The Pennsylvania Court System

What are the major courts of the state of Pennsylvania?
What role do the PA courts play in our everyday life?
What is the job of the state courts?

• The state courts provide two (2) important jobs:
  – Settle disputes
    • Between citizens
    • Between citizens and the state government
  – Act as a check on the conduct of all state governments
    • Judicial Review

• In PA = The Unified Justice System of Pennsylvania
What is the history of the courts in Pennsylvania?

• In 1682, William Penn created a court system under the control of the PA governor
  – Very unpopular

• In 1722, the Penn system of courts was abolished by the state legislature
  – The beginning of the state court system we have today
What is the highest court in the state of Pennsylvania?

• The highest court in the state is the Pennsylvania Supreme Court
  – Founded in 1722

• One of the oldest state courts in the United States
Who sits on the PA Supreme Court?

- The PA Supreme Court has seven (7) justices
  - Ten (10) year term
  - Elected to the court

- Leadership = Chief Justice

- Justices may retire from the Court at the age of 70
  - Mandatory retirement for all judges in 78
An inside look at the PA Supreme Court chamber at the State Capital Building from the back of the courtroom.
The PA Supreme Court sits by seniority, much like the US Supreme Court with the Chief Justice in the center.
One of the many murals on the walls of PA Supreme Court’s courtroom. This one depicts the early courts of the state.
What kinds of cases does the PA Supreme Court hear?

• Under the PA Constitution, the PA Supreme Court can hear:
  – Cases of statewide importance
  – Cases that require clarification of state law

• The Court also must oversee:
  – Cases involving the death penalty
  – Appeals from the state’s Commonwealth Court

• On average, the court receives about 2,500 appeals each year
Is there anyone who assists the PA Supreme Court?

• The PA Supreme Court is assisted by the Supreme Court Committee
  – Unpaid lawyer who advise the Court

• Oversee every aspect of the court’s agenda and research
  – Make sure the Court is unbiased in its decisions
What courts exist directly under the PA Supreme Court?

- Two (2) courts:
  - PA Superior Court
  - PA Commonwealth Court

- Both courts operate as “filters” for the Supreme Court
  - Ease the workload
What is the PA Superior Court?

- The PA Superior Court handles reviews appeals from PA’s county courts
  - Established in 1895

- Filter out important cases for the PA Supreme Court
How does the PA Superior Court operate?

- The Court is made up of fifteen (15) justices (10-year terms)
  - Panels of three (3)

- Can issue petitions for review to the PA Supreme Court
  - Often verdicts are **FINAL**
What is the PA Commonwealth Court?

- The PA Commonwealth Court oversees cases involving the state government, regulatory agencies, and lawsuits
  - Banking regulations
  - Insurance
  - Taxation
  - Elections
  - Labor Disputes
  - Worker Compensation
How does the PA Commonwealth Court operate?

• The Court is made up of nine (9) justices (10-year term)
  – Panels of three (3)

• Like the Superior Court, it can also petition the Supreme Court
  – Often verdicts here are FINAL
What are the PA Court of Common Pleas?

- The PA Court of Common Pleas are the everyday county courts of Pennsylvania
  - Adoption
  - Divorce
  - Criminal Cases
  - Guardianship
  - Estates
  - MANY MANY MORE
How do the Court of Common Pleas operate?

- The Court is run by a Judge of Common Pleas
  - Elected to a ten (10) year term

- Each county has its own Judge of Common Pleas to oversee cases.
What are the PA Minor Courts?

- The Minor Courts are the courts of the individual townships in a county
  - Traffic Courts
  - Small Claims
  - Landowner Disputes

- There are over 500 of these courts in the state
  - Judges are elected
  - Legal degrees is optional