

### Summary of the Access to Justice Standards

Trial courts should be open and accessible. Because location, physical structure, procedures, and the responsiveness of its personnel affect accessibility, the five standards grouped under ACCESS TO JUSTICE require a trial court to eliminate unnecessary barriers to its services. Such barriers can be geographic, economic, and procedural. They can be caused by deficiencies in language and the knowledge of individuals participating in court proceedings. Additionally, psychological barriers can be created by mysterious, remote, unduly complicated, and intimidating court procedures.

The intent of the first two standards is to bring the administration of justice into the open and make it accessible. Standard 1.1 requires the trial court to conduct its business openly. To ensure that all persons with legitimate business before the court have access to its proceedings, Standard 1.2 requires the trial court to make its facilities safe, accessible, and convenient to use. Accessibility is required not only for those who are guided by an attorney but also for all litigants, jurors, victims, witnesses, and relatives of litigants. Access to trial courts is also required for many others—for example, beneficiaries of decedents in probate matters, parents and guardians in juvenile cases, persons seeking information from public records held by the court, employees of agencies that regularly do business with the courts (investigators, mental health professionals, sheriff’s deputies, marshals, etc.), and the public.

Because a trial court may be accessible to most and still hinder access to some, Standard 1.3 requires the court to provide opportunities for the effective participation of all who appear before the court, including those with linguistic difficulties and handicaps. To promote access to justice and to enhance citizens’ confidence and trust in the court, Standard 1.4 urges that all court personnel accord respect, courtesy, and dignity to all with whom they come into contact.

Standard 1.5 recognizes that there are financial and procedural barriers to access to justice. It requires that the fees imposed and procedures established by the court be fair and reasonable. Recognizing the importance of the relationship between public records and access to justice, the standard also requires that public records be preserved and made available at reasonable cost.”<sup>1</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup>From *Trial Court Performance Standards with Commentary*: Commission on Trial Court Performance Standards - A Project of the Bureau of Justice Assistance, U.S. Department of Justice and the National Center for State Courts © 1990 by the National Center for State Courts.

*The Judges and Employees of the First Judicial District affirmatively endeavor, through their efforts toward achieving their individual and collective goals in the administration of justice, to foster the primacy of, and continually improve upon, ACCESS TO JUSTICE.*

Over the last two years, opportunities to broaden access to judicial proceedings and services have emerged at lightning pace. With the explosion of information delivery capabilities, and a resurgence of public interest in the business of the Courts, the First Judicial District continues to develop and erect platforms from which expanded information and other public service programs may be launched, allowing more people to participate — more effectively than ever before. Some of these prospective and very promising advancements are highlighted below.

***Opportunity: Continue to achieve better judicial administration through improvements in automation.***

***Trend:***

Sustained Rapid Improvement in desktop PC power.

***Response:***

Begun in an effort to provide office automation hardware and software to judicial chambers, courtrooms and administrative offices, the First Judicial District is completing installation and upgrades to its networked personal computer system. Hardware and software standards, refreshed twice yearly, evolve with ever changing demands for additional desktop processing power. The 50 server, 2,400 personal computer network distributed over 13 locations, is linked through a high speed wide area network.

***Opportunity: Help to provide employees with the means to reach their true potential and further improve access.***

***Trend:***

Judicial leadership and administrative support spark in-house training.

***Response:***

The Human Resources Department has developed and presented a series of in-house training programs for the employees of the First Judicial District including three important topics: 1) prevention of sexual harassment; 2) Windows and Word Perfect computer upgrades; and 3) Stress Management and other specially tailored courses. The goal is to help employees to be the best informed, most courteous employees in the State Court System.



Criminal Justice Center

***Opportunity:*** *Utilize more responsive information services to broaden access to the public.*

***Trend:***

Improved Automated Voice Response Systems — Judicial Leadership.

***Response:***

Through the guidance of the Office of the President Judge, implementation of an automated court information line (215-686-7000) expands access to the public. Callers are provided with general court information, in English or Spanish, and, through a series of menu choices, connected to the office that can best answer or resolve inquiries. The automated system capitalizes upon an existing voice mail system at no extra cost, and saves the First Judicial District many thousands of dollars of personnel time. More importantly, the information line provides twenty-four hour access to the court and its various departments.

***Opportunity:*** *Translate Internet capabilities into improved access for governmental agencies, private organizations, and the public.*

***Trend:***

Burgeoning power and popularity of the Internet, Judicial & Administrative leadership responsiveness.

***Response:***

In 1997, the First Judicial District Internet website was completed and online. Although currently consisting of static data regarding the operations of the district, the site's features are rich in information and dynamic in terms of navigation and linkage. Future avenues will lead to built-in website connectivity to selected court databases providing direct access to attorneys, governmental agencies and the public.

***Opportunity:*** *Improve communication and widen public access to justice through involvement of communities and victims as clients with interest and standing in the system.*

***Trend:***

Growing public concern over juvenile delinquency.

***Response:***

In 1996 Pennsylvania adopted a new approach to juvenile delinquency - the Balanced and Restorative Justice Model - in pursuit of three goals: 1) offender accountability to victims and communities; 2) public safety; and 3) development of competencies for juvenile offenders. State funding led the Family Division Juvenile Court to create the Victim and Community Services Program in 1997. The program works to restore victims and their neighborhoods through the imposition of restitution and community service. Also following from this trend: creation of School-Based Probation, Special Offenders, Firearms Violators, and Police-Probation Partnership Programs.



City Hall

***Opportunity:*** *Through the application of modern case flow management principles eliminate backlogs and restore access.*

***Trend:***

Explosion of civil litigation in the 1980's.

***Response:***

The Trial Division Civil Section, in employing specialized Court facilities, tailored judicial assignments, and volunteer judges pro tempore with the Day Forward and Day Backward Programs eliminated backlogs and concomitant delay, providing improved access in a very real sense, to a broad spectrum of the citizenry with divergent interests.



Criminal Justice Center Courtroom

***Opportunity:*** *Improve and expand services to families in time of need.*

***Trend:***

Reinvigorated concentration on family values and responsibilities.

***Response:***

The Family Division Domestic Relations Court Branch instituted several improvements to better utilize resources and upgrade service delivery including: 1) expansion of the Domestic Violence Unit; 2) establishment of the "643" Processing Unit to help families moving off welfare; 3) expansion of the Customer Services Unit; 4) change to less invasive techniques for paternity testing; and 5) establishment of the Custody Masters Unit to expedite processing of custody petitions.

***Opportunity:*** *Redesign programs to respond to the needs of the populace.*

***Trend:***

Increasing accessibility needs of the general public and disabled community.

***Response:***

In the Municipal Court Civil Division the upper jurisdictional limit was raised to \$10,000 to allow greater access to Small Claims Court. Dispute Resolution allows for expedited agreement processes, and almost 1,600 Americans With Disabilities Act (ADA) accommodation requests were satisfied in 1996 and 1997. In the Criminal Division, Court services are available in the communities at Night Court, an Arbitration program settles community disputes, and Treatment Court deals with one of the underlying causes of criminal involvement: drug addiction.

***Opportunity: Address “Quality of Life” issues in the District’s high-volume Traffic Court.***

***Trend:***

As the average citizen’s first, and often only interaction with the justice system, high volume and public safety issues give rise to Traffic Court enhancements.

***Response:***

Enhanced access to the Court’s facilities is provided by accommodating the public with extended weekday hours and additional Saturday hours. Working strategies in compliance with the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) like TDD phone systems for the hearing impaired afford citizens greater access. Customer service representatives provide information, receive payments (MAC and credit cards permitted), and help with hearing scheduling and assistance with license suspension. Work toward implementation of the “Boot and Tow” law proceeds to address public safety problems concerning unlicensed drivers and improperly registered autos.



City Hall Courtroom

***Opportunity: Safeguard the rights (access) of the misfortunate.***

***Trend:***

Increasing awareness of the population of incapacitated persons.

***Response:***

The Orphans’ Court Division of the Court of Common Pleas ensures the preservation of the rights of all parties before that Court — including those who temporarily or permanently may not be able to fully participate on their own behalf.

***Opportunity: Provide communities, victims, and defendants with greater numbers of more timely dispositions.***

***Trend:***

Completion of the Criminal Justice Center (CJC).

***Response:***

Since moving into the CJC just prior to the 1996-1997 Biennial Report period, the Trial Division Criminal Section reduced case inventory by approximately 1,000 cases utilizing case management initiatives.

*First Judicial District leaders and employees look forward to more outstanding achievements in the future. Listed below are a few of the FJD ACCESS objectives and goals for the future. The listed topics are highlights of some of the intended accomplishments and methods to achieve the aims.*

***Goal: Court data Internet availability.***

An Administration and Prothonotary sponsored program is to provide Internet access to Court data for a fee in 1998.

***Goal: Wipe out inventory of aged civil cases.***

The dedication of judges and employees and efficient case management are projected to result in the elimination of all Trial Division Civil Section Day Backward Program in 1998.

***Goal: Amass an even greater volume of more timely disposed criminal cases.***

Expansion of Differentiated Case Management techniques will result in their application to all Common Pleas criminal matters.

***Goal: Continue to improve child support services.***

During 1998 and into the future, the Family Division Domestic Relations Branch will continue to streamline and improve its existing processes, including the ongoing refinement and expansion of PARENTS, the Court's automated child support computer system. And, with an eye toward the future, the Branch has established a number of standing committees charged with evaluating new and existing processes and technologies.

***Goal: 1998 Implementation of Technological Initiatives***

With the enthusiastic support of judicial leaders and the Court Administrator, the Data Processing/MIS Department is working on myriad system upgrades and enhancements to the District computing and communications environment:

- imaging project for online web browser access to UCC filings and divorce decrees;
- email gateway to City of Philadelphia agencies;
- Internet access;
- expansion of Human Resources' "Remote Time and Attendance" reporting system;
- Adult Probation pilot case tracking project and expansion of the Pretrial online interview application;
- online archiving system for notes of testimony with new systems for tracking Court Reporter and Interpreter assignments;
- expansion of the network at 1801 Vine Street to push Juvenile Probation case management initiatives;
- attorney, government agency and public Internet access to civil records;
- Internet access to civil data and electronic filing.