



The Pennsylvania Interbranch Commission for Gender, Racial, and Ethnic Fairness

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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Executive Director Shields Joins Other Members of Indigent Defense Advisory Committee as the Committee Convenes its First Meeting

*The Committee, Established by Legislation Supported by the Interbranch Commission, Will Play
an Integral Role in Improving the Provision of and Funding for Indigent Defense Services in
Pennsylvania*

Harrisburg, February 26, 2024 – On February 12, 2024, the Indigent Defense Advisory Committee (the “Committee”) held its inaugural meeting to begin developing statewide standards for the provision of indigent defense services in Pennsylvania and to drive out funding to judicial districts across the Commonwealth working to improve such services. The Committee, of which Interbranch Commission Executive Director Maraleen Shields is an *ex officio* member, was established within the Pennsylvania Commission on Crime and Delinquency (“PCCD”) by [Act 34 of 2023](#). Act 34 was signed into law in December 2023 by Governor Shapiro and, in addition to creating the Committee, established a first-of-its-kind allotment of \$7.5 million for the funding of indigent defense reform in our Commonwealth.

The Committee & its Responsibilities

As a member of the Committee, Executive Director Shields will play an integral role in: (1) crafting minimum standards for the effective delivery of indigent defense services; (2) adopting data collection requirements, the metrics for which will better capture judicial districts’ provision of indigent defense services; and (3) dispersing funds from the \$7.5 million legislative allotment to districts that demonstrate compliance with the standards established by the Committee and

approved by the Supreme Court of Pennsylvania. During the Committee’s meeting on February 12, Executive Director Shields and other Committee members resolved to begin driving out such funding by mid-year, expediting a process through which Pennsylvania will, for the first time, supplement individual county expenditures on indigent defense with state-based funding.

The Committee’s Meeting in Context

The Committee’s inaugural meeting occurred less than a week after Governor Shapiro released his [second budget proposal](#). The proposal calls for an extra \$2.5 million (\$10 million total) to be allotted to the Committee to continue its work. Given that Pennsylvania’s underfunded judicial districts annually spend more than \$100 million on indigent defense services,¹ such statewide funding serves as a crucial down payment on our Commonwealth’s constitutional obligation to make the justice system accessible for all, regardless of wealth.

The Governor acknowledged the importance of sustained funding in a news conference held immediately following the Committee’s first meeting. The press conference also featured remarks from several legislators with whom the Interbranch Commission has worked over the years to reform indigent defense services. Legislators included PA House Speaker Joanna McClinton, PA Senator Art Haywood, and PA Rep. Napoleon Nelson, who included in his comments a tribute to former Interbranch Commission Executive Director, Lisette (“Mimi”) McCormick. Ms. McCormick’s tireless efforts to improve indigent defense services in PA played a large role in the procurement of statewide and state-based funding. Sara Jacobson, Committee Chair and a member of the Interbranch Commission’s LGBTQ+ Rights Committee, offered opening remarks.

¹ Pa. Interbranch Comm’n for Gender, Racial and Ethnic Fairness, *Memorandum in Support of Reform of the Provision of Criminal Indigent Defense Services in Pennsylvania* 1, 8 (Oct. 28, 2020).

Historical Context

The Interbranch Commission has diligently advocated for the funding and reform of indigent defense services in our Commonwealth for nearly two decades. In 1999, the Supreme Court of Pennsylvania appointed a special committee to study racial and gender bias in the Pennsylvania justice system. After three and a half years, that study culminated in a report containing nearly 200 recommendations to address inequities. The Interbranch Commission was specifically created to implement the recommendations from that report. An appreciable number of these recommendations focused on the provision of adequate indigent defense counsel by securing sufficient funding and other resources, statewide professional standards and oversight, and reliable, uniform statewide data collection. Recognizing that the impact of system deficiencies falls disproportionately upon racial and ethnic minorities, the Interbranch Commission began convening – and continues to convene – meetings with legislators and relevant stakeholders to secure funding and support for the recommended reforms. At the request of bipartisan legislative leaders, the Commission also drafted and submitted a first-of-its-kind report, entitled [*Memorandum in Support of Reform of the Provision of Criminal Indigent Defense Services in Pennsylvania*](#), which sets forth a detailed plan for reform of Pennsylvania’s fragmented indigent defense system and contains an analysis of the costs and benefits of implementing those reforms.

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The Interbranch Commission for Gender, Racial, and Ethnic Fairness was established in 2005 by the three branches of Pennsylvania government. The purpose of the Interbranch Commission is to promote equal application of the law. The Interbranch Commission fulfills its purpose by implementing the recommendations from the 2003 study described above; investigating and implementing new initiatives that may not have been addressed by that study;

suggesting ways to reduce bias in all three branches of Pennsylvania government; raising both public and professional awareness of its work; and increasing public confidence in Pennsylvania government.

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