

The Autism and the Courts Initiative

A Chronicle of the Pennsylvania Court System's First in Nation Quest to Create Access, Equity, and Just Outcomes for those on the Autism Spectrum

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Introduction

For nearly three years, with the support of former Chief Justice Thomas G. Saylor and current Chief Justice Max Baer, I have helped spearhead the Supreme Court of Pennsylvania's Autism and the Courts Initiative in my role as Chief Administrative Aide for Justice Kevin M. Dougherty. More than 1 in 54 individuals in the United States, including 1 in 46¹ children, are on the autism spectrum. Unsurprisingly, in addition to the daily sensory and social challenges these individuals face, they are also coming into disproportionate contact with the statewide justice system, often with adverse consequences. In coordination with the Pennsylvania Department of Human Services Bureau of Autism, the Autism Services Education Resources and Training Collaborative² (ASERT), the Administrative Office of Pennsylvania Court's (AOPC)³ Office of Children and Families in the Court, and the Supreme Court of Pennsylvania, this Initiative has endeavored to introduce the Judiciary to this issue through an education session, and a listening/information gathering tour regarding the topic throughout the Commonwealth. The Judiciary is now taking action to reform the system with a Taskforce of justice system professionals in conjunction with this Capstone.

- What does this Capstone do?
 - Explain what autism spectrum disorder (ASD) is and how it intersects with the justice system.
 - Explain why the Autism and the Courts Initiative in Pennsylvania was started in 2019 and what it includes:
 - The conceptualization and implementation of the Judicial Education Session in March of 2020.
 - The inception and implementation of the Virtual Listening Tour throughout Pennsylvania and its widespread impact.
 - The Stakeholder Summit in July 2021.
 - The formation of the Autism and the Courts Dependency Taskforce and why we started with the children and families of Pennsylvania's Child Welfare System.
 - The work that has been done so far with the Taskforce, and what work it hopes to complete in the future.
 - The other reforms that are currently underway regarding ASD in the Courts.
 - The national, local, and regional outreach that has occurred around the Initiative.

¹ "Autism Prevalence,"-PAAutism.org, an ASERT Autism Resource Guide. Accessed March 29, 2022. <https://paautism.org/resource/autism-prevalence/>.

² The ASERT Collaborative is a statewide initiative funded by the Office of Developmental Programs under the auspices of the Pennsylvania Department of Human Services. It consists of a partnership of medical centers, centers of autism research and services, universities, and other providers involved in the treatment and care of individuals of all ages with autism and their families. (<https://paautism.org/about-us/>)

³ The AOPC is the administrative arm of the Supreme Court of Pennsylvania. It assists in the governance and superintendency of the judicial branch of government in the Commonwealth.

- Explain possible recommendations and challenges arising from the initiative.
- Conclusion
- How is the Capstone organized?
 - The Capstone is organized into three separate parts. Part I is a high-level background on what autism is, how it is diagnosed, and how it has intersected with the justice system reinforced by extensive academic research. Part II covers the different facets of the Autism and the Courts Initiative since its inception in 2019. Part III lays out recommendations, challenges, and the conclusions that have arisen from the Initiative.
 - Part I - Autism: Historical Awareness, Diagnosis, and Intersection with the Justice System
 - Section 1 – Autism: Historical Awareness and Diagnosis: This section will explain what autism spectrum disorder (ASD) is, its prevalence in the United States and Pennsylvania, the marked increase in the numbers in the past 15 years, and lastly how it is diagnosed.
 - Section 2 – Intersection with the Justice System: Now that the reader has a rudimentary understanding of what ASD is, this section will show research surrounding the intersection of autism spectrum disorder in the justice system and the adverse experiences those with ASD face when interacting with Courts, law enforcement, and correctional facilities. It includes a qualitative interview with Lindsay Shea, Ph.D., MSS. of the A.J. Drexel Institute of Autism.
 - Part II – Autism in the Courts Initiative
 - Section 1- Inception: This section will illustrate the events that occurred in order to spur the creation of the Autism and the Courts Initiative and include interviews with two of the principal stakeholders: Justice Kevin M. Dougherty of the Pennsylvania Supreme Court and former Pennsylvania Speaker of the House Dennis M. O'Brien.
 - Section 2 – Judicial Education: After recognizing the scope of this problem, this section exemplifies why the decision was made to begin with Judicial Education. In addition, it includes the planning and circumstances around the landmark judicial education initiative titled *Mental Health in the Courts: Autism is not a Label*, the success of which helped commence the Autism and the Courts Initiative as a whole. In addition, it will include qualitative interviews with Regina (Nina) Wall, MSS., LSW, Director of the Bureau of Autism Supports and Special Populations, Pennsylvania Department of Human Services, and Dr. Stephen Feiler, Director of Judicial Education, Administrative Office of Pennsylvania Courts.

- Section 3 – Statewide Virtual Listening Tour: Following the success of the Judicial Education session, Section 3 will chronicle the inception, execution, and widespread impact of the statewide virtual listening tour titled *Autism and the Courts: Listen, Learn, and Educate*. The listening tour illustrates how a high level of success can be achieved when a diverse group of justice system stakeholders collaborate on an issue in a transparent and public-facing way. This section will include qualitative interviews with Stacey Witalec, Director of Communications for the AOPC,⁴ and Kaitlin Koffer-Miller, MPH, Director of Policy Impact at the A.J. Drexel Institute of Autism.
 - Section 4 – Stakeholder Summit: Indicating the need to reflect on what the Initiative had achieved up to this point, this section will briefly discuss the Autism in the Courts Stakeholder Summit that occurred during the Annual Pennsylvania Conference of State Trial Judges in Hershey, PA on July 29, 2021. The remarks for this section will be the author’s, in his capacity as the Chief Administrative Aide for Justice Dougherty of the Supreme Court of Pennsylvania, as the planner and presenter at the Stakeholder Summit.
 - Section 5 – Statewide Dependency Taskforce: After educating the judiciary and embarking on a listening tour throughout the Commonwealth to hear how this intersection of autism and the courts were affecting everyday Pennsylvanians the time for action and reform had come. This section will look at the creation of the Statewide Dependency Taskforce alongside the AOPC’s Office of Children and Families in the Court (OCFC). Qualitative interviews in this section will consist of discussions with Sandra Moore, MSW, Director of the Office of Children and Families in the Court, AOPC, and Justice Kevin M. Dougherty of the Pennsylvania Supreme Court.
 - Section 6 – Other Aspects of the Initiative: Numerous other offshoots of the Initiative have occurred, are occurring currently, or will occur in the future. This section will speak to the other areas that this Initiative has previously or is currently working towards. These areas include data collection, the overarching communication strategy, and national outreach. The section will include the thoughts of the author and the AOPC’s Director of Communications, Stacey Witalec.
- Part III – Recommendations, Challenges, and Conclusion:
 - Recommendations: What has all of this meant, and what has this multi-year Initiative learned that it could recommend as ways to change the justice system for the better? This section will discuss the policy recommendations gleaned so far from the Autism and the Courts Initiative.

⁴ The AOPC, or Administrative Office of Pennsylvania Courts, is the administrative arm of the Supreme Court of Pennsylvania and assists the court in governing and administering the judicial branch of government in the Commonwealth.

- Challenges: This section will discuss possible challenges that could arise from the implementation of the above recommendations.
- Conclusion: The report concludes and projects the hope that this Initiative and this Capstone can provide a template, or “roadmap for reform,” for not just Pennsylvania, but other states or jurisdictions that are looking to create positive systemic change regarding autism in the court system.

Policy Issue/Problem Statement

Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) is a complex, lifelong, neurodevelopmental disorder characterized by communication and social deficits, and restricted interests.⁵ ASD has increased in frequency in both the United States and in Pennsylvania with the latest estimates (2018) from the CDC showing that 1 in 46 Children are currently diagnosed with ASD. Due to these social deficits individuals with autism are at a higher risk of interacting with law enforcement, the court system, and correctional facilities. As this population grows now and into the future in Pennsylvania, how do justice system leaders and stakeholders create policy reforms, meaningful system change, and more “just” outcomes for those with ASD?

- Those with autism spectrum disorder are more likely to come into contact and have adverse outcomes with the justice system than those that are neurotypical.
 - Researchers have demonstrated that autistic individuals encounter the justice system at higher rates than neurotypical individuals, and this is even more apparent for those with ASD that are people of color.⁶ In addition, those with ASD report worse outcomes than those who are neurotypical when interacting with the justice system.⁷
- There is a fundamental lack of education and awareness for court system and justice system stakeholders regarding ASD.
 - Many court and justice system professionals are unfamiliar and uneducated about autism and how it can lead to increased justice system involvement. This ignorance has manifested itself in countless instances of unjust placements, arrests, and lack of diversionary opportunities for those with ASD.⁸ Lastly, there can be no reform efforts throughout the court and justice system without a rudimentary knowledge of ASD and how it can manifest itself in public.

⁵ “Autism Spectrum Disorder – American Psychiatric Association.” Accessed April 29, 2022.

https://www.psychiatry.org/File%20Library/Psychiatrists/Practice/DSM/APA_DSM-5-Autism-Spectrum-Disorder.pdf.

⁶ Shea, Lindsay Lawer, Dylan Cooper, and Amy Blank Wilson. 2021. "Preventing and Improving Interactions Between Autistic Individuals and The Criminal Justice System: A Roadmap for Research". *Autism Research* 14 (10): 2053-2060. doi:10.1002/aur.2594

⁷ Yu Y, Bradley CC, Boan AD, Charles JM, Carpenter LA. Young Adults with Autism Spectrum Disorder and the Criminal Justice System. *J Autism Dev Disord*. 2021 Oct;51(10):3624-3636. doi: 10.1007/s10803-020-04805-9. Epub 2021 Jan 1. PMID: 33386554.

⁸ Shea, Lindsay Lawer, Dylan Cooper, and Amy Blank Wilson. 2021. "Preventing and Improving Interactions Between Autistic Individuals and The Criminal Justice System: A Roadmap for Research". *Autism Research* 14 (10): 2053-2060. doi:10.1002/aur.2594

Research Questions/Goals of my Capstone

- What are the most common challenges and adverse outcomes experienced by those with ASD in the justice system and dependency system?
- What resources do judges need to adequately address ASD in their courtrooms and courthouses?
- What are the different challenges faced by those in rural counties compared to those in suburban or urban counties when it comes to dealing with those with ASD?
- What are the policy reforms that can be made to help accommodate those with ASD in the court system and dependency system?

Part I – Autism: Historical Awareness, Diagnosis, and Intersection with the Justice System

Section 1 – Autism: Historical Awareness and Diagnosis

What is Autism?

In 1910 the Swiss psychiatrist, Paul Eugen Bleuler, became the first individual in the world to use the word 'autism' while describing a pattern of symptoms that he noticed in his research into his schizophrenic patients that were consistently "withdrawn" from those around them.⁹ Autism research continued in the ensuing years, and it officially was included in the first Diagnostic Statistical Manual (DSM)¹⁰ as a childhood subtype of schizophrenia (American Psychiatric Association, 1952). It eventually separated from Schizophrenia into its own category and evolved into a wide-ranging diagnostic spectrum by the time the 5th edition of the DSM (DSM-5) was published in 2013.

It is now defined officially as Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD). ASD is a complex, lifelong, neurodevelopmental disorder characterized by communication and social deficits, and restricted interests.¹¹ The DSM-5 consolidated what was previously five subcategories of autism spectrum disorder into one umbrella diagnosis which now included Asperger's.¹² (Cook) The other four subcategories include Kanner's Syndrome, Pervasive Developmental Disorder, Rett Syndrome, and Child Disintegrative Disorder. These different types of autism and their varying levels of severity include anything from inflexibility in thought and behavior, to challenges with communication and speech, to obsession with handling objects, to delayed language development.

Autism Spectrum Disorder is a wide-ranging complex neuro-development disorder that encompasses a wide range of symptoms that can manifest themselves in a variety of ways. There is a reason why a common refrain amongst autism advocates and the autism

⁹ Cook, Kieran A. and Willmerdinger, Alissa N., "The History of Autism" (2015). Narrative Documents. Book 1.

¹⁰ The *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM)* is the handbook used by health care professionals in the United States and much of the world as the authoritative guide to the diagnosis of mental disorders. (psychiatry.org)

¹¹Autism Spectrum Disorder – American Psychiatric Association." Accessed April 29, 2022.

https://www.psychiatry.org/File%20Library/Psychiatrists/Practice/DSM/APA_DSM-5-Autism-Spectrum-Disorder.pdf.

¹² Asperger syndrome is a condition on the autism spectrum, with generally higher functioning. People with this condition may be socially awkward and have an all-absorbing interest in specific topics. Communication training and behavioral therapy can help people with the syndrome learn to socialize more successfully. (Mayo Clinic)

community at large is “when you meet one person with autism, you meet one person with autism.” What that means is that while there are some similarities among those with ASD on a case-to-case basis, they are rarely exactly the same.

Autism spectrum disorder has no single known cause, but experts believe that a combination of genetics and environment play a large role.¹³ Additionally, it seems each year that autism rates in the populace at large are significantly increasing as the figure to the right indicates. However, most experts believe this marked increase in prevalence is directly correlated to better-diagnosing practices and surveillance practices.¹⁴

Estimated Autism Prevalence 2020

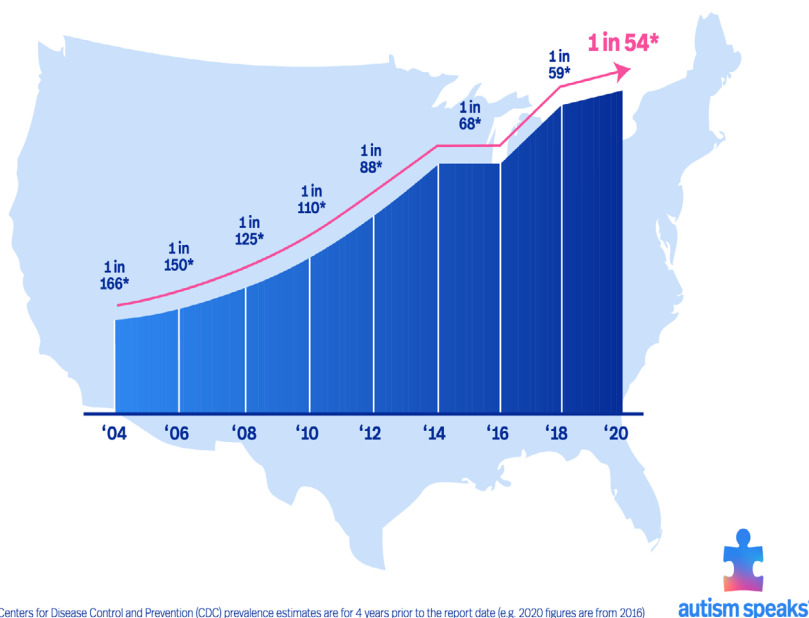


Figure 1 – Autism Speaks (2020)

How is Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) diagnosed?

Due to the wide-ranging and complex manifestations of autism spectrum disorder, there are only a few types of specialists that are qualified to make an official autism diagnosis. These types of specialists include psychologists, pediatric neurologists, and developmental pediatricians. For these professionals to make an autism diagnosis according to *The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, Fifth Edition*, or DSM-5, a child must have persistent deficits in three areas of social communication and interaction in addition to two of four types of restricted, repetitive behaviors. The three persistent social deficits as mentioned in the DSM-5 are as follows: deficits in social-emotional reciprocity (normal social interaction), deficits in nonverbal communicative behaviors, and deficits in developing and maintaining relationships. In addition to these social deficits, a child must have two of the four restricted behaviors including stereotyped or repetitive movements, insistence on sameness and inflexible routines, highly restricted fixated interests, and hyperactivity to sensitive interests.

It is imperative for individuals with ASD to be diagnosed early. The importance of early diagnosis is well established in academic research. In fact, studies have found that

¹³“Autism Spectrum Disorder.” Mayo Clinic. Mayo Foundation for Medical Education and Research, January 6, 2018. <https://www.mayoclinic.org/diseases-conditions/autism-spectrum-disorder/symptoms-causes/syc-20352928>.

¹⁴ Burton, Kelli Whitlock. “Record Breaking Autism Rates Reported with New CDC Criteria.” WebMD. WebMD, December 3, 2021. <https://www.webmd.com/brain/autism/news/20211203/record-autism-rates-reported>.

interventions implemented before age 4 are strongly associated with significant gains in cognition, language, and adaptive behavior.¹⁵ Additionally, research has shown that such early interventions result in long-term improvements in social behavior, daily living skills, and successful long-term quality of life. However, such vitally important early diagnoses do not always occur. As seen in the DSM-5 list presented above, the official diagnosis process is highly complex and can be undertaken by only a certain class of individuals. In Pennsylvania alone, waiting times can take 8-12 months in rural areas of the state and up to 12-24 months in more urban areas.¹⁶

Even more troubling are the challenges faced by families of color and poor rural families when trying to obtain a diagnosis and access services. According to a study in 2002 looking at Philadelphia Medicaid patients, African American and Hispanic children were diagnosed almost 1.5 to 2 years later than white children.¹⁷ What makes this study even more striking is that it looked only at children who were Medicaid patients, or economically disadvantaged families that rely on government assistance, and did not look at the difference between families of greater means that belong to different ethnicities or racial groups.¹⁸ Additionally, it should be noted that ASD affects the genders at a different rate.¹⁹ Males are diagnosed at almost a 4:1 ratio compared to females. The underlying reasons for this gender disparity are unclear.

¹⁵ Elder, Jennifer Harrison, Consuelo Maun Kreider, Susan N Basher, and Margaret Ansell. "Clinical Impact of Early Diagnosis of Autism on the Prognosis and Parent-Child Relationships." *Psychology research and behavior management*, Dove Medical Press, August 24, 2017. <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC5576710/>.

¹⁶WLVR, Chloe Nouvelle |. "As Autism Rates Increase, so Do Wait Times to See a Specialist." 90.5 WESA. April 4, 2022. <https://www.wesa.fm/health-science-tech/2022-04-04/as-autism-rates-increase-so-do-wait-times-to-see-a-specialist>.

¹⁷ Pinto-Martin, Jennifer, PH.D. "Race Differences in the Age at Diagnosis Among Medicaid-Eligible Children With Autism". *Journal of the American Academy of Child & Adolescent Psychiatry*. (2002) [https://www.jaacap.org/article/S0890-8567\(09\)60739-5/fulltext](https://www.jaacap.org/article/S0890-8567(09)60739-5/fulltext)

¹⁸ Furfaro, Hannah. "Race, Class Contribute to Disparities in Autism Diagnoses." *Spectrum*, November 20, 2017. <https://www.spectrumnews.org/news/race-class-contribute-disparities-autism-diagnoses/>.

¹⁹ Halladay, Alycia K et al. "Sex and gender differences in autism spectrum disorder: summarizing evidence gaps and identifying emerging areas of priority." *Molecular autism* vol. 6 36. 13 Jun. 2015, doi:10.1186/s13229-015-0019-y

Section 2 - How does Autism Spectrum Disorder interact with the Justice System?

It does not stretch the imagination to see how these restricted, repetitive behaviors and social deficits experienced by an individual on the autism spectrum can increase the risk for justice system and criminal justice system involvement. This, combined with a lack of education and awareness on the part of first responders, law enforcement, attorneys, prosecutors, court personnel, and judges can further exacerbate negative outcomes.²⁰ To help further illustrate, imagine the scenario below.

An autistic adult is in a public space acting in a manner a neurotypical individual (someone without ASD) finds strange or disturbing. Following a complaint, a law enforcement officer is called to help alleviate the disturbance made by the autistic adult. The law enforcement officer shows up, is unaware or uneducated of what ASD is and how it manifests itself, gives a verbal command to the autistic individual to cease the behavior that goes unanswered, and the officer assumes the behavior is threatening. The individual with ASD, seeing a threat, attempts to flee, and in a frightened state strikes the police officer when the officer grabs him/her.

As a result of that incident, the individual is now charged with a felony for assaulting a law enforcement officer. After being held due to a belief that the individual with ASD is a threat to society, the prosecutor convinces the judge, both of whom are unaware/uneducated about autism, to hold that person until trial. The trial is delayed for a few months due to Court backlogs and while in the county jail, due to repeat unresponsive reactions from the individual with ASD in interactions with correctional staff, the individual is further written up with behavior complaints. During the trial, the individual with ASD refuses to make eye contact and fidgets constantly when testifying in front of the jury. The judge believing that the autistic defendant is acting incorrigible, unrepentant, and disrespectful decides to sentence that person to the highest possible sentence under the sentencing guidelines following the subsequent guilty verdict to "teach a lesson." The autistic individual is sent to jail, removed from the strict routines that help the individual maintain stability, and quickly decompensates in state custody.

This disturbing scenario is all too common to those who cover this issue. "These types of stories occur often, unfortunately," states Lindsay Shea, Ph.D., MSS. of the A.J. Drexel Institute of Autism. "We need more research in this area of the intersection of autism and the justice system because research is evidence, and unfortunately in other nations where the criminal justice system is less punitive and less complex than ours [because their populations are more homogenous] have done more work in this area."

Research shows that once they are involved in the criminal justice system or the justice system at large, individuals with ASD are at high risk of poor outcomes. This is due to the difficulties mentioned with communication and social interactions experienced by individuals with ASD, but more importantly with their struggle to understand the justice system process. A recent study in the *Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders* shows that "Individuals with ASD

²⁰ Rava, Julianna & Shattuck, Paul & Rast, Jessica & Roux, Anne. (2017). The Prevalence and Correlates of Involvement in the Criminal Justice System Among Youth on the Autism Spectrum. *Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders*. 47. 10.1007/s10803-016-2958-3.

reported feeling frightened, stressed, confused in court, having difficulty concentrating and keeping up with information given, and frustration about not knowing what happens next.”²¹

Why do Individuals with Autism Spectrum Disorder Commit Crimes or become Victims?

Studies have shown that “one in seven males on the Autism Spectrum was likely to be involved with the Criminal Justice System.”²² This high percentage is due to a wide range of factors, but research has shown that there are certain patterns of criminal behavior by those with ASD.²³ These patterns, highlighted below, are not surprising given the criteria needed for an ASD diagnosis.

- Relationship Deficits - Offenses relating to social naivety and deficits in creating or maintaining relationships. In many cases, individuals with ASD are taken advantage of by individuals who seek to exploit their condition by making them unwitting accomplices in criminal behavior. For example, because it is difficult for individuals with ASD to understand the motives of other people, they could be coerced into being a getaway driver in a robbery, or commit a violent act in an effort to “fit in.”
- Aggressive Behaviors - Offenses like the scenario mentioned at the beginning of this section that are aggressive in nature. Individuals with ASD in many cases do not understand social environments well and can act out aggressively when presented with situations where their senses are overstimulated, often in public. For example, a study from 2008²⁴ showed that a small sample of autistic offenders’ violent behaviors “were almost always precipitated by an accumulation of stress, exacerbated by maladaptive coping strategies. (Allen et al. 2008) Furthermore, almost 70% of those studied were exposed to social rejection before their offending behavior, and 50% were exposed to bullying. (Allen et al. 2008)
- Social Cues – Offenses can occur due to ASD individuals’ deficits in understanding social cues, or non-verbal communication. As mentioned previously, this could be something as simple as a lack and difficulty in making eye contact when being addressed or responding to a verbal command from an authority figure which can create adverse outcomes. Individuals with ASD are also very literal and can be perceived by those that are neurotypical as rude or abrupt. It could also be something more problematic like the common occurrence of sex crimes perpetrated by those with ASD. In many cases, due to the difficulty in maintaining and developing relationships,

²¹ Yu, Y., Bradley, C.C., Boan, A.D. *et al.* Young Adults with Autism Spectrum Disorder and the Criminal Justice System. *J Autism Dev Disord* **51**, 3624–3636 (2021). <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10803-020-04805-9>

²² Rava, J., Shattuck, P., Rast, J. *et al.* The Prevalence and Correlates of Involvement in the Criminal Justice System Among Youth on the Autism Spectrum. *J Autism Dev Disord* **47**, 340–346 (2017). <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10803-016-2958-3>

²³ Pamela Sue Vandergrift, Bern*. “ASDs and Involvement in the Criminal Justice System.” Autism Awareness, June 15, 2020. <https://autismawarenesscentre.com/asds-involvement-criminal-justice-system>.

²⁴ Allen, David & Evans, Cary & Hider, Andrew & Peckett, Helen & Morgan, Hugh. (2008). Offending Behaviour in Adults with Asperger Syndrome. *Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders*. 38. 748-58. [10.1007/s10803-007-0442-9](https://doi.org/10.1007/s10803-007-0442-9).

autistic individuals often progress sexually at a much slower pace than someone who is neurotypical, and this can lead to adverse consequences. (Dubin)²⁵

- **Strict Routines** – As stated in the American Psychiatric Association’s DSM-5, individuals with ASD are in many cases adherents to rigid routines and can be strict rule followers. An unexpected change in that routine or their environment can cause great anxiety or distress. For example, the observance of another person breaking a rule like parking illegally or cutting in line could provoke an intensely negative reaction from someone with ASD.

While some individuals with ASD enter the criminal justice system by committing crimes as seen in the scenario at the beginning of this section, others enter the system as the **victim of a crime**. For example, this could be as a result of a violent crime committed against them, because they fell victim to a financial scheme, were swindled out of their estate or inheritance by other members of their family, or are placed into the dependency system because of parental neglect or lack of resources. A study from 2019 in Norway published by the medical journal *Elsevier* showed that “adolescents with ADHD, autism spectrum disorders, or mental retardation were 2.7x’s more likely to be a victim of a violent crime.” It is not hard to imagine the myriad of ways that individuals with ASD could be perpetrated upon by others’ criminal behavior or neglect.

How are these negative outcomes alleviated or mitigated?

Research shows how the lack of awareness and education of autism and its manifestations by justice system stakeholders can create negative outcomes for individuals with ASD. According to Lindsay Shea, that’s not the only problem. “Initial public outreach focused on autism as an issue in childhood, but we have not kept up those public issue awareness campaigns into adolescence and adulthood. These issues evolve and grow and are more frequent with adults. And unfortunately, like many problematic issues in society we have built up these academic ivory towers that do not do a good job of educating justice system stakeholders like law enforcement and judges.”

²⁵ Dubin, N. and Allely, C., n.d. Autism Spectrum Disorder, Developmental Disabilities, and the Criminal Justice System. 2021

Her landmark work with the Sequential Intercept Model below shows the various levels of the criminal justice system that an individual (offender or victim) needs to pass through (intercepts) to become deeper enmeshed in the system. She also shows that there are various “exit ramps” out of the system into diversionary programs that could be possible alternatives.

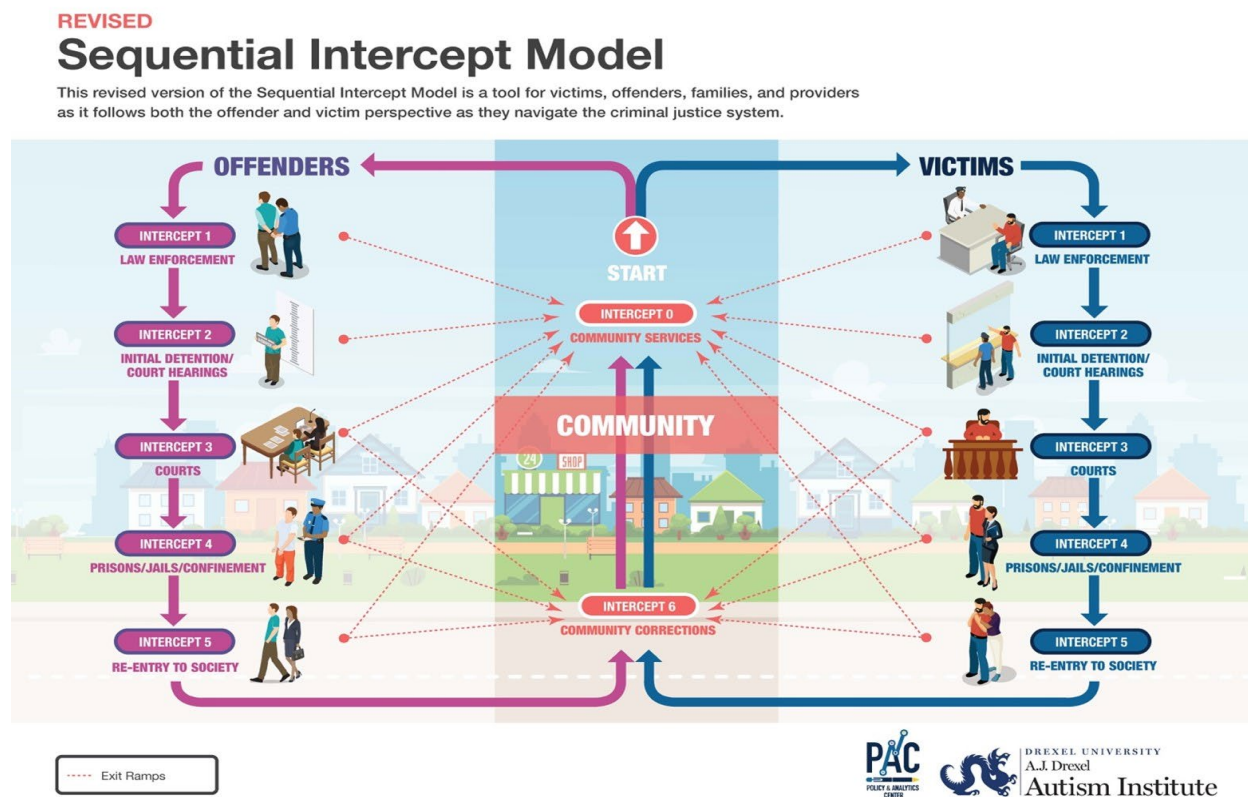


Figure 2 – Drexel University (2020) A.J. Drexel Autism Institute

These exit ramps could be connected to services, or the placement of an individual into problem-solving diversionary courts to ward off prosecution, confinement, and a criminal record.

It is imperative for justice system stakeholders in each of these different intercept levels to become educated about ASD to create better outcomes for these individuals. The scenario described in the beginning of this section provides an excellent example. Had the police officer understood ASD and its manifestations, he could have utilized de-escalation techniques which may have resolved the situation. Instead, the officer’s uninformed approach escalated the individual’s behavior resulting in an arrest. If the prosecutor at the initial hearing recognized the symptoms of ASD, he/she could have requested the presiding judge to allow the individual to go home with electronic monitoring so they could adhere to their normal routine. If the court staff, human services worker, and public defender/defense attorney were educated and aware that the individual before them had ASD they could have disclosed the diagnosis of the individual to the judge so that he/she could possibly have given a lighter sentence or placed the individual into a diversion program at sentencing. Lastly, if the judge were educated and aware of the symptoms of ASD, regardless of disclosure by the parties before the judge, the judge could have attempted to create a more just outcome for the individual with ASD.

Research further backs up the latter point. In a landmark study in England from the *Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders* in 2019 titled “Mock Juror Perceptions of Credibility and Culpability in an Autistic Defendant,” 168 jury eligible participants were asked to read a vignette describing a male who was brought to court for exhibiting aggressive and atypical behaviors in Court. Half of the participants were told that the individual had ASD and given background information regarding the diagnostic label, and the other half were not. The results were impressive. The divulging of diagnostic information led to significantly higher ratings of likeability, honesty, and reduced blameworthiness. They also resulted in fewer guilty verdicts and more lenient sentencing if found guilty. “On the other hand, those who were not given the information regarding the individual’s ASD perceived the defendant as deceitful, unremorseful, rude, and aggressive.” (Maras et. al 2019)²⁶

It should be noted that the respective court systems in the United States and United Kingdom are very different, and in many cases an ASD disclosure may not make it before a jury in the US. However, this study is important to show how disclosure can change the perception or direction of a case. It is not hard to imagine that this result would be replicated if it looked specifically at judges, attorneys, court staff, or any other group of justice system stakeholders.

Due to the ever-growing numbers of individuals diagnosed with ASD, as illustrated by the Centers for Disease Control graphic earlier in this section, and the propensity for these individuals to interact with the justice system as either victims or perpetrators it is clear this intersection is becoming an increasing issue. It is imperative for justice system professionals to establish a comprehensive framework for cross-justice system interactions that can account for both perpetrator and victim experiences to prioritize areas for further investigation.²⁷ (Shea, 2021) More importantly, these cross-justice system interactions and the subsequent research it generates need to be accompanied by targeted policy reform to create more just outcomes for individuals on the autism spectrum.

²⁶ Maras, K., Marshall, I. & Sands, C. Mock Juror Perceptions of Credibility and Culpability in an Autistic Defendant. *J Autism Dev Discord* **49**, 996–1010 (2019)²

²⁷ Shea, Lindsay Lawer, Dylan Cooper, and Amy Blank Wilson. 2021. "Preventing and Improving Interactions Between Autistic Individuals and The Criminal Justice System: A Roadmap for Research". *Autism Research* 14 (10): 2053-2060. doi:10.1002/aur.2594 (Shea)

Part II – Autism in the Courts Initiative

Section 1 - Inception - The Beginning of Awareness

In 2003, Justice Kevin M. Dougherty of the Supreme Court of Pennsylvania was the Court of Common Pleas Supervising Judge²⁸ in the Philadelphia Family Court. Philadelphia’s Family Court, located in a city where 1 in 3 children live in poverty, serves as the intersection of the justice system for these children and their families. One day, when deciding on what charges to bring against a juvenile accused of a serious crime, he asked the child to make eye contact with him “when he was speaking.” The juvenile continued to refuse to do so, and the then-Judge Dougherty assumed the youth was being belligerent and disrespectful. The mother of the child finally spoke up and asked to speak to the Judge at sidebar.²⁹ “My son has autism,” she stated. Judge Dougherty, who considered himself a progressive and forward-thinking Judge responded, “What is that?”

“I felt like it was a punch to my stomach,” recalled Justice Dougherty. “Here I was about to adjudicate this child delinquent and take him from his family when I was confronted with the fact that the child was diagnosed with a disorder that I knew nothing about.” After placing the child into a diversion program to connect him with proper services, then-Supervising Judge Dougherty set out on a mission to “self-educate” himself on what autism was. Following his appointment by the Supreme Court of Pennsylvania in 2005 to be the Administrative Judge³⁰ in Family Court, he decided to educate and train the entire complement of Judges in Philadelphia’s Family Court — 25 in all — in autism awareness and education so that a situation like the one he experienced would not happen again.



Figure 3 -Justice Kevin M. Dougherty (photo credit The Irish Edition Newspaper)

²⁸ In the Philadelphia Court of Common Pleas’ judicial management structure, the Supervising Judge administers a specific division of Judges (in this case the Juvenile Division of Philadelphia’s Family Court) on behalf of the Administrative Judge.

²⁹ The area in front of or next to the bench that is removed from the witness stand and the jury box. Judges will often call attorneys or interested parties to speak confidentially with the judge privately so that the jury cannot hear what is discussed.

³⁰ The Administrative Judge in the First Judicial District (Philadelphia County) administers an entire division, or Court, of the Philadelphia Court of Common Pleas (in this case the entire Philadelphia Family Court).

Inception – Problems Spur Action

Former Pennsylvania Speaker of the House of Representatives Dennis M. O'Brien, in his post-electoral life, has become a persistent and highly effective advocate for autistic Pennsylvanians. During his time in office, he had championed and passed legislation entitled Act 62 which required insurance companies in Pennsylvania to provide services to individuals with autism. Touched decades ago, by the diagnosis of his autistic nephew, he has dedicated his life to educating, creating awareness, and pursuing or ensuring just outcomes for those with ASD. In May of 2019 Speaker O'Brien approached his longtime friend Justice Kevin M. Dougherty of the Supreme Court of Pennsylvania, trying to bring that same sense of urgency to the judicial system.



Figure 4 - Former Pennsylvania Speaker of the House Dennis M. O'Brien (Photo Credit The Pocono Record)

Former Speaker O'Brien was blunt in his comments to Justice Dougherty and me when he met with us in 2019: "The system is failing these people; the stories I hear every week have me pulling my hair out!" He then relayed the following story: A male autistic adult in a rural county in Pennsylvania was the subject of a domestic disturbance call by a neighbor. When police arrived, they noticed the autistic adult man and his two elderly parents trying unsuccessfully to calm him down. The police attempted to restrain the individual and following a brief altercation with the officers they arrested and charged him with assaulting a police officer. A "tough on crime" judge and prosecutor in this rural county were both unaware and unmoved of the implications of the individual's ASD. The judge sentenced him to a state correctional facility, imposing the maximum amount allowed under the sentencing guidelines. Now in prison, the individual with autism was decompensating outside of the strict routine that allowed him to function in society and was getting accosted by the correctional officers when he did not understand or respond in a neurotypical way to their demands. The parents, by virtue of their meager means, had resorted to writing handwritten letters to former Speaker O'Brien. They had heard of his autism advocacy work because they didn't know where to turn. "Here are the letters," he stated as he passed them around to the rest of us in the room who were sitting in stunned silence.

Justice Dougherty, after a few more moments, finally spoke up. "Denny, I am all in. It is time to bring to the rest of Pennsylvania³¹ what I had started in Family Court all those years ago. Where do we begin?"

³¹ Founded in 1722, the Supreme Court of Pennsylvania is the oldest appellate court in the country and the highest Court in the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania. In addition to being the "Court of Last Resort" by virtue of hearing the most important and high-profile cases in the Commonwealth, they administer, superintend, and govern the Judicial Branch of the Government, the Pennsylvania Court System, and the practice of law in Pennsylvania.

Section 2 - Why begin with Judicial Education?

In August of 2019, Justice Dougherty decided to move forward with a 4-hour Judicial Education program for Common Pleas Judges at the upcoming Mid-Annual Pennsylvania State Trial Judges Conference in Philadelphia scheduled for February 29, 2020. “The decision was made to start with Judicial Education because without widespread education and awareness throughout the judiciary and court system there could be no meaningful change,” said Regina (Nina) Wall, Director of Bureau of Autism Supports and Special Populations, Pennsylvania Department of Human Services (DHS). “We realized right away that for our team to make the biggest impact from the outset this was the right venue.”

“We realized that we (The Bureau of Autism Supports) were tired of simply doing crisis response to the issue of autism and the justice system, and we had to be doing this on both sides of the issue,” Wall said. “Without creating meaningful systems change and making sure that the system itself knew who we were endeavoring to support we would simply be doing crisis response forever without addressing the root cause of the issue.” As to her prior relationship with Justice Dougherty, she made this compelling point about the inception of the Bureau of Autism Supports foray into justice system work: “I had met with Justice Dougherty years earlier when he was the Administrative Judge of Family Court alongside Speaker O’Brien regarding Autism in the Family Court System in Philadelphia. At the end of a productive meeting when I asked him to please let me know what I could do to help him he didn’t hesitate and said, ‘Keep these kids out of my system.’ He may not realize it, but that really jumpstarted our own work in this area,” Wall stated.

What Preparation went into the Judicial Education Program?

Due to the immense amount of preparation that would go into the creation of a 4-hour intensive educational session specifically for Judges, an executive planning team was put together to meet monthly. This team included Dr. Stephen Feiler, Director of Judicial Education for the AOPC;³² Lindsay Shea, Ph.D., MSS. of the A.J. Institute of Autism at Drexel University; Regina Wall; Former Speaker O’Brien; Dr. Stacy Nonnemacher, DHS Bureau of Autism Support; Kate Hooven, MS, ASERT Collaborative;³³ and the author representing Justice Dougherty and the Supreme Court.

“We wanted to utilize this incredible opportunity (4-hour long program) to make it specifically relevant to Judges, and we spent a lot of time trying to make it poignant for them,” Nina Wall said. We spent hours of planning calls endeavoring to do this. We decided that yes, it would be an Autism 101, but in a wholesale way for the judiciary in a human way and relevant way including various perspectives and lenses that were data driven. Finally, we wanted to end with resources, so that individuals could tie it all together.”

³² The AOPC stands for the Administrative Office of Pennsylvania Courts. The AOPC assists the Supreme Court of Pennsylvania in administering and governing the Pennsylvania Court System.

³³ The ASERT Collaborative (Autism Services, Education, Resources, and Training) is a partnership of medical centers, centers of autism research and services, universities, and other providers involved in the treatment and care of individuals of all ages with autism and their families. ASERT was developed to bring together resources locally, regionally, and statewide. <https://paautism.org/about-us/>

It was decided as the program was developed that it would be organized into the five different sections listed below.

- Section 1 – The Opening – This section included an introduction to the program by Justice Dougherty and why the Supreme Court was interested in this topic. In addition, the Opening included a self-advocate, Khyllil Robinson, whose personal experience and insights would give the Judges a window into what living with ASD feels like for an individual of color.
- Section 2 – Moving Beyond Stereotypes – This section’s goals were to identify common myths and misconceptions about ASD with interactive technology to keep the Judges engaged. After the exercise, the presenters, including course planners Regina Wall, Dr. Stacy Nonnemacher, and Kate Hooven, would dispel the myths and preconceptions about ASD. The section would conclude with more foundational information on autism and the prevalent disorders along the spectrum.
- Section 3 – Autism in the Justice System – Now that the Judges were more familiar with ASD and how it manifests itself this section looked at how ASD interacts with the justice system. This included system-specific challenges (to relate to Judges from all divisions being present³⁴), environmental challenges faced by those with ASD, and identifying important considerations when interviewing an individual with autism. This section also included an interactive panel with justice system professionals focused on the intersection of autism in the justice system. The panel included two Common Pleas Judges, a District Attorney, and a Philadelphia Police Officer.³⁵ The panelists were selected based on their diversity of experience with autism and geographical location across the State.
- Section 4 – Linking to Service – This section was created as the final substantive section. This section was designed to help Judges make decisions/dispositions in cases when individuals with ASD came before them. In addition, the section focused on helping Judges identify autism-centric resources around the state and understanding what appropriate treatment options could be.
- Section 5 – Closing – The interactive activity in the first section was revisited to test what knowledge the Judges had learned throughout the 4-hour program. Lastly, Justice Dougherty would close, identify the next steps for the Initiative, and challenge those in attendance to change the way they managed cases involving those with ASD.

³⁴ The different divisions of the Pennsylvania Court System include criminal, civil, orphans, juvenile (delinquency, dependency), and domestic relations.

³⁵ The panel included Judge Kelly Wall of Montgomery County, Judge Jennifer Rogers of Luzerne County, District Attorney Michael Piecuch of Snyder County, and Philadelphia Police Officer and autism advocate Roz Talley.

Was the Program a Success?

The program was a great success. Despite being a 4-hour-long program on the last day of the Pennsylvania State Trial Judge's³⁶ Conference we still had over 45% of the entire trial bench in Pennsylvania, or 186 Judges, attend the session. Dr. Stephen Feiler, the Director of Judicial Education for the AOPC, had the following to say "This was one of the more successful and well attended programs the Department has been involved in developing to this point. Both the attendance numbers and the high course evaluation results (feedback) demonstrate to us how important providing continuing education in this area is for our judiciary, and how meaningful this opportunity was for judges serving in courts across the Commonwealth."

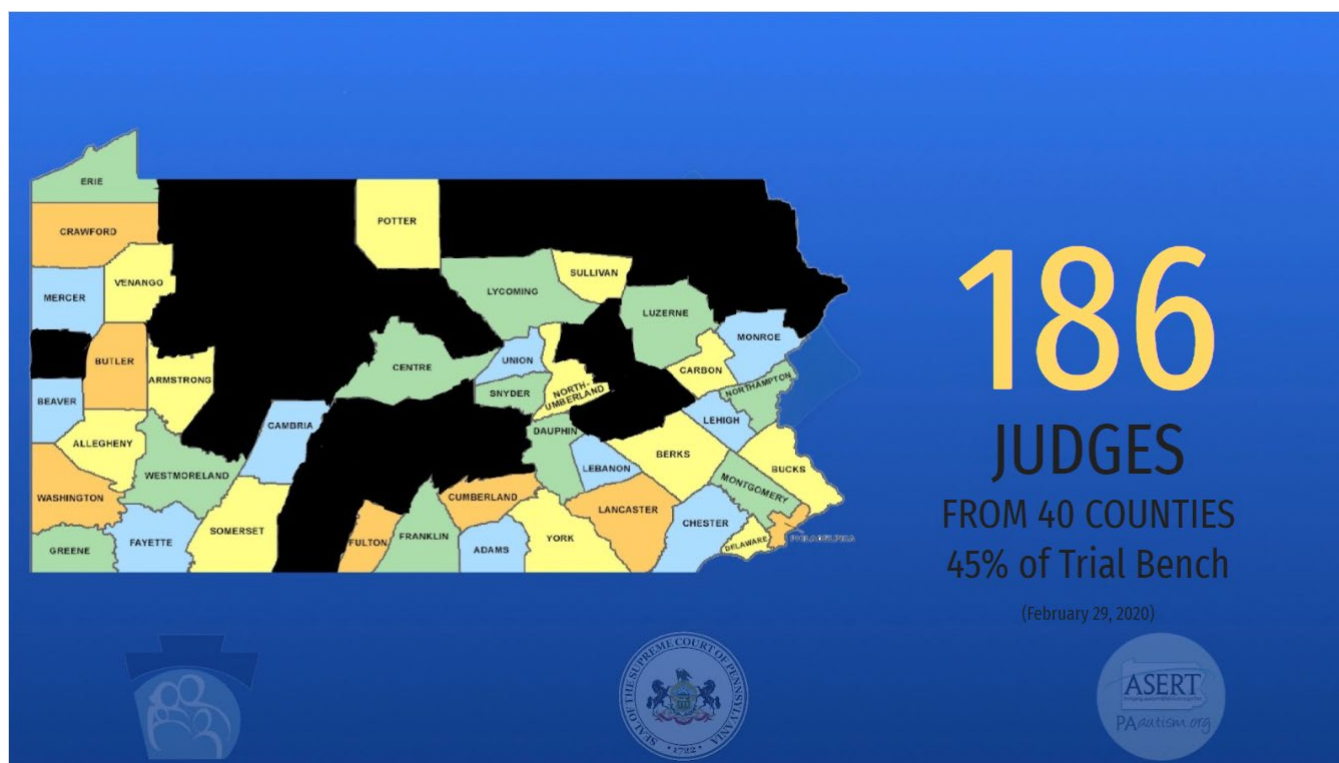


Figure 5 – Graphic showing the 40 (out of 67) counties that had Judges attend the 4-hour judicial education training on 2/29/20 – (Graphic by Author)

Some of the feedback that Dr. Feiler received is noted below.

- More Education/Training:
 - “This gave me the resources to schedule a training in my courthouse.”
 - “There is a need to educate attorneys about individuals with ASD so they can be informed of the necessity of letting the Judge know of the diagnosis and any accompanying issues.”

³⁶ The Pennsylvania Conference of State Trial Judges (PCSTJ) is the organization of all Common Pleas Judges throughout the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania, or Trial Judges. They meet at statewide conferences two times a year, in February and July.

- Creating Awareness:
 - “Every minute of this (4-hour) presentation had useful information.”
 - “I was amazed at the statistics showing the prevalence of autism in Pennsylvania.”
 - “I had no real understanding of autism and the spectrum prior to this training.”

- Creating a Call to Action
 - “This program shows that our orders/dispositions need to be tailor-made for individuals with autism.”

Nina Wall sums up the judicial training and its impact best: *“I just could not believe how many Judges came up to me and said they were personally affected by autism and how much they needed this in their local areas. People really personalized this (training) in a compelling way.”* She continued, *“We all felt that we had an impact. We wanted more of those opportunities. There was a burst and a real interest in what we are saying. It confirmed for us that we are on right track.”*

Section 3 - Why a Listening Tour?

Following the successful execution and overwhelming feedback from the judiciary for more information, it was apparent that the Autism and the Courts Initiative would not simply conclude with the judicial education program. Unfortunately, just as conversations were beginning to occur regarding next steps, Covid-19 and the subsequent shutdowns swept across the world, the United States, and Pennsylvania. Justice Dougherty and the other Initiative stakeholders knew that more needed to be learned regarding how this intersection of ASD and the justice system affected Pennsylvanians, but the question was how to do so?

In the ensuing months early in the pandemic, Stacey Witalec, Director of Communications for the AOPC and Pennsylvania Court System, saw an opportunity to broaden the Autism in the Courts Initiative's impact. "In my previous role, as spokesperson for what is now called the Department of Human Services, we did a 'Listening Tour' with then-DHS Secretary Estelle Richman around the state on Medicaid benefits and it was a great success," Witalec said. "I saw the same opportunity here." When asked why that was, she responded, "Because this whole program is about real people and real issues, and the only way to truly impact people is to involve them." After multiple conversations with Stacey, her team, Justice Dougherty, and the author, it was decided to embark on a virtual listening tour in different regions throughout the state that would utilize the Zoom platform to help widen its reach due to the unique challenges posed by the pandemic.

The question now before the Autism and the Courts team was how to set up the Listening Tour? It was decided after a few hour-long conference calls to host between 11 and 13 justice system leaders and stakeholders along with autistic self-advocates and parents of individuals with ASD in five different geographical areas around the State. Given Pennsylvania's diversity, both demographically and geographically, the team believed a regional roundtable model would be the most effective when studying this issue. "Justice Dougherty has always been sensitive to the diversity of Pennsylvania," Witalec says. "The access to resources in Philadelphia is different from Potter County in the Northern Tier, and he wanted to set up the Roundtables in a regional way to represent that." Furthermore, the decision was also made by the stakeholders to base the regions on local media markets to help keep together communities of interest³⁷ and to focus the outreach made by Stacey and her Communications Team to local news outlets. The development team at ASERT, led by Kaitlin Koffer-Miller of the A.J. Drexel Institute of Autism, strived to achieve this by creating an interactive Zoom format that prized robust discussion amongst the panelists, the selected moderator (Kate Hooven of ASERT), and Justice Dougherty. In addition, an emphasis was placed on audience engagement through the Zoom chat and Q&A functions that in turn helped the panelists and moderators guide the discussion. Lastly, a special focus was placed on information gathering during the registration process to glean information on who was attending each forum, and its potential for widespread impact.³⁸

³⁷ Communities of interest are geographical areas and groups of people that share a common set of concerns and can include towns, counties, ethnic, racial, and economic groups.

³⁸ Information was gathered on participants county of residence and occupation.

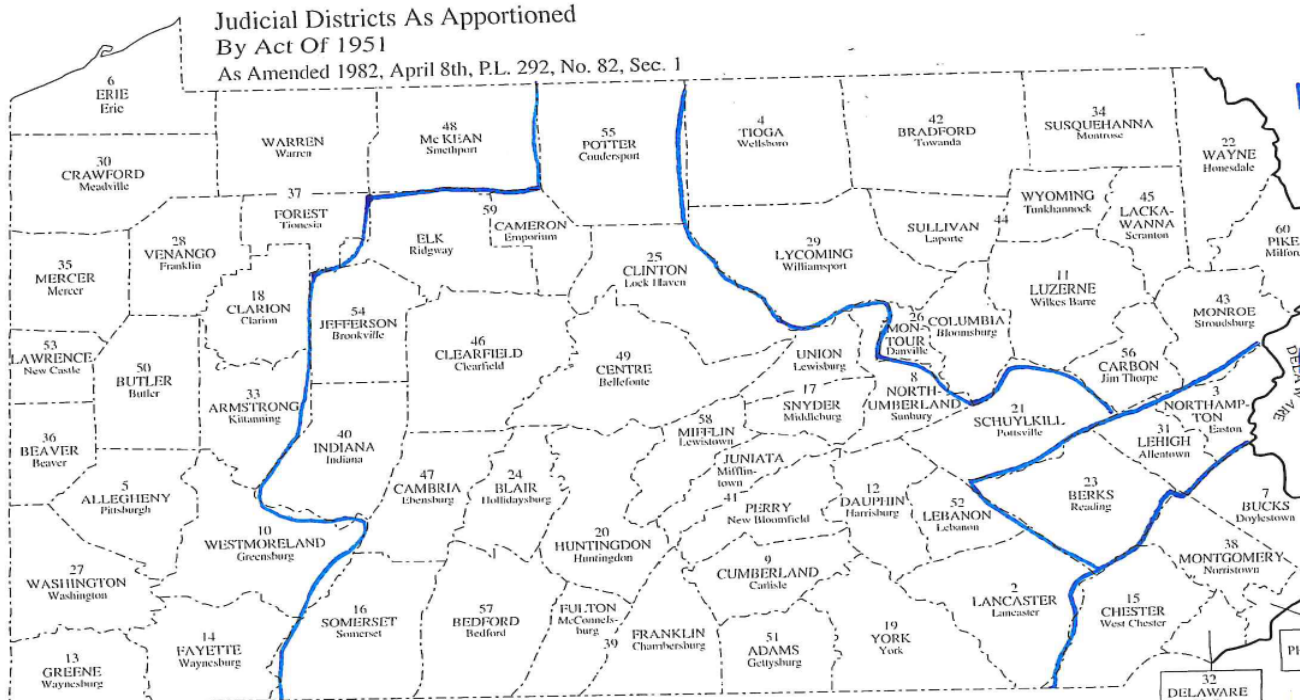


Figure 6 – This is the original document from the Autism and the Courts team showing the decided upon geographical regions of the virtual roundtables (From L to R – Western PA, Central PA, Northeastern PA, Lehigh Valley, Southeastern PA – graphic from Author)

<u>Chronological Order of the Virtual Regional Roundtables</u>	<u>Focus/Theme</u>
1. Kickoff Event - November 17, 2020	- Announce to the public this Initiative had begun.
2. Southeastern Pa – January 26, 2021	- An emphasis on urban challenges, with a focus specifically on those faced by children and families of color with ASD.
3. Lehigh Valley – February 23, 2021	- An emphasis on the opportunities for diversion for this population, and the challenges facing those with ASD in our Hispanic community in the region.
4. Central Pa – March 23, 2021	- A focus on the challenges facing our under-resourced rural families in this area of the state.
5. Northeastern Pa – April 23, 2021	- A focus on the intersection of ASD with law enforcement alongside the State Police and Scranton Police.
6. Western Pa – June 17, 2021	- An emphasis on how the intersection of the justice system affects those in Western Pennsylvania.

Kickoff Event

The Listening Tour, the motto for which was “Listen, Learn, and Educate,” started with a kickoff event on November 17, 2020. The Kickoff event was designed to create awareness with the public and the media regarding the upcoming virtual regional roundtables. Almost immediately there was widespread response to the Initiative. Most poignantly, in this nascent stage the Pittsburgh Post-Gazette, Pennsylvania’s second-largest newspaper by circulation, wrote an Editorial Board piece about the Initiative before the first event even took place, and it was a call to action/challenge to the stakeholders. “The editorial from the Pittsburgh Post-Gazette really reinforced the work that we had done up to this point. What was even more powerful about it was that it challenged everyone involved to make sure that this did not become just another Initiative that talked a good game but did not follow through with results,”³⁹ AOPC’s Director of Communications Stacey Witalec stated.

The Kickoff Event itself was a success and included the below stakeholders:

- Morgan Bathgate – Autistic Self-Advocate (Dauphin County)
- Michael Piecuch – District Attorney Snyder County
- Hon. Jennifer L. Rogers – Luzerne County Court of Common Pleas
- Hon. Kelly C. Wall – Montgomery County Court of Common Pleas
- Hon. Kevin M. Dougherty – Justice, Supreme Court of Pennsylvania
- Kate Hooven (moderator) – ASERT Collaborative

Over 100+ individuals attended the Zoom Kickoff forum, and it was an outstanding trial run that helped focus the future regional roundtables. Some highlights included Morgan Bathgate reminding the audience that “The most important voice is the individual with autism,” when she was responding to a question regarding courtroom accommodations for those with ASD. Justice Dougherty also helped close out the session by reminding the audience that no one around the country (as far as we were aware) had decided to take such a systemic look regarding Autism in the Courts. He stated, “*We are already ahead of the game in Pennsylvania with autism in the courts. Not only should we be ahead, but I want us to be the start.*”

Southeastern PA Regional Roundtable

The first Regional Roundtable occurred on January 26th, 2021, with some trepidation from the Initiative’s core team. “Our planners were unsure of how the event was going to turn out, what kind of turnout we would get, and how the large stakeholder format (14 individuals) would work on the Zoom platform,” Witalec stated. The distinguished set of justice system stakeholders who participated in the Southeastern PA virtual forum was both impressive and indicative of what was to come regarding the quality of the regional roundtable panelists.

- Hon. Kevin M. Dougherty – Justice, Supreme Court of Pennsylvania
- Regina Wall, MSS. – Director, Bureau of Autism Supports, Pennsylvania DHS
- Hon. Kelly C. Wall – Judge, Montgomery County Court of Common Pleas
- Hon. Christopher Mallios – Judge, Philadelphia Court of Common Pleas, Family Division

³⁹ The Editorial Board, Pittsburgh Post-Gazette. “Justice for all, including those with ASD” <https://www.post-gazette.com/opinion/editorials/2020/11/08/Justice-for-all-including-those-with-ASD/stories/202011030018>

- Hon. Charles Ehrlich – Judge, Philadelphia Court of Common Pleas, Criminal Division
- Hon. Sheila Woods-Skipper- Administrative Judge, Philadelphia Court of Common Pleas, Orphans Division
- Hon. Jack Stollsteimer – District Attorney, Delaware County
- Hon. Derek Green – Councilman, City of Philadelphia, and parent to an autistic child
- Officer Roz Talley – Philadelphia Police, and parent to an autistic child
- Kimberly Ali – Commissioner, Philadelphia DHS
- Jill Bowen, Ph.D. – Commissioner, Philadelphia Department of Behavioral Health and Intellectual Disability Services
- Laura Deriggi – Senior Director, Clinical Consultation – Philadelphia Department of Behavioral Health

Attendance at the event, our best of the entire Regional Roundtable Initiative, stood at 357 individuals, many of whom stayed for the entire 2-hour event. Highlights from the Southeastern PA virtual forum included Laura Deriggi of the Philadelphia Department of Behavioral Health discussing the “Services Cliff” that occurs when autistic individuals “age out of the system.”⁴⁰ She emphasized that services in both the educational and Dependency System stop at age 21, and the challenges she faces in trying to get services and placements for autistic adults. Many stakeholders used the Southeastern PA Region, home to Philadelphia and the largest communities of color in the State, to place a special focus on the urban experience of autism and the challenges of connecting those on the Spectrum to resources in a dense and high-stress environment. To further this point Justice Dougherty made a statement that encapsulated why we were doing the virtual roundtables in a regional format: *“We need to make sure there is a collaboration between all system stakeholders so that a child in Tioga County gets the same access to resources as a child in South Philadelphia.”* With great attendance, and media attention most notably by KYW⁴¹ for our Southeastern Forum, it was considered a great success and generated momentum heading into the other four regions.

Lehigh Valley Regional Roundtable

The second Regional Roundtable was focused on the three-county Lehigh Valley Region consisting of Lehigh, Northampton, and Berks counties and occurred on February 23, 2021. This region was the smallest one both geographically and population-wise. “The decision was made to allow the Lehigh Valley their own Regional Roundtable because they truly are a distinct and separate media market from the Philadelphia area (Southeastern PA Region). The Justice and Shane (the author) also wanted to make sure that we had a special focus on one of the largest if not the largest, Spanish-speaking population in Pennsylvania centered around the population centers of Reading and Allentown,” said Stacey Witalec, AOPC’s Director of Communications. In addition, due to the success and interest generated by the first Regional Roundtable in the Southeastern region, the Pennsylvania State Police reached out to the team

⁴⁰ Children are no longer able to be covered by government benefits in the Dependency and Educational Systems after the age of 21.

⁴¹ Johanson, Kristen. KYW Newsradio. “Series of Community Conversations Begins on Access to Justice for People with Autism.” Online Discussions begin on justice for people with autism, January 25, 2021. <https://www.audacy.com/kywnewsradio/news/local/online-discussions-begin-on-justice-for-people-with-autism>.

and wanted to be included in future Roundtable discussions. The Roundtable panelists from this region included:

- Hon. Kevin M. Dougherty – Justice, Supreme Court of Pennsylvania
- Regina Wall, MSS. – Director, Bureau of Autism Supports, Pennsylvania DHS
- Hon. Brian Johnson – President Judge, Lehigh County Court of Common Pleas
- David Vaida, Esq. – Bilingual Attorney, Lehigh County
- Hon. James Martin – District Attorney, Lehigh County
- Steve Luksa- First Assistant District Attorney, Lehigh County
- Brandon Sands, LPC – Director of Diversion Programs, Berks County
- Ardhika Aziz – Self Advocate
- Marina Ermold – Parent Advocate, Lehigh County
- Drew Taylor – Mental Health Professional, Lehigh County
- Lt. Adam Reed – Pennsylvania State Police
- Capt. Joanne Reed – Pennsylvania State Police
- Capt. Christopher King – Pennsylvania State Police

The Lehigh Valley event, attracting 100+ individuals, exceeded expectations as well. It was a much more polished virtual event with robust discussion amongst the stakeholders and the audience during the Q&A portion compared to the first Regional Roundtable a month prior. Some highlights of the Roundtable included hearing Lehigh County District Attorney Jim Martin and his First Assistant Steve Luksa speak about their cutting-edge collaboration between criminal justice stakeholders called Team MISA. Team MISA stands for “Mental Illness Substance Abuse” wherein stakeholders meet monthly to try to divert individuals with those issues out of traditional prosecution and into diversionary programs. Attorney David Vaida also gave very poignant reminders about the challenges that individuals who speak English as a second language have, and how those difficulties could be amplified if the individual has ASD. Brandon Sands, the Director of Diversionary Programs in Berks County answered best when asked by a member of the audience what the stakeholders gathered could do to help create better outcomes for those with ASD and he said, “*Collaboration, continuity, and communication.*” That is the key to any kind of successful system-wide public sector initiative, and it rings true when looking at the intersection of autism and the courts.

Central PA Regional Roundtable

The third Regional Roundtable, the largest by geographic size, occurred on March 23, 2021. Justice Dougherty wanted a forum that had a special focus on the challenges faced by not just more populous areas of the region like Harrisburg, York, or Lancaster but also the large rural population in Central Pennsylvania. It was obvious to all Initiative planners that there was an immediate interest in the Central Pennsylvania Roundtable by local media and potential attendees. An article, originally written for the York Dispatch, and subsequently picked up by the Associated Press regarding the Initiative and our Roundtables, helped spread the word about the work that we were doing in this area.⁴² “What was fascinating about the Associated Press article is how quickly it spread not just through traditional media outlets, but also on

⁴² The Associated Press. Scolforo, Evans Liz. “Pa. Supreme Court Justice Eyes Reforms to Serve Those on Autism Spectrum.” <https://www.pennlive.com/news/2021/03/pa-supreme-court-justice-eyes-reforms-to-serve-those-on-autism-spectrum.html>

social media. As of the date this Capstone was written, the article was shared on Facebook alone over 1,000 times.” Witalec stated. There was also a robust local cable news presence for the Central PA Roundtable both leading up to the event and after with segments airing on all three major local news networks.⁴³ Panelists for the Central PA Regional Roundtable included:

- Hon. Kevin M. Dougherty – Justice, Supreme Court of Pennsylvania
- Regina Wall, MSS. – Director, Bureau of Autism Supports, Pennsylvania DHS
- Hon. Stephen Minor – President Judge, Potter County Court of Common Pleas, parent of an autistic child
- Hon. John Foradora – President Judge, Jefferson County Court of Common Pleas
- Hon Paula Aigner – Magisterial District Judge, Blair County
- Hon. Michael Piecuch – District Attorney, Snyder County
- Dr. Lucas Malishchak – Director of Psychology for the PA Department of Corrections
- Tom Hassell – Self-Advocate, Cumberland County
- Kylie Stauffer – Parent Advocate, Cumberland County
- Scott Shea – Deputy Chief Juvenile Probation Officer, Cumberland County
- Laval Miller-Wilson – Executive Director, Pennsylvania Health Law Project
- Dr. Ashley Yinger – Dauphin County Co-Responder Program, Dauphin County District Attorney’s Office
- Lt. Adam Reed – Pennsylvania State Police

The Central PA Regional Roundtable was attended by 247 individuals and included a great discussion by both the panelists and the audience during the Q&A portion. Highlights included the revelation that President Judge Stephen Minor of Potter County, a rural county in the Northern Tier of the state, had to drive 2+ hours to make sure that his autistic child had the proper services when he was growing up. He made the powerful statement, “Imagine if this is a poor rural family in my county without the means or time to travel that I have, what are we to do then?” District Attorney Mike Piecuch of Snyder County in his closing remarks reminded the audience and his fellow panelists that, *“Accountability takes a lot of different forms, and it doesn’t necessarily have to end up with a criminal conviction.”* These words were even more powerful coming from the Chief Law Enforcement Officer of his county and got at the core of what this Initiative was trying to achieve for this population.

Northeastern PA Regional Roundtable

The fourth Regional Roundtable, centered on the Scranton/Wilkes-Barre media market, occurred on April 27, 2021. Justice Dougherty wanted this region to have more of a focus on the law enforcement aspect of autism and the courts, and it featured both State Police Leadership and the Chief of Police of Scranton, PA. Other panelists included:

- Hon. Kevin M. Dougherty – Justice, Supreme Court of Pennsylvania
- Regina Wall, MSS. – Director, Bureau of Autism Supports, Pennsylvania DHS
- Hon. Jennifer Rogers – Judge, Luzerne County Court of Common Pleas

⁴³ Owens, Dennis. “Pa. Supreme Court Justice Brings Autism Awareness to State Courts, Stakeholders.” ABC27, June 28, 2021. <https://www.abc27.com/news/this-week-in-pennsylvania/pa-supreme-court-justice-brings-autism-awareness-to-state-courts-stakeholders/>

- Hon. Vito Geroulo – Judge, Lackawanna County Court of Common Pleas
- Hon. Bonnie Carney – Magisterial District Judge, Wayne County
- Hon. Samuel Sanguedolce – District Attorney, Luzerne County
- Robert Moran, Esq. – Attorney, Lackawanna County
- David Knauss – Self Advocate
- Jennifer Williams – Deputy Mental Health Administrator, Carbon-Monroe-Pike Counties
- Shelly Mattie – Parent Advocate, Lycoming County
- Leonard Namoitka – Chief of Police, City of Scranton, PA
- Lt. Adam Reed – Pennsylvania State Police
- Capt. Christopher King – Pennsylvania State Police

Attendance at the Northeastern Regional Roundtable was a robust 236 individuals, and it also received media attention from local newspapers and cable news networks. There were two separate instances that made this roundtable poignant. Chief of Police Namoitka of Scranton, PA spoke about how when they answer calls in many mental health situations, they have embedded mental health professionals within the police department. He had seen firsthand how these types of interactions have helped create better outcomes for those with intellectual disabilities and autism when they encounter law enforcement. In addition, the parent advocate for the Northeastern Regional Roundtable made one of the more powerful quotes explaining the importance of this work and the impact that this intersection of ASD and the justice system had on her family:

“In my son’s case, here’s this handsome, strong kid that ‘looks normal.’ Even though we were telling the officers (state police) ‘he’s scared, he has autism’ he was tased. Twice. That left an incredible emotional impact on him because when he is not in an autistic meltdown, he is the most kind, sensitive, ultimate rule-following person you’d ever meet. So when I say there needs to be a separate protocol, there truly does. If there is a parent or support staff there, they need to be allowed to explain and advocate for their child.” Shelly Mattie, Parent Advocate, Lycoming County

Western PA Regional Roundtable

After the core planning team took some time off to regroup, the fifth and final Regional Roundtable focused on Western Pennsylvania and took place on June 17, 2021. With Allegheny County, the second-largest population center in the state anchoring this geographical region and media market, the focus was on what specific challenges those in Western Pennsylvania faced when trying to create just outcomes for those with ASD. The planners were pleased to have State Representative Jessica Benham participate, who as the first openly autistic state lawmaker to win election in Pennsylvania, offered a valuable perspective.⁴⁴ Other panelists included:

- Hon Kevin M. Dougherty – Justice, Pennsylvania Supreme Court
- Regina Wall, MSS. – Director, Bureau of Autism Supports, Pennsylvania DHS
- Hon. William Ward (ret.) – Former Judge, Allegheny County Court of Common Pleas

⁴⁴ Kidd, David, “A Young Autistic Pennsylvania Lawmaker Overcomes the Odds.” *Governing*. April 26, 2022. <https://www.governing.com/now/a-young-autistic-pennsylvania-lawmaker-overcomes-the-odds.html>

- Hon. Susan Strohmeier – Magisterial District Judge, Erie County
- Tamara Siegert, Esq. – Allegheny County
- Hon. Jessica Benham – State Representative, HD-36 (D)
- Sandra Moore, MSW – Director, Office of Children and Families in the Courts, AOPC
- Lu Randall – President, Autism Connection of PA, Allegheny County, Parent Advocate
- Janet M. Pawlowski – Licensed psychologist, Erie County
- Michelle Middlemiss – Self-Advocate
- Officer Cristyn Zett – Commander, Pittsburgh Police
- Lt. Adam Reed – State Police
- Capt. Joanne Reed – State Police
- Cap. Christopher King – State Police

There was a vigorous discussion during the event, attended by 236 individuals, regarding autism and the justice system. Some highlights included discussion around creating a specialized diversionary court, similar to the Mental Health Courts, for those on the spectrum. Justice Dougherty helped wrap up the final Regional Roundtable with a quote and call to action.

“We have to do better. We’re a justice system. The operative word is just.” Justice Kevin M. Dougherty

Roundtables Recapped

“The Roundtables turned out fantastic, exceeded expectations, and showed that there is an appetite out there for this. With technology there were challenges, but the medium allowed more people to attend than in person.” Stacey Witalec, Director of Communications at the AOPC stated. Kaitlin Koffer-Miller, MPH, Director of Policy Impact at the A.J. Drexel Institute of Autism and one of the integral planners of the Regional Roundtables added, “I think the Roundtables turned out very well. Including justice professionals alongside those with lived experience, including family members and autistic individuals, **provided an insight into the justice landscape across Pennsylvania that I don’t know has ever been seen publicly.**”

The Regional Roundtables by the Numbers:

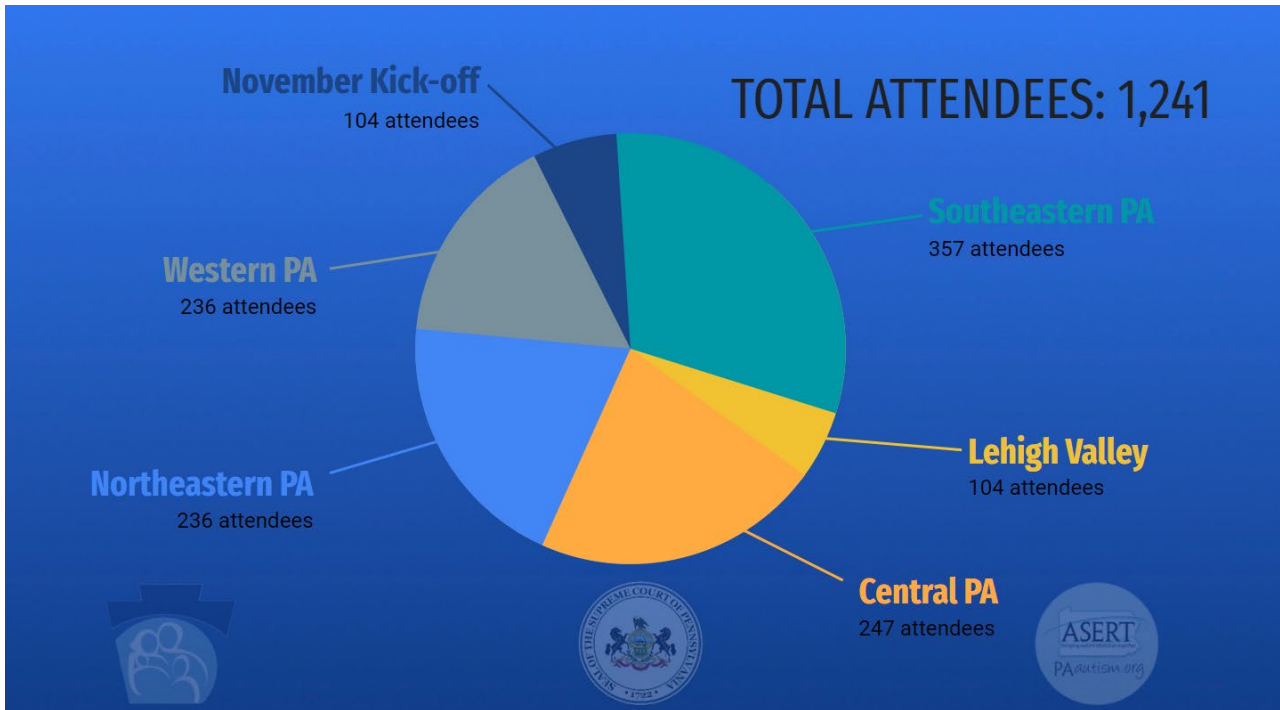


Figure 7 - Graphic showing the total attendees by regional roundtable (graphic by author)

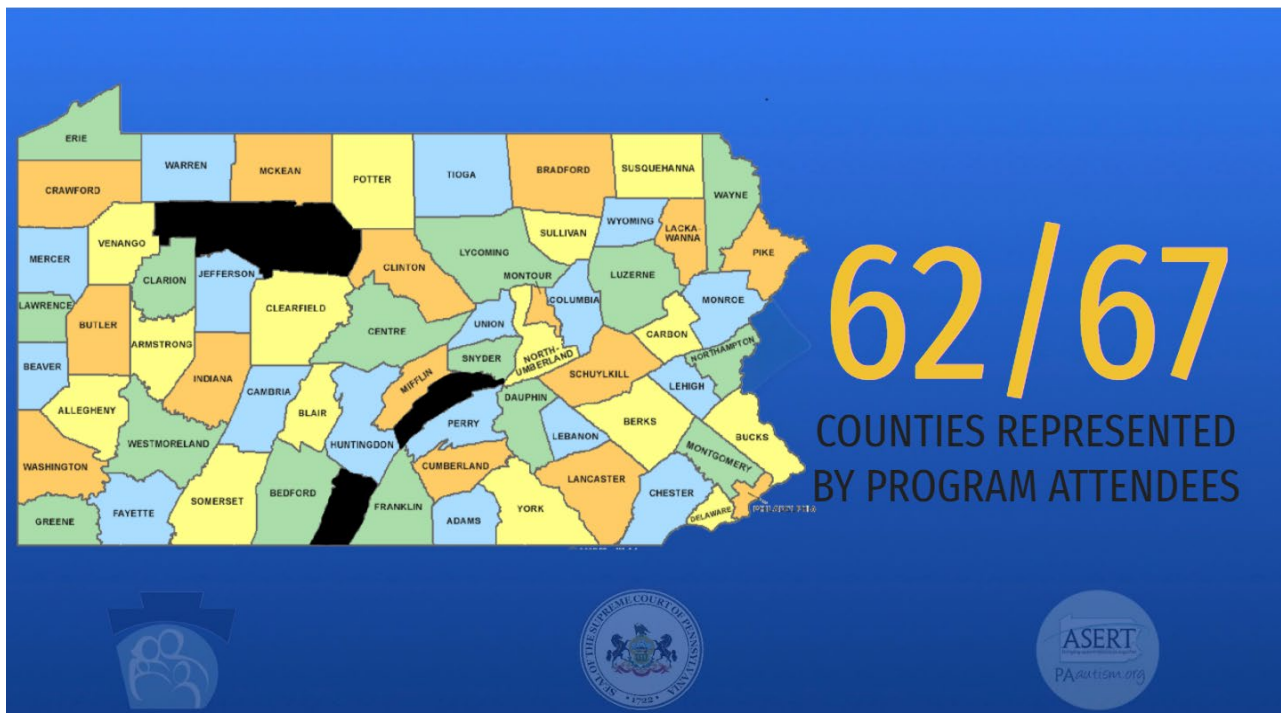


Figure 8 - Graphic showing the counties represented by attendees (graphic by author)

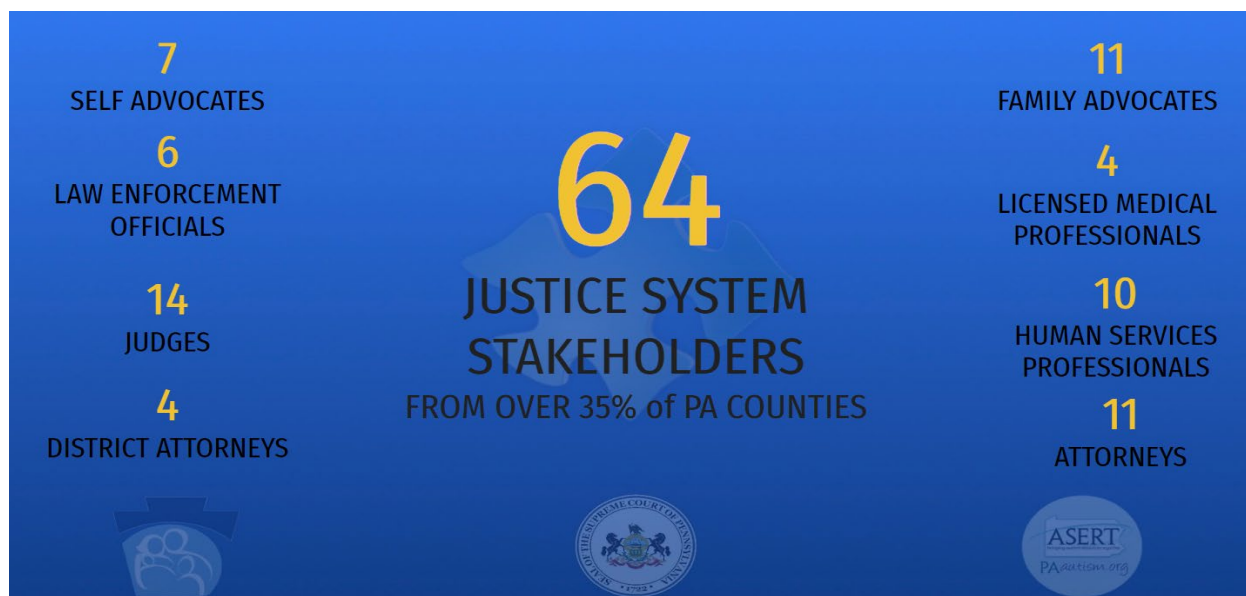


Figure 8 – Graphic showing each regional roundtable panelist by profession (graphic by author)

Stacey Witalec concluded her observations on the Roundtables with this thought. *“Since I have been part of the Court System, as its spokesperson, I have not seen a public-facing initiative that has gotten so much more positive attention than the Regional Roundtables and the Autism and the Courts Initiative in general. With over 40+ unique articles written about it, and coverage by 10 local news segments across Pennsylvania, neighboring states, and the national Associated Press it showed there is a huge appetite and need for this type of work, and much more to be done in this space.”*

Section 4 – Stakeholder Summit

We have momentum, now what?

Unlike many well-meaning public sector Initiatives our problem was not one of why our judicial education and Regional Roundtables had not created any traction. Instead, our problem was deciding where to focus the enormous amount of momentum we had? To develop next steps, Justice Dougherty and I decided to reconvene our core stakeholder group that helped bring this Initiative to this point to figure out the next steps. These planners included:

- Hon. Kevin M. Dougherty – Justice, Pennsylvania Supreme Court
- Hon. Dennis M. O’Brien – Former Speaker, Pennsylvania House of Representatives
- Shane Carey (author) – Chief Administrative Aide, Chambers of Justice Dougherty
- Stacey Witalec – Director of Communications, AOPC
- Sandra Moore, MSW. – Director of the Office of Children and Families in the Court, AOPC
- Regina Wall, MSS. – Director, Bureau of Autism Supports, Pennsylvania DHS
- Kaitlin Koffer-Miller - Director, Policy Impact at A.J. Drexel Institute of Autism
- Kimberly Bathgate – Asst. Director of Communications, AOPC
- Dr. Stephen Feiler – Director of Judicial Education, AOPC
- Kathy Hooven – ASERT Collaborative

In the month leading up to the Summit, I along with my summer intern, Victoria Rose Conroy of the University of Pennsylvania, spent hours reviewing the Judicial Education recordings and the six Regional Roundtables. We also compiled statistics on attendance, media coverage, and highlights/common themes for all the Initiative’s events up to that point. It was arduous and at times tedious work, but the highlights and statistics compiled helped create a narrative for the groundbreaking work that had been done so far. Most importantly, this look back would help guide our decision-makers on where to take the Initiative next.

Common Themes

A 45-slide PowerPoint presentation depicting the findings, highlights, and possible next steps for the Initiative was developed. The first section dealt with the statistics and highlights regarding the Initiative’s Judicial Education Session, the Regional Roundtables, and media coverage with highlight videos showcasing the latter two. Many of these statistics regarding the Initiative’s successes have been mentioned in previous sections. The second part of the Summit presentation centered around common themes that arose multiple times by either attendees of the roundtables, panelists, or judges during the Q&A at the training. Those common themes are listed below and organized into four categories.

- Early Disclosure
 - Disclosing an ASD in advance to Judges/Lawyers if possible
 - Requesting a pre-trial conference or sidebar with the Judge to discuss accommodations for the individual with ASD

- Notifying justice system stakeholders through a collaboration like Lehigh County's Team MISA, or a premise alert/sticker/mark like the Philadelphia and Pennsylvania State Police use for individuals with ASD within their jurisdiction
- Asking "do you have autism" on intake/processing forms
- Awareness
 - Understanding the sensory processing disorders/sound sensitivity of those with ASD
 - Issuing autism cards/benchbooks to judges, lawyers, and court staff
 - Understanding the intersection between racism and autism
 - Training justice system stakeholders to recognize signs of ASD or non-verbal cues
- Education
 - Identifying, training, and educating all gatekeepers into the criminal justice system
 - Creating mandatory sensitivity and implicit bias training for justice system stakeholders
 - Stressing the importance of self-advocates being part of the learning process
 - Emphasizing that Justice System stakeholders must be open and willing to learn
 - Educating on how to best support and communicate with people on the Spectrum
- Further Action
 - Bringing children with ASD to meet with police officers to create mutual understanding and respect.
 - Preparing individuals with ASD thoroughly on what they can expect before they enter the courthouse
 - Knowing where to find resources and how to access them
 - Deferring to specialized diversionary courts, judges, and attorneys

As part of the presentation, I further synthesized the common themes into five simple items that came up most frequently throughout the Listening Tour or held the most promise for actionable change within the court system.

- The inclusion of Courtroom Adaptability/Comfort Dogs.
 - This was an item that came up repeatedly at almost every Initiative event. There is a glaring need and desire by the autism community and their advocates to make the courtroom experience more inclusive and just for those on the spectrum. These could be simple things like conducting proceedings virtually when possible instead of physically in the courtroom. In addition, courtroom adjustments like the dimming of lights, loud fans, and HVAC systems, the addition of textured chairs, and positioning of blinds could be helpful. There was also a call to expand the court system's very successful comfort dog

program (30/67 counties have one) if the individual with ASD was in fact comfortable and responded well to domestic pets.

- The importance of streamlining regional resources.
 - How do the court and justice system connect individuals with ASD to the existing services in their specific county or region? There is a plethora of autism service providers and other resources specific to most counties across the Commonwealth. How can justice system leaders on a statewide and countywide level work collaboratively to connect individuals to these community-based services instead of a dependency placement, county correctional facility, juvenile detention center, or some other negative outcome for an individual with ASD?
- The possibility of having an identifying marker.
 - The Pennsylvania State Police and the Philadelphia Police have programs they called the Yellow Dot Program and the Premise Alert System. The yellow dot program exists for families that have an individual with ASD or an Intellectual Disability, and involves placing a large yellow dot on the back of the car so that when they are pulled over by the State Police the responding officer is aware that an individual has ASD in the vehicle. The Premise Alert System in Philadelphia is a program wherein an individual or their family can call their local police district or 911 call center and register a member of their family as someone with ASD or an intellectual disability. Then, when responding to a call first responders will be informed that the household they are heading to has an inhabitant with one of the intellectual disabilities mentioned above.
 - Furthermore, there was discussion that possibly someone with ASD could wear a wristband or signifying clothing item so that individuals during and prior to court proceedings would know that they were dealing with someone on the spectrum. To avoid any kind of stigma for the individual or their family this identifying marker would need to be agreed upon by all parties.
- An emphasis on greater Department of Corrections collaboration.
 - During our Central Pennsylvania Regional Roundtable, it was disclosed by Dr. Lucas Malishchak, Director of the Psychology Office of the Pennsylvania Department of Corrections, that only 17 inmates out of 38,000 in state custody had been diagnosed with autism. He readily admitted this was a drastic undercount.⁴⁵ If statistics are correct that 1 in 54 individuals have autism (latest CDC numbers) and these individuals are 7x's more likely to encounter the justice system, the number reported by Dr. Malishchak is most likely drastically

⁴⁵ Dr. Malishchak has since partnered with the Bureau of Autism at the Pennsylvania Department of Human Services to create an autism specific wing at SCI-Albion in Northwest Pennsylvania, which is groundbreaking in and of itself.

underrepresented (most likely the number would be somewhere in the low thousands).

- Additionally, Westmoreland County President Judge Rita Donovan Hathaway, just by virtue of being invited to participate in the Western Pennsylvania Regional Roundtable panel, created a box on the county correctional intake forms denoting if an individual had ASD. A simple adjustment like that, made on a statewide level, could help create awareness and reform on a larger scale.
- The inclusion of peer advocates.
 - The Philadelphia Autism Project's Community Autism Peer Support Program (CAPS), mentioned during the Southeastern Pennsylvania Regional Roundtable, is a peer support group in Philadelphia. The program consists of individuals with ASD mentoring other individuals with ASD who are dealing with difficulties integrating into society. The thought was raised multiple times about expanding a version of the CAPS program into the courts to help create just outcomes for those with ASD who are court-involved as victims of crime, witnesses, jurors, or even individuals themselves accused of crimes by providing peer level guidance to all involved with the case.⁴⁶

Next Steps

Despite the animated and passionate discussion, there was no consensus on the day of the Summit on where next to direct the energy and momentum of the Initiative. My thought was to create a large Taskforce made up of individuals from across the justice system modeled after our Regional Roundtables to take a system-wide review of the issue, but that was tabled due to funding and staffing questions for such a large group. Other individuals present wanted to create a robust judicial education curriculum that continually updated and educated members of the judiciary around the intersection of autism and the courts, and others wanted to focus on a specific area of the court system and create targeted reform before building from there. These decisions, regarding the direction of this first in the nation Initiative with limitless potential that had already achieved so much, would be made in the weeks to come.

⁴⁶ This most likely will become an actual initiative. The A.J. Drexel Institute of Autism has reached out to the Autism in the Courts Team about possibly piloting a peer support program for those with ASD in Philadelphia over the coming months.

Section 5 - Autism and the Courts - Dependency Taskforce

In the weeks following the Stakeholder Summit in July of 2021 many conversations were had between Justice Dougherty and myself regarding the direction of the Initiative. “There was a feeling that the natural progression of this ‘movement,’ as it had become around Autism and the Courts, was to start creating policy reform around the issue,” Justice Dougherty stated. “Anyone that knows me understands that I do not put my time and energy into something that could be seen as just another government initiative that ends up being in some binder on some dusty shelf never to be seen or heard from again. We first educated individuals in a systemic way in the judiciary, followed that by going out in the community through our Regional Roundtables to find out more about how this issue was playing out on the local level, and now it was time to take what we learned and implement it through targeted action. So that is when we decided to turn to Sandy Moore and OCFC,” Dougherty said.

What is the Office of Children and Family in the Courts (OCFC)?

The Office of Children and Family in the Courts was founded by current Chief Justice Baer of the Supreme Court of Pennsylvania in 2004 as an independent office within the Administrative Office of Pennsylvania Courts (AOPC). Then-Justice Baer, an illustrious former Allegheny County Family Court Administrative Judge before his ascension to the Supreme Court, wanted to streamline the balkanized Dependency Court System in Pennsylvania similar to what he had done in Allegheny County. To assist him in this endeavor he created the Children’s Roundtable Initiative. Per the OCFC website,⁴⁷ the Children’s Roundtable Initiative is “comprised of a three-tiered structure that allows for effective administration and communication between Local Children’s Roundtables, Leadership Roundtables, and the Pennsylvania State Roundtable.” The goal of the Children’s Roundtable Initiative is to provide “Families for Children” and to ensure that every child coming through the Dependency/Child Welfare System in Pennsylvania grows up in a safe, nurturing, and permanent family. (ocfcpacourts.us)

The Local, Leadership, and the Pennsylvania State Roundtables all share the same structure on different tiers or levels. The first tier includes local Children’s Roundtables. These local groups are chaired by the County’s lead Dependency Judge and the Child Welfare Administrator. Other members of the local Children’s Roundtables include county solicitors, guardians ad litem⁴⁸, county juvenile probation, service providers, law enforcement, parent attorneys, hearing officers, and other system leaders that vary by county. Local Children’s Roundtables meet as often as local need dictates. At the second tier are seven Leadership Roundtables. These groups are organized by county size and meet two times per year. They include the county lead judge, child welfare administrator, and one additional local Children’s Roundtable member. The final tier contains the State Roundtable. The group meets one time per year and includes Leadership Roundtable co-chairpersons, workgroup leaders, and content experts. The State Roundtable is co-chaired by Justice Kevin Dougherty, DHS Office of Children, Youth, and Families Deputy Secretary with support from the OCFC Director, Sandra (Sandy) Moore. This group is tasked

⁴⁷“Mission and Guiding Principles.” Office of Children Families in the Courts. Accessed March 29, 2022. <https://ocfcpacourts.us/childrens-roundtable-initiative/state-roundtable-workgroupscommittees/mission-and-guiding-principles/>.

⁴⁸ A “GAL” is appointed by the court to advocate for a child that has been removed from their homes because of alleged abuse, abandonment, or neglect.

with setting the priorities for all Dependency Court Improvement activities. Since its inception, the Children’s Roundtable Structure has experienced remarkable success. This success includes the safe reduction of children placed in foster care (from 21,000 in 2006 to 13,000 in 2022), the expansion of kinship care (from 20% in 2006 to 44% in 2022), and the safe reduction of group care (from 16% in 2006 to 10% in 2022). In addition, the structure has created extensive judicial and attorney education and innovative practices including the Permanency Practice Initiative, Family Group Decision Making, and the Family Engagement Initiative.⁴⁹

“The Children’s Roundtable structure is a really solid one that is tied to the local community with an existing state roundtable tasked with giving direction and feedback back down to the local roundtables,” stated Sandra (Sandy) Moore, Director of OCFC. “The Roundtable structure also allows our smaller to mid-sized counties that often have great ideas but lack the resources to get them out on a statewide level the same level playing field as our largest counties, and I believe that is why OCFC has become so successful.”

Why start targeted reforms with OCFC and the Dependency System?

“I was present at the inception of OCFC alongside then-Justice Baer when I was the Administrative Judge of Family Court,” Justice Dougherty said. “I had a front-row seat to the success it created over the years, and it only made sense to turn to their proven track record in creating reform when I wanted to move in that direction with the Initiative. Their Children’s Roundtable structure was already in existence and would be able to roll out whatever reforms we created much quicker than creating something from scratch. And what better place to start making the court system and justice system more inclusive for those with ASD than the vulnerable children and families of our child welfare system in Pennsylvania with the hope that it would serve as a template for the other divisions such as criminal, civil, juvenile delinquency, and orphans.” He continued, “Lastly, since Chief Justice Baer has become the head of the Supreme Court and the judicial branch in April of 2021, I had become the new liaison between the Supreme Court and OCFC. It was a natural progression,” Dougherty stated.

Additionally, OCFC Director Sandy Moore had been part of the Initiative since the Western Pennsylvania Roundtable in June of 2021 and had been laying the groundwork for what would come next. “In preparation for the Stakeholder Summit I had circulated a survey to our Dependency Judges to ask them if autism in their courtrooms was an issue. I was completely blown away by the response. Over 80% of judge respondents had experienced individuals with ASD recently in their courtrooms and were interested in strategies to help create better outcomes for children and their families. Additionally, our Dependency Court judges were very impacted by your Judicial Education Training back at the Trial Judges Conference in 2020. So much so, that they added an ASD chapter to our Dependency Benchbook Resource Companion addressing it, so I knew coming into this process that the interest and the need were there,” Moore stated.

⁴⁹“Organizational Structure.” Office of Children & Families in the Courts. Accessed April 2, 2022. <https://ocfcpacourts.us/childrens-roundtable>

“When it was decided by the Justice, you (the author), and me to create the Taskforce to address this issue of Autism in the Dependency System we knew right away that we wanted the entire state represented. Small counties, mid-sized counties, and large counties all over the Commonwealth. Included and anchoring this work would be our Judges that do just Dependency work (in the larger counties) and judges that do multiple dockets (in the small to mid-sized counties) so that this issue could set the foundation for the Initiative’s future work. Lastly, we needed the experts in Autism and Human Services including the Bureau of Autism, Children and Youth, the Office of Mental Health and Substance Abuse at Pennsylvania DHS, county child welfare administrators, and legal advocates to help us eventually implement this work throughout the Commonwealth,” Moore stated. She continued, “Our primary goal within OCFC is to make the Dependency System experience a more inclusive, understanding, and helpful one. Our Taskforce’s goal was to figure out how we do that for children and families with ASD.”

“In my experience, the best way to create an effective Taskforce like this was to get buy-in from the start. This is best achieved by having it consist of members who want to be there,” Moore stated. Following that line of thought, it was decided to send a mass email throughout the various Leadership Roundtables to find out who wanted to serve on the Taskforce, and there was a strong response. After clearing the individuals with Justice Dougherty, the Taskforce members who were selected were as follows:

- Judges:
 - Margaret T. Murphy, Administrative Judge, Family Division, Court of Common Pleas of Philadelphia County
 - Hugh McGough, Judge, Court of Common Pleas of Allegheny County
 - Jennifer Rogers, Judge, Court of Common Pleas of Luzerne County
 - Mitchell Shahan, Judge, Court of Common Pleas of Beaver County
 - Ryan Tira, Judge, Court of Common Pleas of Lycoming County
 - Linda Cordaro, Judge, Court of Common Pleas of Fayette County
 - Maureen Skerda, President Judge, Court of Common Pleas of Forest and Warren Counties
 - Michael Sholley, President Judge, Court of Common Pleas of Snyder and Union Counties
 - Stephen Minor, President Judge, Court of Common Pleas of Potter County
- Hearing Officers:
 - Kate Lawrence, Esq., Juvenile Court Hearing Officer, Cumberland County
- County CYS County Directors:
 - Crystal Natan, Executive Director, Lancaster County Children & Youth Social Services Agency
 - Kerri Browning, Deputy Director, Department of Human Services, Office of Youth & Family Services Lackawanna County
 - Thomas Patterson, Director, Potter County Children & Youth Services

- Jennifer Napp Evans, Director, Snyder County Children, and Youth Services⁴⁰
- Attorneys:
 - Cathy Volponi, Esq., Director, Allegheny Bar Association, Juvenile Court Project
 - Kerith Strano Taylor, Esq., Jefferson County Guardian ad Litem
 - Heath Brosius, Esq., Snyder and Union Counties Guardian ad Litem
- State Partners:
 - Rick Steele, Executive Director, Juvenile Court Judges' Commission
 - Michele Walsh, Executive Assistant to Deputy Secretary, Office of Children, Youth, and Families, Pennsylvania Department of Human Services
 - Scott Talley, Director, Bureau of Children's Behavioral Health Services, Office of Mental Health and Substance Abuse Services
 - Nina Wall, Director, Bureau of Supports for Autism and Special Populations, Pennsylvania Department of Human Services
 - Mike Byers, Director, Pennsylvania Child Welfare Resource Center, University of Pittsburgh, School of Social Work
 - Kate Hooven, Justice Project Coordinator, ASERT
 - Kaitlin Koffer-Miller, AJ Drexel Institute of Autism, Director of Special Projects, ASERT
- Supreme Court, AOPC, OCFC:
 - Hon. Kevin M. Dougherty, Justice, Supreme Court of Pennsylvania
 - Shane Carey, Chief Administrative Aide, Chambers of Justice Dougherty
 - Sandy Moore, Director, OCFC
 - Christy Stanek, Judicial Analyst, OCFC
 - Jennifer Doyle, Judicial Analyst, OCFC
 - Elke Moyer, Administrative Associate/Graphic Designer, OCFC
 - Stacey Witalec, Communications Director, AOPC
 - Kim Bathgate, Assistant Director of Communications, AOPC

It should be noted that several Taskforce members have lived experience with ASD, either through their own children, domestic partners, other relatives, or close personal friends. In addition, four Taskforce judges are either President or Administrative Judges which means they set Judicial District policy and practice expectations. All nine judges oversee judicial proceedings other than dependency cases. Seven of the Judges oversee criminal matters. The selection of these judges was purposeful, as what they learned for dependency court proceedings could likely be transferable to criminal and civil matters.

The Work of the Taskforce

Prior to the first meeting, multiple decisions were made. It was decided that the Taskforce would meet monthly for one and one-half hours. These meetings would initially occur virtually. The Taskforce's mission of reform would include the development of court, agency, and

community strategies that make the experience of individuals with ASD more positive, helpful, and supportive. The only Taskforce membership pre-requisites were a willingness to create better outcomes for this population, to learn and be creative, and to attend all meetings. The meetings were designed and structured in a way that continuously built on each other while covering different facets of autism in society and the Dependency court system in Pennsylvania. The virtual meetings would culminate at the end of March 2022 with an in-person Taskforce Summit. During the Summit, members would spend nearly two full days translating the knowledge from the previous meetings and the Initiative, in general, into Dependency System reforms.

Kickoff Meeting, 11/9/2021

After extensive preparation by the core planning group of the Taskforce,⁵⁰ the first virtual “kickoff” meeting of the Taskforce occurred in November. This meeting was focused on providing the Taskforce Members, some of whom knew nothing about the autism spectrum, an introduction to ASD and how it has interacted with the Justice System. Experts were brought in from the Bureau of Autism, ASERT, and the AJ Drexel Institute of Autism to present. As the meeting concluded, Taskforce Members were given a homework assignment. Members were asked to identify Autism services and resources in their counties, providing the information to OCFC staff prior to the next Taskforce meeting.

Second Meeting, 12/15/2021

The second meeting focused on more in-depth information for Taskforce members on how ASD interacted with the justice system. Additionally, a focus was placed on what local resources each Taskforce members had found in their counties the month before which is illustrated on the next page. It should be noted that these county-level resources were found in a very short period by the Taskforce members, and it showed the potential for a more comprehensive look into connecting at-risk and vulnerable children with resources in their county.

⁵⁰ The core planning group of the Taskforce consisted of Sandy Moore, Christy Stanek, Jennifer Doyle, from OCFC and the author.

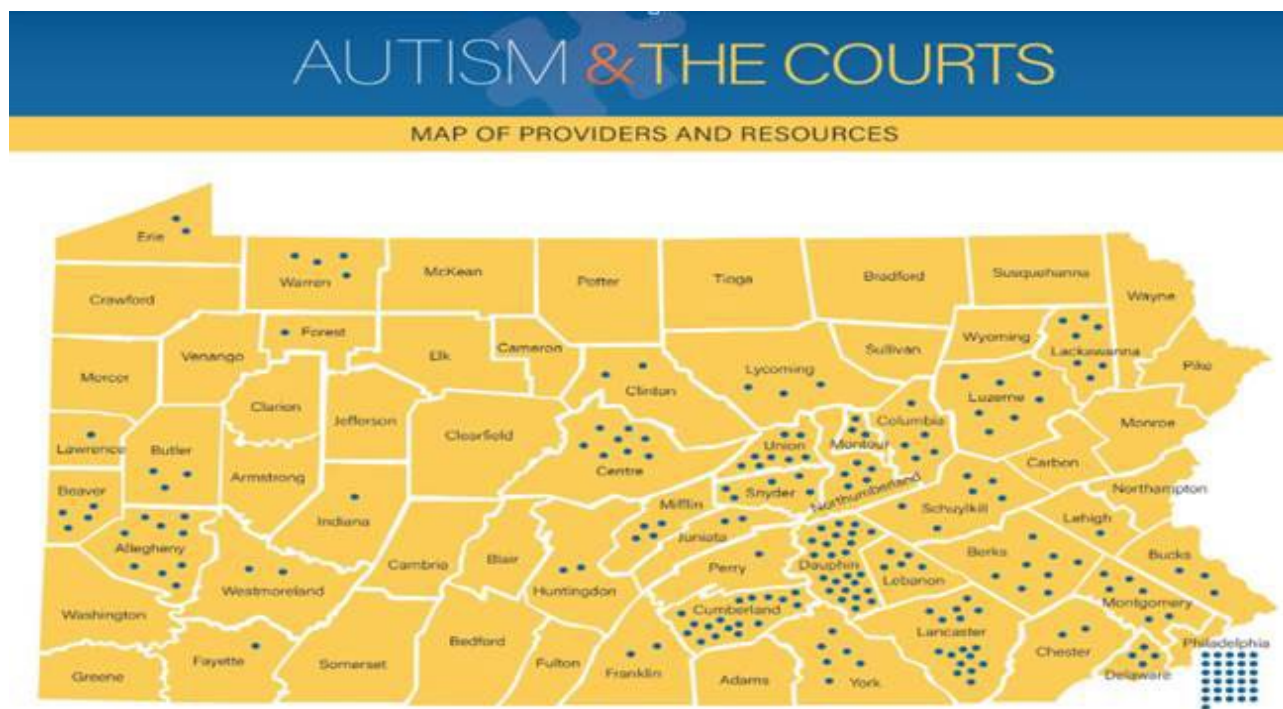


Figure 9 - Graphic created for Taskforce Members showing the results of their autism service provider search (each dot representing a provider) - (graphic credit, Gretchen Wilson AOPC and Jennifer Doyle OCFC)

Third Meeting, 1/19/2022

This meeting focused on evaluations, services, and support available for those with ASD in Pennsylvania's education system. The information was presented by Stephanie Hoesly, M.Ed., BCBA of the Intermediate Unit 1: Fayette, Greene, and Washington Counties in Southwestern Pennsylvania.⁵¹ Ms. Hoesly spent the time educating the Taskforce on what the Department of Education and the local school districts in their respective counties' responsibility was to the child with autism, and what the courts could do to assist these children and families.

Fourth Meeting, 2/18/2022

The fourth meeting focused on the diagnosis of those with ASD throughout Pennsylvania. Information was presented by two medical experts qualified to make those diagnoses, Dr. Scott Myers, MD of Geisinger's Autism and Developmental Medicine Institute, and Dr. Cora Taylor, Ph.D., Clinical Psychologist and Assistant Professor at Geisinger Health. In addition, the Doctors spoke about the severe waitlists (1 to 2 years) for children trying to receive the diagnosis, and what if anything the Court or a judge could do about it. Finally, the doctors emphasized the need to gain access to services rather than waiting for the diagnosis if a child's development was compromised.

⁵¹ In Pennsylvania, intermediate units are regional educational service agencies, established by the Pennsylvania General Assembly. Intermediate units are public entities and serve a given geographic area's educational needs and function as a step of organization above that of a public school district but below that of the Pennsylvania Department of Education. (www.pattan.net)

Taskforce Summit, 3/29/22 – 3/31/22

The Taskforce Summit occurred at the end of March 2022 . Taskforce members from around the state convened at Normandy Farms Hotel and Conference Center in Blue Bell, PA. After the success of the foundational virtual meetings leading up to the Summit the members were excited to get to work. Throughout the Summit, Taskforce Members would listen to three different panels. The first, led by renowned Autism expert Dr. Wendy Ross,⁵² focused on neurodiversity, environmental awareness/courtroom adjustments, and resources/strategies for creating inclusive environments for those with ASD. The second panel included a parent and founder of an autism school, a Philadelphia Police Officer and mother of an autistic daughter, and an individual on the autism spectrum who was also a parent. Each panel member gave a personal perspective on this Taskforce’s work. The third panel included state-level Human services agencies. This group spoke about the “Services Cliff” that occurs when a child ages out of the educational or dependency system. The latter two panels were facilitated by Christy Stanek, OCFC Judicial Analyst.

Most importantly, the Summit had four separate working sessions focused on bringing concrete targeted reforms to the Dependency System. To help narrow the focus, Taskforce Members were organized into three different sub-committees to focus their work. “It was decided after the virtual meetings and speaking with Justice Dougherty regarding his vision for the work that the Taskforce should be split into three different subcommittees to focus on issues of high importance to the topic,” said Sandy Moore of OCFC. “The first group would be focused on what we called a ‘local county road map.’ It is apparent to anyone who has tried to implement court system reform in Pennsylvania that it needs to occur at the county level. Each county, whether it is rural, suburban, or urban has its own unique challenges, resources, and stakeholders. What I hoped this Taskforce would do is create a template for counties to convene these stakeholders from their respective communities to start tackling this issue of autism and the child welfare system,” Moore stated. The second group focused on education. “Education and creating awareness around the intersection of autism in the court system is paramount. Whether it is identifying the individuals or autism service providers that will create the training for the curriculum itself without this in place no meaningful reform can take place,” she continued. The final group focused on environmental reform. “This subcommittee will focus on what courtroom, agency, and community adjustments and adaptations can be made for children and parents on the autism spectrum,” Moore said.

County Roadmap

This subcommittee worked to develop a “Roadmap for Change” that would mirror the process used by the Taskforce. The Roadmap would be shared with counties and courts to assist in examining this issue locally and, ultimately, implement meaningful local reforms. The Roadmap provides suggestions regarding local team members, agenda items, educational topics, possible goals/outcomes, and potential strategies. More importantly, the Roadmap

⁵² Dr. Wendy Ross of the Jefferson University Hospital Center for Autism and Neurodiversity was a “CNN Hero” in 2014 and nationally recognized for her work in creating inclusive environments for those on the autism spectrum when it comes to air travel, attendance at professional sporting events, and specialized Covid-19 vaccine clinics. (<https://www.bizjournals.com/philadelphia/news/2019/05/15/jefferson-autism-wendy-ross-neurodiversity-phila.html>)

provides a process by which local communities and courts can better understand and implement change that will result in a child welfare agency and a dependency court system that are more understanding, accepting, and supportive of children and parents with Autism Spectrum Disorder.

As of this writing the draft Roadmap created has yet to be reviewed by the entire Autism and the Dependency Courts Taskforce or the Pennsylvania State Roundtable. We expect the review from these groups will provide valuable feedback that, once incorporated, will result in an incredibly useful resource.

Education

This group looked at opportunities to advance the educational efforts completed thus far (see Judicial Education Section above). Members thought this could include introductory virtual trainings for juvenile court hearing officers, attorneys, administrators, and county partners to ensure that as many members as possible within the Dependency System in Pennsylvania had a rudimentary understanding of ASD and how it could interact with the courts.

Other recommended educational programs could include another judicial education session at the Pennsylvania Conference of State Trial Judges (PCSTJ) in July of 2022, an education session at the Pennsylvania Children and Youth Administrators (PCYA) Meeting in October of 2022, and an additional session geared specifically towards Dependency Court attorneys. Discussions have also taken place regarding the creation of a mock hearing education session geared towards Dependency Court proceedings that could be available for widespread use as an online resource.

Environmental Reform

The Environmental Reform group looked at what changes could be made regarding the Dependency Court environment, or the direct courtroom experience for individuals with ASD. Some of what was discussed included items listed below.

- Having a greeter meet the family as they walk into the courthouse
- Creating a video tour of the courthouse/agency and placing it online for those with ASD and any other population that encounters the system
- Planning for individuals with ASD that come before the court by silencing machines, using an alternative entrance, or allowing fidget/comfort toys during the proceedings
- Providing an alternative quiet room, noise cancelling headphones, or the court comfort dog if the county has one
- Adjusting the blinds, temperature, or lighting prior to the start of a court proceeding
- Providing the possibility of virtual/hybrid hearings where possible, or the hearing in the quiet of the Judge's chambers
- Providing alternative courtroom seating that are proven effective for some individuals with ASD such as a bean bag/egg chair

Next steps for the Taskforce

In the coming weeks,⁵³ the Taskforce will present its findings and tools to the State Roundtable. If accepted by the Roundtable, the Taskforce will begin to implement the reforms they identified at the Summit. It will be a very large undertaking involving multiple counties, hundreds of county stakeholders, autism service organizations, and autism advocates. The Taskforce will continue to meet monthly, with virtual meetings scheduled until the end of the year at the least. While the Taskforce's work will focus on the child welfare and dependency systems, templates of that work may be useful in future reform efforts within other justice system areas.

"This taskforce purposefully includes individuals who are going to be part of the change by implementing the change. This isn't an ivory tower statewide taskforce who will issue an edict down to the individuals in the system below, but it is in the hands of people who will create the change they want to see." Sandy Moore, Director of OCFC

"No one has ever taken a look at this issue on a system-wide level as has been mentioned before. This Taskforce is the 'Tip of the Spear' and will be the ones implementing the changes we have spent the last few years working towards. I could not be more excited to see where their work takes us in the efforts to create a court system that is finally inclusive of those with ASD and all intellectual disabilities." Justice Kevin Dougherty

⁵³ At the time this Capstone was written, the Taskforce Summit had just occurred. It is the hope of this author and others involved in the Autism in the Courts Initiative that this document will serve as a working copy encapsulating this Initiative's work in the months and years to come.

Section 6 – Other Aspects of the Initiative

Data Collection

Since the Initiative officially began at the Judicial Education Session in 2020, continuing into the Regional Roundtables, and remaining through the Taskforce’s work, one question has endured: How many individuals are coming through the system with Autism? The answer is that we do not know. Every single story that we have heard throughout our work around the intersection of autism and the courts is anecdotal, and a solution to this has vexed the core planning team. Thankfully, following a conversation that I had at the end of 2021 with our Director of Information Technology (IT) for the AOPC, Russel Montchal, , there is a planned solution.

The Court System collects data and tracks the progress of individual cases at all levels of the Court through its Case Management Systems (CMS). These include the Common Pleas Case Management System (CPCMS) for the Common Pleas (trial) courts, MDJMS for Magisterial District Courts and Philadelphia Municipal Court, and PACMS for the Appellate Courts. For the thousands of cases that are heard around the Commonwealth in the Magisterial District Courts and the Common Pleas Courts, there will soon be an option in these CMSs to include autism as an indicator for a specific case similar to a request for a court interpreter. This will help bring awareness to those interacting with the case, through an indicator on their screen, that the individual before them is on the autism spectrum. In addition to creating awareness, the AOPC will begin to collect data on how many individuals are coming through the system. This simple adjustment could bring the Initiative first-in-the-nation hard data on how many individuals interact with the system on a daily, monthly, and yearly basis. This information could be used to allocate future resources while helping all justice system stakeholders involved with a specific case being made aware that the individual coming before them has ASD.⁵⁴

Communication Strategy

An instrumental part of the Autism and the Court Initiative since its inception has been the robust communications strategy surrounding its work. “It was decided early on that there would be a strong communications strategy surrounding the work that was being done by Justice Dougherty and his partners on the intersection of autism and the court system. I come from the school of thought that the more individuals that know about the good work being done the larger positive impact it would have,” stated Stacey Witalec, Director of Communications for the AOPC.

She continued, “While our team knew that there would be strong interest surrounding the Taskforce’s work, we have all been pleasantly surprised by the widespread impact and attention that this Initiative has received. It has not always been easy, and there is an inherent bias within the Court System and also by Justice Dougherty himself to want to keep a low profile, but it was imperative in my mind and that of my communications team that we let the

⁵⁴ It should be noted that this information will only be given to those who can legally access it. For example, in delinquency and dependency cases involving juveniles, all identifying information for those not directly involved in the case is prohibited.

thousands of Pennsylvanians with autism and their families know that our judiciary and justice system take their lived experience serious.”

As has been mentioned earlier in this report there have been over 40+ unique media articles written about the Initiative, 10+ local television news segments, 1 major newspaper editorial, and 1 national media publication covering Pennsylvania’s work regarding Autism and the Courts.

National Outreach

There have also been other jurisdictions and national conversations occurring surrounding the Autism and the Courts Initiative’s work. Our partners at the A.J. Drexel Institute of Autism and ASERT had Justice Dougherty present at an International Society of Autism Research (INSAR) Criminal Justice Consortium virtual event in 2020. The INSAR Global Autism and Criminal Justice Consortium is an interdisciplinary team of researchers, policy experts, criminal justice system professionals, self-advocates, and family members from 10 separate countries that attempt to use best practices to create better outcomes for those with ASD in the Courts. In addition to INSAR, the Initiative has received interest regarding our work from the National Autism Association, Autism Speaks, the International Society for Autism, and the Autism Society of America. Those conversations will continue in the coming months.

Furthermore, there has been interest from other jurisdictions in the Initiative’s work including the Miami-Dade County Court System, and from the Conference of Chief Justice’s Mental Health Summit that will occur in Brooklyn, NY in June of 2022 which Justice Dougherty and the author will attend.

Part III – Recommendations, Challenges, and Conclusion

The third part, the final one of the Capstone, will discuss the policy recommendations gleaned so far from the Autism and the Courts Initiative, the challenges in the implementation of future reforms, and a conclusion to the report.

Recommendations

- **Recommendation 1- Emphasizing the Education of Justice System Stakeholders Around Autism Awareness**
 - For any jurisdiction studying this complex and constantly evolving subject, there needs to be a continually updated and robust curriculum for Judges and Courthouse staff regarding the intersection of autism and the courts led by autism experts and experienced justice system professionals. This curriculum will lay the foundation for both ASD awareness and justice system reform.
- **Recommendation 2 – Creating a New County-level “Road Map” to Implement Reform on the Local Level**
 - The 1968 version of the Pennsylvania Constitution created the Unified Judicial System (UJS), with the Supreme Court of Pennsylvania at its top. In reality, its governance structure is similar to the Federal System. The Federal System, where the majority of reform and implementation of policy actually occurs at the State level, is reflected in Pennsylvania’s Court System, where the implementation of reforms occur at the county level. To address this fact, the Autism in the Courts Dependency Taskforce and its possible future iterations in other areas of the justice system is looking to create locally sourced county-based reforms that follow a state level template, or road map to help create solutions for those with ASD. These groups, consisting of court system leaders, advocates, and autism service providers from the jurisdiction or county would drive these solutions and help account for the unique challenges and resources that a rural county may have compared to an urban county.⁵⁵
- **Recommendation 3 – Conducting a Courtroom Autism Evaluation to make the Courthouse Experience more Inclusive for those with ASD**
 - There is a glaring need for experts and autism advocates to initiate courtroom evaluations/audits that could help certain courtrooms become ASD accessible and inclusive. These adjustments can include dimming the lights, drawing the blinds, installing ASD-friendly seating, the judge coming down from behind the bench, conducting specific hearings virtually or through Closed Circuit Television among others.

⁵⁵ Possible Members of these county teams listed at the end of the Autism Dependency Taskforce (Part II, Section 5)

- Expansion of CAPS or a similar peer-led program – Spearheaded by Philadelphia City Councilman Derek Green (a father to an autistic child) and the Philadelphia Autism Project the Community Autism Peer Specialist Program is led by self-advocates (individuals with ASD) who complete a peer support training program. There have been preliminary discussions about expanding CAPS into the Court System to help those with ASD better navigate its challenges with the assistance of someone with their own lived experience.
- Courthouse Comfort Dogs - This is an existing program in about half of the judicial districts in Pennsylvania (31 out of 60) that currently maintain a comfort dog program for children in their Courthouses to help lower anxiety around court proceedings. This program could easily be expanded for those with ASD who respond well to domestic pets.
- **Recommendation 4 – Emphasizing the Collection of Accurate Data of Those Coming Through the System with ASD**
 - There has never been accurate autism data collected in the Pennsylvania Court System or any other state court systems around the country. This needs to be a priority since without data collected regarding the numbers of individuals coming into the system with ASD, creating concrete reforms and performance measures based on those reforms will be difficult.
- **Recommendation 5 – Prioritizing the Need for Communication and Collaboration Amongst Justice System Leaders**
 - One of the biggest contributors to the lack of continuous autism advocacy in the justice system is the “balkanization” of access to services. The lack of communication amongst different stakeholders in the government and court system is a long-standing one, but without open lines of communication surrounding this issue, real systemic system reform will be impossible.

Challenges

- **Challenge 1 – Risking the Loss of Stakeholder Support**
 - The Initiative has been fortunate to have the collective buy-in from the head of a branch of Government in Justice Dougherty, state level autism experts and services, and other leaders throughout the justice system. However, this Initiative that started in the summer of 2019 and has persisted until the time this report was written almost 3 years later was with the understanding that its real work is just beginning. If there is a loss of stakeholder support, momentum could feasibly come to a stop.

- **Challenge 2- Confronting Problems with Implementation**
 - Implementation of the reforms mentioned in the recommendations above will occur at the county level. Their work will be just as arduous as it has been on the statewide level, and a certain measure of commitment to this issue is necessary or the hard work of creating better outcomes for this population will stall.

- **Challenge 3 – Losing/Lacking Funding When it is Needed**
 - When the Autism and the Courts Initiative reaches the level of targeted and system-wide reform there will be costs involved in rolling out the Initiative on a statewide and county level. These costs could include conference and travel costs for those involved, startup costs regarding the launch and maintenance of the county-based road maps, and possible costs in collecting data related to the intersection of autism and the courts internally or from an outside vendor. In the public sector government funding is a finite resource, and many well-meaning Initiatives have stalled or stopped because of the lack of funding. This Initiative is no different.

- **Challenge 4 – Compiling Inaccurate/Incomplete Data on Individuals with ASD coming through the System**
 - Due to the diverse group of individuals utilizing data from the MDJMS and CPCMS Systems throughout the state,⁵⁶ there is a distinct chance that some of these individuals will enter data that is either incomplete, inaccurate, or even no data at all. When this adjustment is made in the case management systems strong internal communications rollout needs to ensure that this very important data is being entered correctly.
 - There are other challenges when it comes to data collection as well. Due to the extreme waitlist for individuals to get officially diagnosed with ASD by a qualified

⁵⁶ Stakeholder groups that utilize and enter data into the courts case management systems include Clerk of Courts, the Judiciary, District Attorneys, Public Defenders, Court Filing Offices, County Children and Youth, Service Providers, Probation Departments, Law Enforcement among others.

clinician, there may be cases where a judge or justice system stakeholder may suspect that an individual has autism but there is no diagnosis. What should occur in these situations? In addition, are there any possible HIPPA violations in the collection and sharing of data? Finally, how do you alleviate the concern that many Americans and Pennsylvanians have regarding any data the government tries to collect? These are all questions that need to be answered before and during the rollout of the data collection effort.

Conclusion

The Autism in the Courts Initiative in Pennsylvania has been involved in groundbreaking work since its inception in the fall of 2019. What seemed to be at first simply an awareness/educational campaign has turned into what has become a “movement” throughout the justice system. This Initiative illustrates how progress can come out of government entities collaborating for a common good, and it could possibly even serve as a template for other states and jurisdictions looking to tackle this issue or any similar one in the justice system. It started with judicial education, progressed to the virtual Regional Roundtables to learn how this affects everyday Pennsylvanians, continued with the current Statewide Dependency Taskforce, and holds limitless potential for future growth in other court-involved areas. Our team has quickly realized that we are the “tip of the spear” when it comes to ASD awareness, education, and reform on this system-wide level throughout the country and with that comes great responsibility. Through these reforms, we are seeking to completely change the dynamics surrounding this issue and create a national model of acceptance and justice when it comes to those with ASD intersecting with the court system in Pennsylvania. This Capstone hopefully has highlighted why this intersection is a major issue within the court system reinforced by extensive academic research, what has been done to rectify the issue up to this point in Pennsylvania, and what eventually a “just” justice system could look like for those on the autism spectrum.

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