  
WITHIN PCFJ  
MEMBERSHIP

**4**

INTERNS HOSTED  
BY PCFJ SINCE  
2024

**173**

FOLLOWERS GAINED  
ACROSS SOCIAL  
MEDIA PLATFORMS

# EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE WELCOME

## WHY WE SHOW UP: ROOTED IN JUSTICE, GROWING WITH PURPOSE

On behalf of the Executive Committee, we welcome you to a new year of purposeful service with the Pennsylvania Commission for Fairness and Justice (PCFJ). As we enter 2025, we do so grounded in two guiding themes **Why We Show Up** and **Rooted in Justice, Growing with Purpose**. Together, they reflect both who we are and the times in which we serve.

We show up because the rule of law demands more than passive belief, it requires active guardianship. Each of us has been called to this work by personal conviction and a shared sense of responsibility to the Commonwealth. We show up because justice is not abstract. It is experienced in families, communities, courtrooms, classrooms, and the daily lives of Pennsylvanians whose trust in the system depends on our vigilance.

For Executive Committee members, showing up means giving our time, talent, and moral courage. We do this work because we believe in a Commonwealth where fairness is not aspirational but expected; where equity is not conditional but foundational; and where every resident, regardless of race, ethnicity, gender, disability, identity, or circumstance, experiences justice without bias or barrier. Justice is deeply personal to us and profoundly communal in its impact.

As the Commission has evolved from its original charge, our roots have remained firmly planted in the core values of fairness, equity, and accountability. We continue to support implementation of the foundational recommendations of the 2003 Racial and Gender Bias Report, while also confronting emerging forms of bias that challenge the integrity of our justice system, and all systems, in Pennsylvania today.

In an era marked by misinformation, polarization, and shifting public trust, our commitment to evidence-based practices, lived experience, and transparent governance anchors our work. PCFJ continues to grow, broadening its reach, strengthening partnerships, and elevating public awareness of the standards that the rule of law requires of all three branches of government.

Growth for us is not simply expansion, it is evolution with intention. It is the willingness to ask hard questions, develop new initiatives, support local leaders with the tools they need, and ensure that fairness is not only promised but delivered. As we enter this next chapter, we invite our partners and communities to grow with us, contribute to the work, and help shape a Commonwealth where justice takes root in every corner of Pennsylvania.

We acknowledge the complexity of the moment. The challenges confronting our systems of justice, and all systems, persistent inequities, strained public trust, and rapidly changing societal dynamics are neither simple nor fleeting. But this is precisely why our work matters. In times of uncertainty, the rule of law must remain a stabilizing force. And in times of challenge, our commitment to fairness must be unwavering.

This is a historic moment for the Commission. For the first time in many years, we are fully seated with an extraordinary group of commissioners whose talents, perspectives, and lived experiences represent the depth and diversity of the Commonwealth. Their expertise spans the legal profession, education, public service, community advocacy, policy development, and more. Together, they reflect the strength that emerges when voices from every corner of Pennsylvania are invited to the table.

# EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE WELCOME

## WHY WE SHOW UP: ROOTED IN JUSTICE, GROWING WITH PURPOSE

We are equally grateful for the many volunteers who serve on our committees. Though they are not board members, they are indispensable to our mission. They devote their time, insight, and passion to advancing fairness in ways both seen and unseen. Their commitment amplifies the work of the Commission and strengthens our reach across every community.

Because of this remarkable group of Commissioners and dedicated volunteers, we are poised to meet this moment. We are ready to pivot, innovate, and face the daily challenges of bias, inequity, and misinformation with clarity and purpose. We have never been better prepared to make meaningful change.

This year, the Executive Committee, Attorney Leonard J. Rivera, Attorney Jessie L Smith, and Judge Nicola Henry Taylor, affirms our dedication to leading with integrity, humility, and purpose.

Thank you for joining us in this vital work. Together, we remain rooted in justice, and together, we will grow with purpose.

*Attorney Rivera is a seasoned trial attorney with more than thirty (30) years of experience representing individuals in criminal defense, immigration, and personal injury matters. Guided by his belief in hard work, ethics, and treating every person with dignity, he has been a mentor, an advocate, and a steadfast supporter of underserved communities.*

*Attorney Smith is a distinguished attorney, mediator, and former deputy cabinet secretary whose career spans more than three (3) decades of public service, private practice, legal education, and bar leadership. She has advanced statewide efforts in continuing legal education, diversity, and agricultural law, and has played key roles in shaping policy and promoting fairness across Pennsylvania.*

*Judge Henry Taylor brings decades of experience as a prosecutor, private practitioner, and now a member of the Allegheny County Court of Common Pleas. Her lifelong commitment to diversity, inclusion, and equal access to justice has shaped institutions across the Commonwealth, from legal education to judicial leadership.*



# VIDEO LIBRARY



PCFJ HAS BEEN PRIVILEGED TO INVITE ACADEMICS, COMMUNITY LEADERS, AND GOVERNMENTAL OFFICIALS TO DEEPEN OUR UNDERSTANDING OF CHALLENGES FACING OUR COMMUNITY AND HOW SOME ARE SHOWING UP TO ADDRESS THOSE CHALLENGES.

## MURDER PROSECUTION AND SENTENCING IN PENNSYLVANIA

Hear Professor Ulmer of Penn State's Criminal Justice Research Center discuss research designed to better understand death penalty case processing and how the decision is made to seek the death penalty.

[PRESENTATION LINK](#)



## ALLEGHENY COUNTY'S TRAUMA INFORMED FAMILY COURT

Hear Judge Jennifer McCrady discuss how Allegheny County's Family Court Division built a trauma informed courthouse from the ground up.

[PRESENTATION LINK](#)



## ABOLITIONIST LAW CENTER

Hear the ALC present on the findings of its 2023 study, *'You Send Yourselves to Jail': Coercive Diversion in the Allegheny County Mental Health Court.*

[PRESENTATION LINK](#)



## PUSHING FORWARD: LOCAL PROTECTIONS FOR LGBTQ+ PENNSYLVANIANS

Participate in this free training, administered by the Commission and other organizations, on the importance of local non-discrimination ordinances.

[WEBINAR LINK](#)



## PHRC IMPLICIT BIAS PRESENTATION

Listen to Desiree Chang (Director of Education & Outreach, Pennsylvania Human Relations Commission) define, explore the science behind, and provide examples of implicit/unconscious bias.

[PRESENTATION LINK](#)



# FROM GRANTS TO GRASSROOTS: BUILDING A STRONGER SUPPORT SYSTEM FOR SURVIVORS

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I have had the privilege of serving on the Pennsylvania Commission for Fairness & Justice's Domestic Violence and Sexual Assault Victims/Survivors Committee for the past year. Through my involvement with the committee, I had the opportunity to serve as a grant reviewer for the Pennsylvania Commission on Crime and Delinquency (PCCD) in connection with the federal STOP Violence Against Women Formula Grant funding program. Participating in the grant review process was challenging as I quickly realized how many Pennsylvania organizations are working tirelessly to support survivors of sexual assault and domestic violence. Individuals across our Commonwealth are experiencing violence, and the needs of the organizations supporting these survivors are significant. The grant review process was an impactful reminder that these organizations, and the individuals they serve, need broad support from our communities. There will never be enough grant money to fully fund all of these efforts, especially during a time when many non-profits are losing federal funding. To ensure these organizations can continue their good work, we need to identify how each of us can help. It may be through monetary donations, provisions of professional services, or in-kind contributions of our time and effort. Regardless of the form, survivors' needs are unique and substantial, and their support system must be strong.



Fairness and justice in our legal system can take many forms, and I am proud to be a tiny part of this Commission, a group of dedicated leaders and volunteers that are carrying out a demonstrated priority to move our system further towards a goal of being genuinely and consistently just. There are innumerable ways attorneys and non-attorneys alike can help Pennsylvania continue its progress toward fairness and justice. We can make efforts within our own organizations, whether through improved corporate or organizational policy development, mentorship, community involvement, or partnerships with community organizations, among other approaches. We can volunteer our expertise to help organizations defend vulnerable people and ensure that everyone has quality legal representation and guidance. If we notice data or service gaps, we can research strategic approaches to address them. I'm currently working on research to develop practical guidance for companies trying to eliminate harassment by clients—a complex problem that affects women across the legal field. There are many such problems. Fortunately, there are also many people in a position to help. As we head towards a new year, this is a good opportunity to take a step back and look around our own communities to find ways, big or small, that we can provide some support.



*Stephanie Prevost is Professor of Practice of Law at Lehigh University and owner of Prevost Legal Consulting LLC*

# BRIDGING THE DIVIDE: REALITIES OF DOMESTIC VIOLENCE IN PENNSYLVANIA

By: PCFJ Staff

Across Pennsylvania, survivors of domestic and sexual violence face vastly different experiences depending on where they live. Recent data and research reviewed by PCFJ reveal a troubling rural-urban divide in how survivors access justice—and how courts respond.

## What The Reports Conclude

Two major reports—Penn State Harrisburg's *Roadblocks to Reporting* and the Pennsylvania Commission on Crime and Delinquency's (PCCD) *Analysis of Weapons Relinquishments in Protection-from-Abuse Orders*—highlighted key trends:

- Rural survivors are less likely to report abuse due to fear, shame, and lack of anonymity.
- Choking and stalking were reported more frequently by rural survivors.
- Urban survivors reported to police at nearly double the rate of rural survivors (65% vs. 38%).
- More than half of rural survivors were unaware of local services before experiencing abuse.

## PFA Cases Are Rising—But STOP Training Isn't Keeping Pace

Between 2019 and 2023, Pennsylvania courts handled nearly **175,000** Protection-from-Abuse (PFA) cases. While overall court caseloads declined, PFA filings increased by **16%**, with the largest growth in cases decided by a final hearing before a judge.

- Many counties with the highest PFA case growth received **no** STOP grant funding—a key resource for training.

A major resource for trauma-informed judicial training may be underutilized.

## Access to Justice: Where the System Falls Short

In addition to the gaps and unique challenges documented above, PCFJ's Domestic Violence & Sexual Assault Committee identified several systemic concerns:

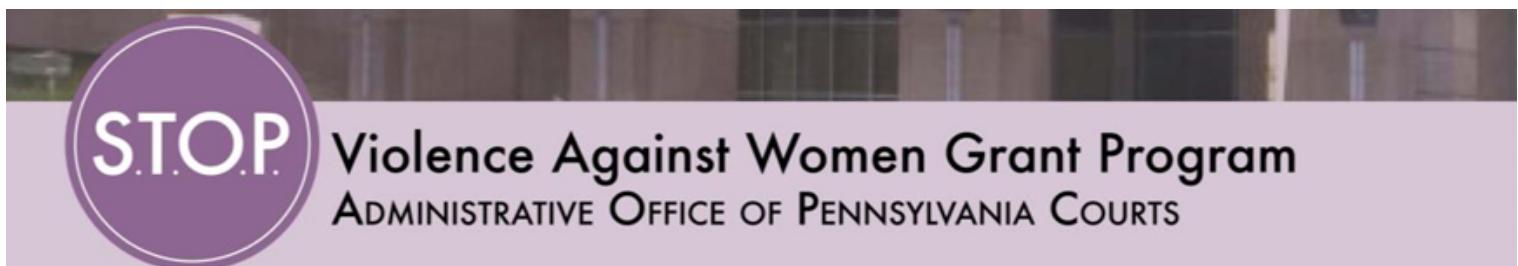
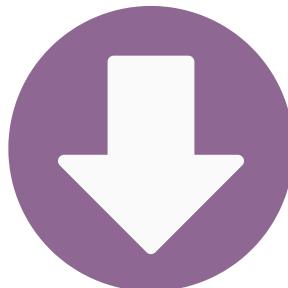
- **Emergency PFAs** are inconsistently handled, with some counties requiring informal screenings that delay relief.
- **Temporary PFAs** are limited by intake hours that vary judicial district-to-judicial district, reducing access to firearm relinquishment protections.
- **Open courtrooms** can compromise survivor safety by requiring public disclosure of personal information.
- Some judges express sentiments about PFA misuse that may dismiss and re-traumatize survivors, reflecting a need for **trauma-informed education**.

## Our Recommendations

PCFJ recognizes that judicial districts handle these matters differently, depending on factors such as the district's size and number of court personnel. In some counties, a senior status judge may be the only member of the bench that handles PFAs. In others, newly elected judges or a rotating cast of personnel might share the load. Nevertheless, these documented concerns underscore an opportunity to increase access to trauma-informed judicial training on DV/SA matters and best practices.

Consistent with these differing arrangements, UJS may consider adopting dual training benchmarks. For example, UJS may set a goal to achieve **full participation** by judges assigned to DV/SA cases, or **50% participation** by judges in each judicial district. These goals are both aspirational and achievable—and essential to ensuring that survivors receive fair, informed, and compassionate treatment in every courtroom.

If you are interested in the kind of DV/SA-specific training resources described in the two articles above, we encourage you to attend one or more of the AOPC STOP Grant Team's programs in 2026.



### **Criminalized Survivors: The Abuse to Prison Pipeline (Human Trafficking Prevention Month)**

(CLE and CJE credits available)

Jan. 22, 2026 | 12 - 1 pm EST | Virtual Via Zoom

[Register Here](#)

### **The Intersection of Protection from Abuse and Child Custody Law in Pennsylvania – 2 Part Webinar Series**

(Expected to offer CLE and CJE credits)

March 12 and 19, 2026 | 12 – 1 pm EST | Virtual via Zoom

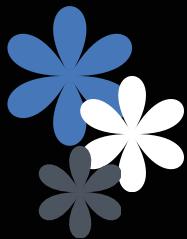
[Register Here](#)

To contact the AOPC STOP Grant Team: [AOPC.STOPGrantProject@pacourts.us](mailto:AOPC.STOPGrantProject@pacourts.us)

# 2025 IN PICTURES



Staff Attorney Bertig attends Carnegie Museum of Art's Reflections on Healing event in support of Domestic Violence Awareness Month.



E.D. Shields attends sexual assault listening session with Dr. Val Arkoosh, Secretary of the PA Dept. of Human Services.



Photos from the 2025 PA LGBTQIA+ Health Needs Summit, attended by Staff Attorney Bertig and featuring Commissioner Ashleigh Strange (top right).



Commissioner, Cathy Law, Esq., and Criminal Justice Committee Member, Elizabeth Wood Bennett, Esq., presenting to PACDL on implicit bias.

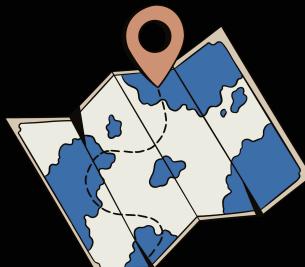
# HOSPITALITY IN GOVERNMENT ISN'T A NICETY - IT'S A NECESSITY

Imagine how hard it must be for a *pro se* litigant to step inside their county courthouse and try to handle their own piece of litigation. If they found the Pennsylvania Rules of Civil or Criminal Procedure, chances are they have little idea what they mean. What's more, each judicial district has its own customs, practices, and local rules that are usually impossible to find—let alone understand.

More and more unrepresented litigants are entering our county courthouses. On these occasions, it is like they are in a foreign land and they do not speak the language. According to data from the Administrative Office of Pennsylvania Courts (AOPC), the number of *pro se* civil filings **increased from approximately 6,600 in 2021 to nearly 10,000 in 2023**. That's a significant rise in the number of people navigating the justice system without legal representation.

Arriving passengers at Pittsburgh International Airport are often greeted by smiling Airport Ambassadors who can answer questions about the airport's layout, provide information about ground transportation, and make suggestions for lodging, sights to see, and dining. Guests at hotels often have access to concierge services where they can access maps, obtain local information, and maybe even score theater tickets. Patrons of group tours are usually led by an experienced guide who knows the area, has arranged access to important sites, and has made arrangements for hotels and meals. Visitors to a museum are greeted by trained docents who provide meaningful details on each work of art and the artist.

Is there any reason why our county courthouses and government buildings cannot provide similar services—and do so with a smile?



*Jay N. Silberblatt, Esq. is a seasoned civil trial attorney and a founding partner at Silberblatt Mermelstein, P.C. in Pittsburgh. A National Board of Trial Advocacy (NBTA) Certified Civil Trial Advocate, Jay has built a distinguished career representing clients in complex civil litigation. He is a past president of the Pennsylvania Bar Association and has long championed access to justice and professionalism in the legal field.*



I know that answering the same sort of questions can become tedious and cause court personnel to lose their patience. Consider, however, that Disney World personnel likely explain to park patrons how to get to the monorail station many times each day. Nonetheless, each time the question arises, the Disney “cast member” smiles and provides the appropriate answer, sometimes even offering an escort.

Patience and kindness is really not so hard. In our government buildings, patience, kindness, and helpful information ought to be the standard, not the bonus. Perhaps mandatory hospitality training ought to be required for our court personnel.

I suspect many people feel unfairly treated when they are not treated with kindness. If the very first encounter someone has when they walk into the courthouse is a smiling face and a helpful hand—and if their subsequent encounters with staff are equally pleasant—their perception of the “justice” they receive in the end will likely be more positive, even if they “lose.” At least they will feel like they were treated with respect, and therefore, fairly.

If we expect the public to trust and navigate our institutions, we must meet them with patience, clarity, and care. Hospitality training shouldn't be optional—it should be foundational. And perhaps, as we think about fairness and access to justice, we should consider how these small acts of service align with efforts to build a more equitable and inclusive system.



# REMEMBERING HOMER FLOYD



## In Memory of Homer Floyd

With the passing of Homer Floyd on June 9, 2025, the Commission lost a deeply valued colleague, and the nation mourned the loss of a revered civil rights leader. Mr. Floyd was often referred to as the “North Star” of human rights leadership, not only in our country but across the globe. His unwavering commitment and passion for advancing the civil rights of the underrepresented and underserved were legendary, setting a standard for others to follow.

## Early Life and Education

Homer Floyd was born on May 23, 1936, in Alabama to Homer C. and Annie R. Floyd. He was raised in Massillon, Ohio, where he attended Washington High School. Floyd went on to earn a Bachelor of Science degree from the University of Kansas. He furthered his academic pursuits with post-graduate research at Fisk University in Nashville, Tennessee, and Washburn University in Topeka, Kansas.

## Athletic Accomplishments

In addition to his academic achievements, Mr. Floyd was a standout high school football player in Ohio, earning “All State Ohio” and “All-Big 8” honors. Floyd played professional football in the Canadian Football League and spent one year with the Cleveland Browns. Floyd ultimately chose a different path, opting for a position as a field investigator with the Kansas Commission on Civil Rights. This choice was likely influenced by a formative and painful experience from his high school years: while traveling in Missouri, Floyd was denied service at five restaurants in a row due to his race, eventually eating in a restaurant kitchen while his white colleagues were served in the dining area.

## Career in Civil Rights

Mr. Floyd’s dedication to justice propelled him quickly through the ranks. In just four years, he advanced to the position of Executive Director of the Kansas Commission on Civil Rights, demonstrating exemplary leadership. This led, in turn, to his appointment four years later as the Executive Director of the Pennsylvania Human Relations Commission, a role he held from 1970 until 2011. During this challenging period in our nation’s history, Mr. Floyd guided the Commission through significant obstacles, expanding protections in employment, housing, education, and public accommodations. His strategic approach to legislation and innovative enforcement methods earned him widespread recognition as an exceptional agency leader. He was celebrated for his integrity, courage, kindness, humility, and for serving as a moral compass for his era.

## Service on the Pennsylvania Interbranch Commission

In 2015, State Senator Jay Costa appointed Mr. Floyd to the Pennsylvania Interbranch Commission for Gender, Racial and Ethnic Fairness. Mr. Floyd served on the Commission as a dedicated member for the next four years, even as his health deteriorated. Despite his many accomplishments, he consistently conducted himself in a reserved and unassuming manner, willingly accepting assignments and fulfilling all responsibilities to support the Commission’s mission.

## Legacy

Homer Floyd will be greatly missed by all who had the privilege to know and work with him. His unwavering dedication to justice for all and his exemplary leadership will be remembered for many years to come. His life and work continue to inspire those committed to the ongoing pursuit of fairness, equality, and human rights.



*Lisette “Mimi” McCormick, Esquire served as the first Executive Director of the Pennsylvania Interbranch Commission for Gender, Racial and Ethnic Fairness from 2005 until her retirement in 2023.*

# SUPPORTING OUR JURORS: A CONVERSATION WITH THE FIRST JUDICIAL DISTRICT



In April 2025, the First Judicial District (FJD) established a partnership with West Chester University (WCU) to offer post-trial mental health supports to jurors in need. Check out our conversation below with FJD Jury Commissioner, Patrick Martin, and Dr. Michele Pole, Clinic Director at WCU's Community Mental Health Services.

**Question:** What inspired you to create a mental health support program specifically for jurors?

**Mr. Martin:** In 2013, during the trial of Dr. Kermit Gosnell, I saw how emotionally overwhelming jury service can be. The case was widely known and involved deeply disturbing testimony and evidence, and it became clear that jurors were carrying a tremendous emotional burden with very little support once the trial ended. That experience stayed with me.

At the time, I didn't have the authority or resources to build a program. But when I became Jury Commissioner in 2023, I finally had the ability to turn that longstanding concern into action. The memory of that trial's impact was a driving force behind establishing Philadelphia's post-trial support program.

**Question:** How does the psychological first aid model used in this program differ from traditional therapy?

**Dr. Pole:** Therapy is a practice that requires specialized training, a degree in specific fields of study, and clinical supervision by a licensed individual until the practitioner becomes licensed. Therapy entails the use of specific treatment methods that a layperson would not be competent to provide. Psychological First Aid (PFA) is an approach that does not require a degree or license; it is an evidence-based intervention that supports people in crisis. It's meant to be a short-term approach to get through a crisis situation. You can think of it as cleaning and dressing a cut to avoid infection and prevent the need for professional medical interventions like surgery. In addition to the jury context, it has been used in disaster areas to address needs related to housing, food, and safety.

**Question:** What kind of training do the graduate students at West Chester University receive, and how are they prepared to support jurors?

**Dr. Pole:** The doctoral students at WCU are trained to provide psychotherapy to clients at their practicum sites. They have a foundation that is helpful in providing support, active listening, and assessing the needs of a client. In addition to these basic support skills, they receive a 5-hour training on the provision of PFA that is adapted to instruct students on the parts of PFA most relevant to jurors' needs. These needs include managing emotional distress, reducing anxiety, identifying support, and helping jurors access resilience within themselves.

**Question:** How have jurors responded to the program? Are there any stories or feedback that stand out?

**Mr. Martin:** The response has been overwhelmingly positive. At the end of each trial, jurors are given our coping pamphlet and information about the support available through WCU. The following day, jurors receive an email thanking them for their service and reminding them about the program. While many tell me they don't personally need the service because they have external support, they consistently express appreciation that the First Judicial District cares for jurors' well-being.

One case that stands out was highlighted nationally on the CBS Evening News. It involved extremely difficult subject matter. A juror in that trial initially declined the pamphlet, believing he was fine. But that night he struggled to sleep. After receiving our follow-up email the next day, he connected with WCU to get the support he needed. That moment underscores why this program matters.

# SUPPORTING OUR JURORS: A CONVERSATION WITH THE FIRST JUDICIAL DISTRICT

**Question:** Why might a juror need services even if the case did not involve gruesome or graphic evidence?

**Mr. Martin:** A juror's stress isn't limited to cases involving graphic testimony. Jury service can create pressure in many everyday, practical ways. People worry about missing work, the cost and logistics of transportation, and navigating unfamiliar routes. Many jurors are also juggling family responsibilities—like wondering if the day's testimony will end in time for them to pick up a child before incurring daycare fees. All of these factors can create real stress, even in cases that aren't emotionally heavy.

**Question:** What challenges did you face in launching this initiative, and how did you overcome them?

**Mr. Martin:** One challenge was gaining support from leadership. In 2022, I learned through the National Center for State Courts that federal courts have been offering support to jurors through their employee assistance programs, and that Massachusetts is providing similar services through a third-party. I brought those ideas back to the First Judicial District, but without initial success. Then, in January 2024, Judge Anders became our Administrative Judge, and he encouraged me to forge ahead.

The next hurdle required finding a partner. I reached out broadly, from the City's benefits department to our own Behavioral Health Department, and also explored grant opportunities. Eventually, I realized that local universities might be the perfect fit. Their students need clinical hours, and our jurors need support. We found the ideal partner in WCU.

**Question:** Since its start in the FJD, to how many other districts in PA have the program expanded?

**Mr. Martin:** Since the program launched in April 2025, it has broadened beyond Philadelphia to encompass six additional counties. In November 2025, the AOPC hosted a statewide town hall to introduce the program to the rest of the Commonwealth.

**Question:** How do you see the role of court administration evolving in light of juror wellness?

**Mr. Martin:** Both judges and attorneys have groups that help them process the stress of difficult cases. But jurors—who often hear the same testimony and see the same evidence—have historically been on their own. Massachusetts was the first to address this gap, and other states have followed. It's time for court administrators to recognize that juror wellness is an essential part of a healthy court system.

**Question:** What message would you like to share with jurors who may be struggling after service?

**Mr. Martin:** I would tell them that they don't have to go through this on their own. What they're feeling is completely normal, and talking to someone can make a real difference. The support is there for them — it's confidential, it's free, and it's designed specifically for jurors who may be having a hard time after a difficult case. There's no reason to hesitate. If something is weighing on them, even a little, I would encourage them to take advantage of the help that's available.

**To learn more about this and other initiatives supporting juror well-being, be sure to check out PCFJ's forthcoming article in the spring issue of the American Bar Association's Judges' Journal.**



*Michele Pole, Ph.D., is a licensed psychologist and the Clinic Director at West Chester University's Community Mental Health Services. She has presented nationally and internationally on addiction and trauma.*



*Patrick Martin has served as Jury Commissioner in the First Judicial District since 2023. He is a member of PCFJ's Equal Access to Courts Committee.*



# NAVIGATING THE CURRENT LANDSCAPE FOR LGBTQIA+ PENNSYLVANIANS

By: PCFJ Staff

## A Constant State of Flux

This past year, Pennsylvanians have borne witness to a cascade of anti-LGBTQIA+ Executive Orders, court cases, and regulations that, both singularly and cumulatively, have proven challenging to comprehend. Just as soon as the dust seems to have settled on one development, another proclamation or proposal reagitates the dust, reducing the clarity of the landscape in front of us.

This legal and administrative dust bowl is not without consequence; it foreseeably generates feelings of overwhelm in LGBTQIA+ Pennsylvanians, their loved ones, and policy advocates. “We haven’t had time to hang our grief up to dry,” writes author Billy-Ray Belcourt in *A History of My Brief Body*, before another news article emerges.

While these developments have impacted all members of the LGBTQIA+ community, they have disproportionately fallen on trans individuals. (See, e.g., the Kaiser Family Foundation’s [Overview of President Trump’s Executive Actions Impacting LGBTQ+ Health](#).) Such targeted actions exacerbate existing disparities. According to GLAAD, transgender Americans were the target of over half of all anti-LGBTQIA+ incidents over the past year. A recent snapshot of LGBTQIA+ individuals’ experiences in our own Commonwealth confirms this troubling trend. Of the 1,749 transgender Pennsylvanians the survey reached, **71%** have experienced some form of discrimination in their lifetime.

## The Mission of PCFJ

PCFJ exists to combat these discriminatory trends against LGBTQ+ Pennsylvanians through education, training, and advocacy for legislation, policies, and regulations in collaboration with allied partners across the Commonwealth. In short, we work to ensure equal access to justice for all Pennsylvanians, regardless of one’s sexual orientation or gender identity or expression.

At PCFJ, it is our charge not to run from these myriad policy developments, but to confront them head-on as an opportunity to declutter the confusion and misinformation. Clarity is an invaluable resource – one which PCFJ is well-positioned to provide. We accept our charge, and we do so in collaboration with our growing network of partners eager to separate rumor from reality.

## So, What’s True – And What’s Not?

**FACT:** On its first day in office, the federal administration issued [two Executive Orders](#), sweeping in their attempts to impact LGBTQ+ individuals in the contexts of military service, education, and healthcare, among others. It is also true that, almost a full year later, these Orders have not been and may never be fully implemented, and that they remain the subject of [multiple lawsuits](#).

**FACT:** This administration has successfully sought to suspend changes to one’s sex designation on passports. This [prohibition](#) will be reviewed by the First Circuit Court of Appeals soon. In Pennsylvania, individuals remain empowered to obtain an “X” gender marker on state-issued IDs, such as driver’s licenses.



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**FACT:** In June, the U.S. Supreme Court issued a significant decision in *Skrmetti v. U.S.*, holding that Tennessee's ban on gender-affirming healthcare for minors does not illegally discriminate against individuals on the basis of sex. This decision does not limit care for trans adults, nor does it impact youth in states that have not passed gender-affirming care bans. As of January 2026, Pennsylvania has not implemented any restrictions on gender-affirming medical care for minors or adults, nor has the Commonwealth sought to limit funding for such care.

**FACT:** The current administration ended the national 988 Suicide and Crisis Lifeline's "press 3" option, which, from September 2022 through July 2025, connected nearly 2 million LGBTQIA+ callers with trained counselors. **However, in August, Governor Shapiro directed Pennsylvania's Dept. of Human Services to fill this gap by training 988 operators at each of Pennsylvania's 14 designated call centers to serve LGBTQ+ individuals.**

**FACT:** Efforts are underway at the federal level to undercut the protections to which LGBTQIA+ individuals are entitled. Yet, with the recent passage of local non-discrimination ordinances in municipalities such as Allentown, Collingdale, Delaware, and Chester County, an additional **6.5 million** Pennsylvanians have access to LGBTQIA+-affirming legal protections that are irrevocable by federal officials.

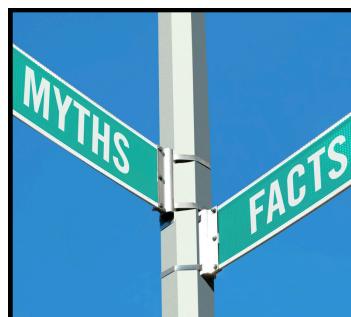
These efforts dovetail other state-based attempts to add clarity to and uniformity under Pennsylvania law. In *Glover v. Junior* (2025), for instance, the Supreme Court of Pennsylvania adopted "intent-based parentage," a doctrine that, in recognizing parentage as a legal status capable of being achieved by means beyond one's marital status or genetic connection to the child, affords much-needed protections to same-sex couples.

### **The Path Forward**

PCFJ stands ready to fulfill its charge, working collaboratively to eliminate discrimination and misinformation across all branches of government and within all communities in the Commonwealth. So long as the dust never settles, neither will PCFJ rest.

As part of this commitment, we are proud to be partnering with the Pennsylvania Human Relations Commission (PHRC) and the Governor's Advisory Commission on LGBTQ Affairs on an upcoming webinar, entitled ***Navigating the Current Landscape for LGBTQIA+ Pennsylvanians***. The program, scheduled from 12:00 to 1:30 p.m. on January 22, 2026, will address the ongoing developments described above in greater detail. **We encourage you to register for the program [here](#).**

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# READING NOOK

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## PROTECTION FROM ABUSE ORDERS ARE ROUTINELY VIOLATED IN PA. WHY THE LAW FAILS VICTIMS

Penn Live, September 2, 2025 | Ivey DeJesus

A sobering look at the systemic failures in enforcing protection-from-abuse (PFA) orders, this piece underscores the urgent need for accountability and reform in how we protect survivors of domestic violence.

## ANALYSIS OF WEAPONS RELINQUISHMENTS IN PFAS IN PENNSYLVANIA: 2019–2023

PA Commission on Crime and Delinquency, October 2024

This data-rich report examines compliance with firearm surrender mandates in PFA cases, offering insights into enforcement gaps and policy opportunities.

## ROADBLOCKS TO REPORTING: EXAMINING BARRIERS THAT DETER DV SURVIVORS IN RURAL PA

Penn State University at Harrisburg, November 2024

Exploring the unique barriers faced by domestic violence survivors in rural communities, this study highlights the importance of culturally and geographically responsive services.

## "YOU SEND YOURSELVES TO JAIL": COERCIVE DIVERSION IN ALLEGHENY COUNTY

Abolitionist Law Center: Court Watch, December 2023

A critical analysis of mental health court practices, this report raises questions about the ethics and effectiveness of coercive diversion programs.

## 2024 PENNSYLVANIA LGBTQ HEALTH NEEDS ASSESSMENT

Bradbury-Sullivan LGBT Center, PA Dept. of Health: April 10, 2025

A comprehensive, survey-based assessment exploring the experiences and wellness needs of LGBTQ+ Pennsylvanians and offering robust policy recommendations.



Recent discussions among committee members have highlighted the enduring importance of the Language Access Committee in advancing access to justice across the Commonwealth. Despite ample progress, particularly within the judiciary, significant challenges remain in ensuring meaningful language access in Pennsylvania's legal system. The Committee continues to serve as a platform for identifying and meaningfully addressing these issues—particularly those that may not be visible at the administrative level.

Members have pointed to real-world examples of court proceedings disrupted due to interpreter unavailability or a misapprehension of the standard for making an interpreter available, underscoring the persistent gaps in access that directly affect individuals navigating the justice system.

## LANGUAGE ACCESS COMMITTEE REAFFIRMS ITS RELEVANCE IN 2025 AND BEYOND

**By: PCFJ Staff**



These experiences reflect the Committee's unique role in surfacing on-the-ground realities that inform broader policy and operational decisions.

The Committee is a force in the Commonwealth's language access efforts—providing education, visibility, and empowerment to legal professionals and communities alike. The Committee pays attention to appellate opinions that clearly outline what language access should look like in the Commonwealth, urging additional training opportunities to close any identified gaps. The Committee has worked to develop clear pamphlets for lay people explaining how to obtain language access services in the courts. The Committee takes seriously the concerns raised by the Sheller Center for Social Justice's recent report, *Justice on Paper: Gaps Between Language Access and Policy*, making substantive recommendations to improve the ability to capture feedback. Two members of this Committee were recently invited to serve on a plenary session panel for Philadelphia Bar Association's Public Interest Law Day in December 2025. This Committee work helps ensure that language access is not treated as a peripheral concern, but as a core component of access to justice.

Recent federal executive orders have further emphasized the importance of language access, making it even more critical to communicate clearly with Pennsylvanians about their rights. In this context, the Committee's work is not only relevant but essential.

As the Commission considers its future priorities, the reflections of the Committee reinforce a clear message: the work of ensuring language access is far from complete, and the Committee remains a critical vehicle for progress.

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## PROACTIVE EFFORTS TO ELIMINATE SEXUAL HARASSMENT BY CLIENTS

Stephanie Prevost, Lehigh University College of Business, May 2025

An important contribution to workplace safety discourse, this research explores strategies for protecting legal professionals from client-initiated harassment.

## JUSTICE ON PAPER: GAPS BETWEEN LANGUAGE ACCESS POLICY AND PRACTICE IN PENNSYLVANIA

Sheller Center for Social Justice, July 2025

This report exposes the disconnect between language access mandates and their real-world implementation, emphasizing the need for systemic change to ensure meaningful access to justice for non-English speakers.

## WOMEN LEGISLATORS IN THE PENNSYLVANIA GENERAL ASSEMBLY, 1923/24–2023/24

Joel Fishman, Ph.D., M.L.S., Pennsylvania Commission for Fairness & Justice, May 2025

A historical overview of women's representation in Pennsylvania's legislature, this piece offers context for understanding gender equity in policymaking and its implications for justice reform.

## AFTER A GRISLY TRIAL, JURORS ARE LEFT WITH MENTAL SCARS AND FEW RESOURCES

New York Times, Liz Krieger, August 10, 2025

This article brings to light the emotional toll jury service can take, particularly in cases involving graphic or traumatic evidence, and calls for greater institutional support for jurors.



# SPOTLIGHT ON THE INDIGENT DEFENSE ADVISORY COMMITTEE (IDAC): ENSURING FAIRNESS IN PUBLIC DEFENSE ACROSS PENNSYLVANIA

By: PCFJ Staff

The **Indigent Defense Advisory Committee (IDAC)**, under the Pennsylvania Commission on Crime and Delinquency (PCCD), is working to ensure that all Pennsylvanians—regardless of income—have access to effective legal representation. The committee advises on best practices, promotes equity in public defense, and supports systemic improvements across the Commonwealth.

**Historic State Investment in Indigent Defense**  
Established under Act 34 of 2023, IDAC was created to improve the delivery of legal representation for indigent defendants across Pennsylvania and advise PCCD on funding to supplement county-level spending. IDAC is chaired by **Sara Jacobson, Esquire, Executive Director of the Public Defenders Association of Pennsylvania**, and **Katheryn Cacciamani, Esquire**. Before the passage of Act 34, Pennsylvania was one of two states that provided neither state funding nor state-level supervision for indigent defense. In 2023, Pennsylvania made a landmark investment by allocating **\$7.5 million** in state funding to support indigent defense—the first such funding in the state's history. **A second and third allocation of \$7.5 million each** was approved for the 2024–2025 and 2025–2026 fiscal years, reinforcing the Commonwealth's commitment to strengthening public defense infrastructure.

## First Biennial Report

IDAC released its first biennial report in December 2025. The Biennial Report outlines the Committee's progress over its first two years, including the development of statewide standards, grant distribution, data collection initiatives, and recommendations for the improvement of indigent defense services.

Key highlights from the report include:

- **\$12.3 million** in Indigent Defense Grant Program funds awarded to **all 67 counties**
- **37 new attorney and support staff positions** created to expand local capacity
- **14 counties** upgraded or implemented case management systems
- **Two statewide standards** adopted by the Pennsylvania Supreme Court to guide effective representation
- **Over 300 stakeholders** engaged through surveys, meetings, and webinars

This report is a comprehensive accounting of the tremendous work the IDAC has put into improving indigent over the last two years. But it is also an unflinching look at the ongoing questions, the work and barriers that remain, and the real need for a commitment across all levels of government to drive this work forward in the coming years. The report also acknowledges the leadership of the PCFJ, which has long been at the forefront of efforts to improve indigent defense in the Commonwealth. PCFJ's advocacy and data-driven approach have helped shape the foundation for statewide reform.

# SPOTLIGHT ON THE INDIGENT DEFENSE ADVISORY COMMITTEE (IDAC): ENSURING FAIRNESS IN PUBLIC DEFENSE ACROSS PENNSYLVANIA

PCFJ Executive Director, Maraleen Shields, Esquire, currently serves as Co-Chair of the Data Collection, Technology, & Research Subcommittee with Clinton County Commissioner, Jeffrey Snyder. The Biennial Report includes recommendations for improving funding sustainability, enhancing workforce development, and expanding training and data infrastructure. The report has been shared with the Governor, the General Assembly, the Pennsylvania Supreme Court, and the public via PCCD's website. To read the full report and learn more about IDAC's work, visit:

<https://bit.ly/idacbiennialreport>

## Take Action

If you believe in the constitutional right to counsel and the importance of fair access to justice, now is the time to act:

- **Contact your state legislators** and urge them to pass a prompt FY 2026-2027 budget that protects and sustains funding for indigent defense.
- **Share this message** with colleagues and community members who care about justice and equity.

Together, we can ensure that Pennsylvania continues moving toward a more just and inclusive legal system.





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## PRESERVING THE FUTURE OF JURIES & JURY TRIALS

National Center for State Courts, December 2024

This national report outlines strategies to strengthen jury systems, including reforms to improve juror diversity, reduce hardship, and enhance public trust in the process.

## PENNSYLVANIA LGBTQ LEGISLATIVE AGENDA

Pennsylvania Youth Congress, December 2024

A forward-looking policy agenda that centers the rights and needs of LGBTQ+ Pennsylvanians, this document reflects the intersection of identity, advocacy, and legislative action.

## IT'S THEIR CIVIC DUTY TO WATCH THE UNWATCHABLE. AND THEY GET \$25 A DAY FOR IT.

Lehigh Valley Live, Rudy Miller, May 22, 2025

A local perspective on the burdens placed on jurors, this piece critiques the inadequate compensation and support provided to those fulfilling a vital civic role.

## PUBLIC DEFENDER RETENTION & SUSTAINABILITY REPORT

Public Defender Association of Pennsylvania, June 2025

This report sheds light on the challenges of retaining qualified public defenders and sustaining indigent defense systems—an essential pillar of fair justice.

## BODY-WORN CAMERA FOOTAGE OUTCOMES FOR LAW ENFORCEMENT OFFICERS AND CIVILIANS

Joint State Government Commission, December 2024

Commissioned by House Resolution 113 (2023), this report examines how and by whom body-worn camera footage is used and the costs associated with such footage.



# CELEBRATING OUR PCFJ FAMILY



**BROOKE  
CARICKHOFF, ESQ.**

Commissioner Carickhoff joined Saltz Mongeluzzi Bendesky as a medical malpractice and catastrophic injury attorney.



**JAY SILBERBLATT,  
ESQ.**

Commissioner Silberblatt retired from Silberblatt Mermelstein to start his next chapter as a mediator.



**JUDGE HENRY-  
TAYLOR**

Commissioner Judge Henry-Taylor was awarded the MLK Drum Major for Justice Award by the ACBA Homer S. Brown Division.



**MATT FOGAL, ESQ.**

Former Franklin County DA and member of the Criminal Justice Committee, Matt Fogal, opened his legal practice in Chambersburg, PA.



**PATRICK MARTIN**

First Judicial District Jury Commissioner and member of the Equal Access to Courts Committee, Patrick Martin, received the Mid-Atlantic Association for Court Management's John Neufeld Court Achievement Award for his work to secure post-trial mental health supports for jurors.



**CORINNE GOODWIN**

Executive Director of the Eastern PA Trans Equity Project and member of the Equal Opportunity & Diversity Committee, Corinne Goodwin, received the Keira Kristine DeSantis Award for Transgender Advocacy at the 2025 Pennsylvania LGBTQIA+ Health Summit.

The end of the year is a time when people routinely reflect and take stock. Maybe you set a new fitness or a stretch reading goal. It is no different here at the Pennsylvania Commission for Fairness & Justice. As an organization, we are intentional about celebrating what we have done and strategizing around new challenges and the work that is still unfinished.

## FINAL THOUGHTS BY MARALEEN D. SHIELDS, ESQ.

Our work has only become more challenging as we face real headwinds. Our allocated funds have been stagnant for over a decade while costs continue to rise. Important initiatives were placed on pause while we (and many others) waited for a state budget to be passed. We have experienced pressure to abandon initiatives that advance public and professional awareness of the impact of race, ethnic origin, gender, sexual orientation, and disability on the fair delivery of justice in Pennsylvania. We must regularly close information gaps and confront apathy.

So, how does one get 24 volunteers, appointed by government leadership, to give their time, knowledge, labor, and voices in this environment? Why does an organization like the Pennsylvania Commission for Fairness & Justice still exist after 20 years?

As part of our transition to a cloud-based storage system, we had the opportunity to “clean up” our organizational files. In the process, we uncovered a July 2004 letter from then-Chief Justice Ralph J. Cappy to then-Governor Edward Rendell and legislative leaders of the General Assembly. In it, he affirmed that this organization could “prove to be a wonderful vehicle to tackle serious issues that affect” all branches of government. He emphasized that the Commission “should be authorized to create its own strategic plan and vision.” Most importantly, he acknowledged the long-term nature of this work:

Initially, it is important to realize that, in my view, this Commission will be a long-term project. New Jersey’s Gender Commission is in its 22nd year. I have no reason to believe that we can solve all the problems or issues that our Commission will face any more quickly than those working so hard for the last two decades in our sister state. Additionally, we have the added task of dealing with Racial and Ethnic Fairness Issues where they do not.

- former Chief Justice Ralph J. Cappy

At the heart of everything we do is a simple but profound idea most clearly articulated by Commissioner and former PBA President, Jay Silberblatt: that our government—all three branches—owes the public a basic level of care, concern, respect, and service. These obligations apply to all people—whether you have a lot of or little money; whether you have a disability; whether you are a survivor or victim of domestic abuse or sexual assault; whether you are non-binary, gay, or transgender and navigating the dependency system; whether you are a caretaker summoned to court; or whether your primary language is not English.

At PCFJ, we are, at our core, concerned with the quality of public service—and we expect our institutions to deliver compassionate, fair, and competent service to everyone in Pennsylvania. This means “good” is simply not good enough. To channel Maya Angelou, if we know better, we should do better:

- This means we will continue to ask questions about what is and is not working in our Commonwealth.
- This means we will engage with stakeholders and review research and literature to understand what opportunities exist to improve the quality of services provided by all three branches of state government.
- This means we will make recommendations to close gaps and improve how government functions.

It is never popular to shine a light on what is not working well. It is never easy to call for humility and a willingness to listen from those in positions of authority. It is rarely simple to find partners—inside or outside of government—who are deeply committed to continuous improvement. But that is our charge. And that is what we do.

It has been heartening to work collaboratively with leaders within the Commission and its Committees, and with organizations such as the Pennsylvania Commission on Crime & Delinquency (PCCD), Pennsylvania Human Relations Commission (PHRC), Pennsylvania Coalition to Advance Respect (PCAR), Pennsylvania Coalition Against Domestic Violence (PCADV), Abolitionist Law Center (ALC), Public Defenders Association of Pennsylvania (PDAP), Pennsylvania Innocence Project, National Center for State Courts (NCSC), the Governor's Advisory Commissions, and the Pardon Project, among many others, to investigate ideas and proposals aimed at making things easier and fairer for people across Pennsylvania over the last year.

As Senator Patty Kim reminded us at her September quarterly meeting: we go toward the pain. We question. We listen. We investigate. We advocate for improvements.

If you are interested in joining our efforts, we urge you to contact us at [pcfj@pacourts.us](mailto:pcfj@pacourts.us) or follow us on Facebook, Instagram, and LinkedIn to learn more about our work.



# LOOKING FORWARD



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