

**The
Structure
of
Pennsylvania's
Unified
Judicial
System**

Pennsylvania's judicial system forms a hierarchal structure that can best be illustrated in the form of a pyramid, as presented in Figure 2.2.1 below:

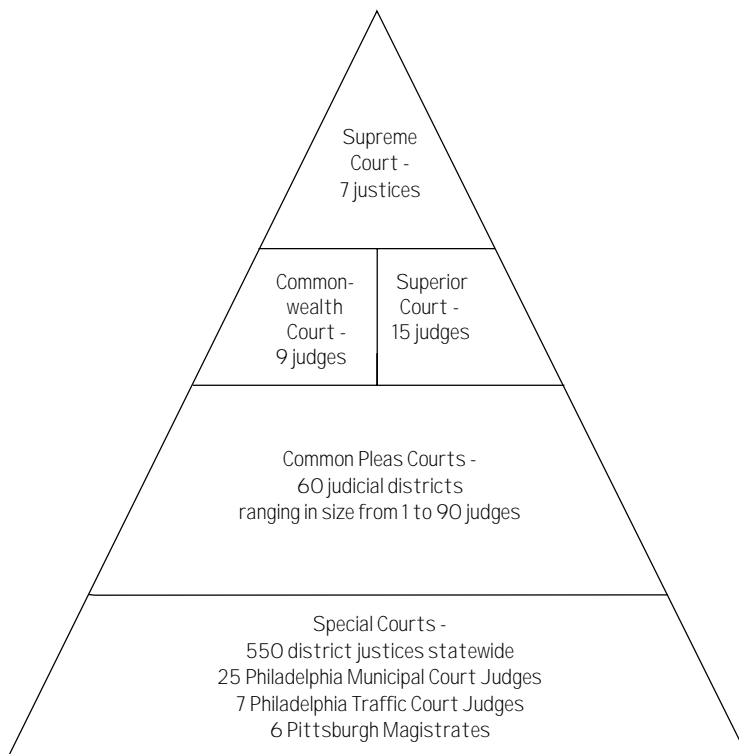


Figure 2.2.1

Special courts form the foundation of this system, followed in turn by the Courts of Common Pleas; the Commonwealth and Superior Courts; and the Supreme Court, the Commonwealth's court of last resort. A description of each level of the judiciary, beginning with the special courts, follows.

Special Courts

Special courts, also called minor courts or courts of limited jurisdiction, constitute the “grass roots” level of Pennsylvania’s court system. For many Pennsylvanians these are the first, and often the only, courts they will ever encounter. The special courts include 550 district justice courts, Philadelphia Municipal Court, Philadelphia Traffic Court and Pittsburgh Magistrates Court.

District Justice Courts

District justices preside over the district justice courts in all counties but Philadelphia. They have authority to:

- conduct non-jury trials concerning criminal summary matters not involving delinquent acts as defined in 42 Pa.C.S., § 6301 *et seq.*
- conduct non-jury trials concerning civil claims (unless the claim is against a Commonwealth party as defined in 42 Pa.C.S., § 8501) where the amount in controversy does not exceed \$8,000, exclusive of interests and costs, in the following classes of actions:
 - landlord-tenant actions
 - *assumpsit* actions unless they involve a contract where the title to the real estate may be in question
 - trespass actions
 - fines and penalties by any government agency
- preside over preliminary arraignments and preliminary hearings
- fix and accept bail except in cases involving murder or voluntary manslaughter
- issue arrest warrants
- accept guilty pleas to the charge of Driving under the Influence (75 Pa.C.S.A., § 3731) so

long as it is a first offense, no personal injury occurred to a third party other than the defendant’s immediate family, property damage to any third party is less than \$500 and the defendant is not a juvenile

- preside over non-jury trials involving all offenses under Title 34 (relating to game)
- accept guilty pleas to misdemeanors of the third degree in certain circumstances.

District justices are not required to be lawyers, but if they are not, they must complete an educational course and pass a qualifying examination before they can take office. They must also complete one week of continuing education each year in a program administered by the Minor Judiciary Education Board. (For more information on the Minor Judiciary Education Board see page 91.)

Philadelphia Municipal Court

One of two special courts in Philadelphia County, Municipal Court is Pennsylvania’s only court of record at the minor courts level. Its judges have the same jurisdiction as district justices with the following exceptions:

- jurisdiction includes all criminal offenses except summary traffic offenses that are punishable by a term of imprisonment not exceeding five years
- they may enter judgments in civil claims where the amount does not exceed \$10,000.

The Municipal Court complement numbers 25, and judges who serve on this court must be attorneys.

Municipal Court judges elect from their ranks a president judge who oversees the administration of the court. The president judge serves one five-year term, but may be reelected after a one-term interlude.

In addition, an administrative judge appointed by the Supreme Court is responsible for judicial assignments, budgeting and the daily operation of the court.

Philadelphia Traffic Court

Philadelphia Traffic Court's jurisdiction covers all summary offenses under the Motor Vehicle Code as well as any related city ordinances.

Seven judges sit on this court. As with district justices, the judges need not be lawyers, but must complete the certifying course and pass the qualifying examination administered by the Minor Judiciary Education Board.

Unlike the president judges in the Common Pleas and Philadelphia Municipal Courts, the president judge of Traffic Court is appointed by the governor.

Pittsburgh Magistrates Court

In addition to the district justices who serve throughout Allegheny County, the city of Pittsburgh has six police magistrates. These magistrates, who are required to be members of the Pennsylvania bar, sit on the Pittsburgh Magistrates Court. As members of Pennsylvania's only nonelective court, each magistrate is appointed by Pittsburgh's mayor to a four-year term.

Pittsburgh Magistrates may:

- issue arrest warrants
- preside at arraignments and preliminary hearings for criminal offenses occurring within the city
- preside over criminal cases brought by Pittsburgh police for violations of city ordinances and other specified offenses

- handle all summary offenses under the Motor Vehicle Code and related city ordinances.

The special courts in Pennsylvania hold no jury trials. In summary cases, the district justice hears the case and reaches a decision on its merits. In misdemeanor and felony cases, the district justice first holds a preliminary arraignment at which charges are formally brought. Following the preliminary arraignment the district justice also holds a preliminary hearing, unless that hearing has been waived by the defendant to Common Pleas Court, the next level of the judicial pyramid. During the preliminary hearing the district justice determines whether sufficient evidence exists for the case to be tried in Common Pleas Court.

At some point in this process the district justice will also hold a bail hearing to determine what security is appropriate to ensure the defendant's appearance at later court proceedings.

Appeals of judgments made by special court judges may be taken to Common Pleas Court where the case is heard *de novo*, or anew.

Common Pleas Courts

Common Pleas Courts are Pennsylvania's courts of general trial jurisdiction. They have original jurisdiction over all cases not exclusively assigned to another court and appellate jurisdiction over judgments from the special courts. They also hear appeals from certain state and most local government agencies.

The courts are organized into 60 judicial districts which generally follow the geographic boundaries of the Commonwealth's counties; however, seven of the districts are comprised of two counties. They are: Perry-Juniata, Snyder-Union, Franklin-Fulton, Wyoming-Sullivan, Columbia-Montour, Warren-Forest and Elk-Cameron. Each district has from one to 90 judges.

Each district also has a president judge to administer the affairs of the court. In districts with seven or fewer judges, the judge with the longest continuous service holds this position. In districts with eight or more judges, the president judge is elected to a five-year term by his or her peers.

Appellate Court System

Pennsylvania's appellate courts form a two-tiered appeals system. The first, or intermediate, level has two courts: the Superior Court, which has 15 judges, and the Commonwealth Court, which has nine. At the second level is the seven-justice Supreme Court, the highest court in Pennsylvania.

In general, appeals of Common Pleas Court decisions are made to one of the two intermediate appellate courts.

Commonwealth Court

The Commonwealth Court was created by the Constitutional Convention in 1968 as not only a means to reduce the workload of the Superior and Supreme Courts, but as a court to hear cases brought against and by the Commonwealth. It has, therefore, both original and appellate jurisdiction.

The court's **original** jurisdiction encompasses:

- civil actions brought against the Commonwealth government or an officer of the government usually seeking equitable relief or declaratory judgment and not damages
- civil actions brought by the Commonwealth government (note: these could also be brought in the Courts of Common Pleas)
- matters under the Election Code involving statewide offices.

Its **appellate** jurisdiction includes:

- appeals relating to decisions made by most state administrative agencies
- appeals from the Courts of Common Pleas involving:
 - actions against the Commonwealth that could not be initiated in Commonwealth Court
 - actions by the Commonwealth that could have been commenced in Commonwealth Court
 - some appeals from decisions of the Liquor Board and the Department of Transportation
 - most local government matters other than contract matters, including actions for damages
 - eminent domain proceedings
 - matters involving the internal affairs of non-profit corporations.

Superior Court

Because the Superior Court's main function is as an appeals court, its original jurisdiction is limited. Such jurisdiction includes applications made by the attorney general and district attorneys under the Wiretapping and Electronic Surveillance Control Act.

As an appeals court, the Superior Court's jurisdiction is less specialized than the Commonwealth's; therefore, it hears a wide variety of petitions, both criminal and civil, from Common Pleas Courts. Such petitions include all manner of cases from child custody to armed robbery to breach of contract.

Supreme Court

Since the Supreme Court was established by the Pennsylvania Provincial Assembly in 1722, the Commonwealth's highest court has undergone several major changes that have

helped shape its composition today. The most far-reaching of these changes was the 1980 expansion of the Court's authority that allowed it to not only better administer the entire judicial system, but to devote greater attention to cases holding significant consequence for the Commonwealth and its citizens.

The Supreme Court's jurisdiction encompasses four main areas: original, appellate, exclusive and extraordinary.

The Court's **original** jurisdiction is non-exclusive and includes cases:

- of *habeas corpus*, cases involving detention of a party and determination of whether that party has been denied liberty without due process
- of *mandamus* or prohibited to courts of inferior jurisdiction
- of *quo warranto*, lawsuits challenging the right of an individual to hold a public office, alleging that the individual is holding the office illegally.

The Court's **appellate** jurisdiction includes those cases it hears at its own discretion and various types of cases heard as a matter of right. These latter cases include appeals of cases originating in Commonwealth Court and appeals of certain final orders issued by either the Common Pleas Courts or specific constitutional and judicial agencies.

Appeals from final orders of Common Pleas Courts include:

- cases involving matters prescribed by general rule
- the right to public office
- matters where the qualifications, tenure or right to serve or the manner of service of any member of the judiciary is in question

- review of death sentences
- supersession of a district attorney by the attorney general or by a court
- matters where the right or power of the Commonwealth or any political subdivision to create or issue indebtedness is in question
- statutes and rules held unconstitutional by the Courts of Common Pleas
- matters where the right to practice law is involved.

The Supreme Court has **exclusive** jurisdiction of appeals from the following boards/commissions:

- Legislative Reapportionment Commission
- Court of Judicial Discipline (under limited conditions)
- Minor Judiciary Education Board
- Pennsylvania Board of Law Examiners
- Disciplinary Board of the Supreme Court (attorneys).

The Court also has exclusive jurisdiction of appeals from Common Pleas Court involving the death penalty. Such cases are automatically appealed to the Supreme Court.

Finally, the Court possesses **extraordinary** jurisdiction to assume jurisdiction of any case pending before a lower court involving an issue of immediate public importance. This it can do on its own or upon petition from any party and is known as King's Bench power.

As with president judges in lower courts having seven or fewer judges, the chief justice attains office by virtue of having the longest continuous service among the seven justices.

For a list of Pennsylvania's judges and their jurisdictions, please refer to The Directory 2000, beginning on page 111. 