



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

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Interbranch Commission Convenes Quarterly Meeting of its Full Membership

The Meeting Welcomed a New Commissioner, Featured Strategies to Further New and Existing Initiatives, and Affirmed the Interbranch Commission's Commitment to Promoting Equal Application of the Law in Pennsylvania

Harrisburg, October 4, 2024 – On Friday, September 27, 2024, the Pennsylvania Interbranch Commission for Gender, Racial, and Ethnic Fairness (“Interbranch Commission”) conducted a quarterly meeting of its full membership at the Pennsylvania Judicial Center in Harrisburg.

The Quarterly Meeting: A Closer Look

The quarterly meeting featured the introduction of the Commission’s newest member, David Sexton. Mr. Sexton was appointed by Representative Brian Cutler, Minority Leader of the Pennsylvania House of Representatives. Commissioner Sexton is the Director and Managing Owner of Solegis, Inc., a diversity-owned staffing and recruiting firm. Two vacancies on the Interbranch Commission remain, to be filled by Senator Kim Ward and Senator Jay Costa.

The meeting highlighted efforts to raise the profile of the Interbranch Commission via an expanded presence across social media platforms, speaking engagements during educational programs and networking events, and focused outreach to key stakeholders across the Commonwealth. Interbranch Commission staff have worked diligently with the Interbranch Commission’s standing committees and officials within each of Pennsylvania’s three branches of government to increase the geographic and vocational diversity of the Interbranch Commission.

Commissioners also engaged in a robust discussion of the strategies the Interbranch Commission is pursuing to drive forward its existing initiatives. At present, the Interbranch Commission conducts its work through six committees: Criminal Justice, Domestic Violence and Sexual Assault Victims/Survivors, Equal Opportunity and Diversity, Jury Service, Language Access, and LGBTQ+ Rights. Among the Interbranch Commission’s current initiatives are:

- **Working with the Administrative Office of Pennsylvania Courts (“AOPC”), the Executive Branch, and the National Center for State Courts (“NCSC”) to improve access to language-based services in the Commonwealth.** The Commission is assisting with the targeted recruitment of court interpreters, improving transparency within the examination process that interpreters must complete to become certified, and modernizing the procedures through which court users and other individuals may submit feedback on language services. The Commission recently conducted a survey of rostered interpreters to solicit input on the certification process and to obtain a better sense of the qualification level of the interpreters provided when language access services are requested. The survey results will inform the Commission’s efforts moving forward.
- **Advocating for the implementation of evidence-based reforms for Pennsylvania’s jurors.** The Interbranch Commission assisted in the coordination of testimony presented by Pennsylvanians for Modern Courts (“PMC”) during a PA House Judiciary Committee hearing on jury service issues in February. Since the hearing, the Commission has advocated for: (1) increased compensation and employer-driven paid time off for jurors; (2) alleviating childcare burdens by learning more about existing childcare programs and advocating for the establishment of others across the Commonwealth; (3) advocating for jurors’ access to post-trial counseling and producing a pamphlet on juror mental health to

be made available in all judicial districts; and (4) striving to diversify jury composition by surveying court administrators and working with the AOPC to learn which districts use the Statewide Juror List and how the List can be improved.

- **Advocating for modernized and uniform procedures for individuals seeking a legal name change:** During the current legislative session, the Interbranch Commission [made recommendations](#) to the General Assembly aimed at streamlining and improving access to the process through which Pennsylvanians obtain a legal name change. The Commission also recently commented on a [proposal](#) by the Pennsylvania Supreme Court’s Civil Procedural Rules Committee to adopt a statewide rule governing name change petitions in the Commonwealth. The Commission suggested several amendments to the proposal but supported its provision of much-needed procedural uniformity and its focus on protecting petitioners’ privacy and safety.
- **Improving the provision of indigent defense services in the Commonwealth.** Executive Director Maraleen Shields continues to serve as an *ex officio* member of the statewide Indigent Defense Advisory Committee (“IDAC”). The Committee was created by Act 34 (2023) to craft standards for the effective provision of indigent defense services and to award funds from the Indigent Defense Grant Program to judicial districts so that they may expand support and resources for public defenders. Every county will receive funding for staffing, training, and ancillary services (investigators, interpreters, and social workers). Most recently, E.D. Shields agreed to serve as co-chair of the Data Collection, Technology, and Research Subcommittee, one of three working subcommittees formed by IDAC. The finalized FY 2024-25 state budget again allots \$7.5 million to this initiative.

“I am inspired by the diversity of professional perspectives and lived experiences that our Commissioners bring to the table each and every quarterly meeting. Their exceptional public service allows the Interbranch Commission to advocate effectively for the equitable administration of justice in our Commonwealth,” said Executive Director Shields. The next quarterly meeting of the Interbranch Commission will occur on December 12, 2024.

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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 Commission fulfills its purpose by implementing the findings and recommendations of the 2003 Final Report by the Pennsylvania Supreme Court Committee on Racial and Gender Bias in the Justice System; investigating and implementing new initiatives that may not have been addressed by that Report; suggesting ways to reduce bias in all three branches of Pennsylvania government; raising public and professional awareness of its work; and increasing public confidence in Pennsylvania government.

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