

By Ronald D. Castille
Chief Justice of the Pennsylvania Supreme Court

As leader of the Pennsylvania court system, my top goal is for the citizens of this Commonwealth to trust their judges, and for judges at every level to deserve that trust.

It is of the utmost importance for any individual who faces any judge in a courtroom to have confidence he or she will be treated fairly, and for all Pennsylvanians to have that same sense of confidence, because a sound court system is essential to our system of government -- and to our very freedom.

How do judges earn the confidence of the citizens? We expect judges to be fair and impartial. We expect judges to be unaffected by either side or by outside influence. We expect that judges will not favor the strong over the weak or the rich over the poor. Above all, we expect judges to adhere to their oath of office.

In my experience of nearly four decades in the legal profession, the vast majority of judges strive daily to live up to those oaths. Most of the judges I know, and I know a lot of them, are worthy of public trust and confidence.

Unfortunately, we have seen two judges in Luzerne County who have shown themselves to be unworthy of trust. They have pleaded guilty to federal charges involving a corrupt scheme to receive kickbacks from the building of two juvenile detention facilities.

Media attention on this case has spread around the world. With it, an unjustified taint has been placed on the entire Pennsylvania court system -- a system of more than 1,200 judges -- because of the conduct of two corrupt judges who dishonored their offices for private gain.

The Supreme Court has taken a series of steps to address problems in Luzerne County. As an immediate response, the court relieved both judges of their judicial duties and cut off their pay. The court appointed a respected special master to review all cases in which juvenile defendants were adjudicated in Luzerne County.

The special master's first recommendation was that records be expunged in all cases in which juvenile offenders were found delinquent for minor offenses without benefit of legal counsel between 2003 and 2008. The Supreme Court approved that recommendation and authorized the master to move forward with all possible speed. Cases involving more serious juvenile offenses will be reviewed in due course. Hopefully these are first steps toward ameliorating harm caused to children and families.

The Supreme Court also is gravely concerned about broad damage to the court system and is prepared to take whatever steps are necessary to restore public confidence in the judicial system in Luzerne County.

Restoring public confidence will not be easy. American essayist Henry Ward Beecher emphasized the point when he wrote: "Take all of the robes of all of the good judges who have

ever lived on the face of the earth and they would not be large enough to cover the iniquity of one corrupt judge."

I hope the task will not be quite so formidable. With the full support of my fellow justices, I pledge to the citizens of Pennsylvania that the Supreme Court will do all in its power to ensure that justice is done fairly and honestly in Luzerne County and in every courtroom in this Commonwealth every day.

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