

A Citizen's Guide to Court Basics

About Us



**PENNSYLVANIANS
FOR MODERN COURTS**

To restore citizens' faith in the courts following a series of public judicial scandals in the 1980's, then-Superior Court Judge Phyllis W. Beck joined with other respected civic leaders to form Pennsylvanians for Modern Courts ("PMC"). PMC has functioned as Pennsylvania's only official "court watchdog" for nearly thirty years, identifying and speaking out on issues that impact the public's confidence in our courts, and then working to reform the judiciary. PMC aspires to create the conditions for a statewide judicial system in which all Pennsylvanians come to our courts, at all levels, with knowledge of the judicial system and confidence that they will be treated fairly and with respect.

Pennsylvania Court System

PENNSYLVANIA SUPREME COURT

The highest court in the Commonwealth is the Pennsylvania Supreme Court, which is the ultimate authority on state cases. The Supreme Court handles appeals from the Superior and Commonwealth Courts, especially cases involving the death penalty. The Supreme Court has seven members and they may serve until they reach the age of 75.

INTERMEDIATE APPELLATE COURTS

In Pennsylvania, there are two Intermediate Appellate Courts. The first is the Superior Court, which handles appeals in criminal and civil cases from the Courts of Common Pleas. The second is the Commonwealth Court, which handles original civil actions brought by and against Commonwealth and appeals from state agency decisions.

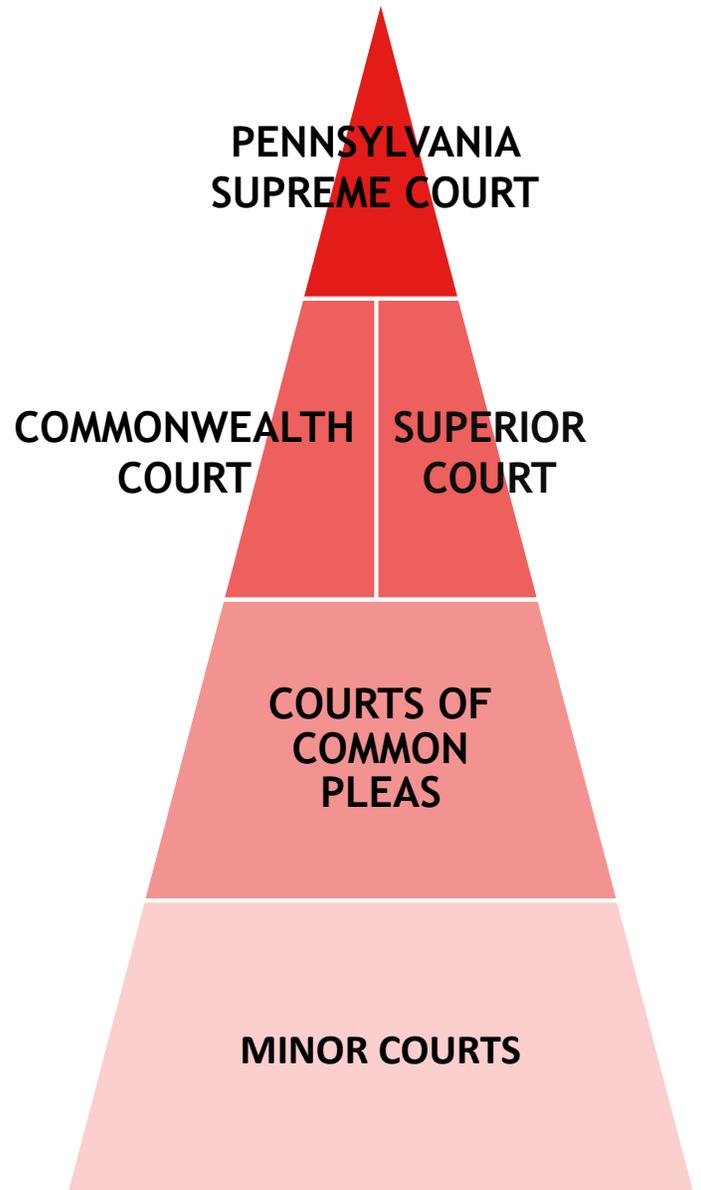
COURTS OF COMMON PLEAS

There is a Court of Common Pleas in each judicial district. A judicial district usually follows county lines, but seven districts consist of two counties. The Court of Common Pleas is the general trial court of Pennsylvania. This court also handles appeals from minor courts, as well as matters involving children and families.

MINOR COURTS

In Pennsylvania, there are two versions of minor courts. If you live outside of Philadelphia County, Magisterial District Courts are your minor courts. If you live in Philadelphia County, the Philadelphia Municipal Court is your minor court.

Minor courts address whether serious criminal cases go to the Court of Common Pleas, preliminary hearings, or setting bail (except in murder or voluntary manslaughter cases) and decide minor cases, such as those involving housing or small claims.



A Citizen's Guide to Court Basics

Federal Court System

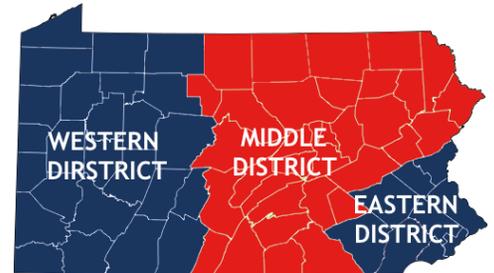
Federal courts only hear two types of cases. The rest must be heard in state courts.

1. Cases involving federal law
2. Both Plaintiff and Defendant are from different states AND the case is for more than \$75,000

UNITED STATES DISTRICT COURTS

The United States District Courts are the lowest level of federal courts. The United States brings both civil and criminal cases in this court. These courts do not handle bankruptcy cases.

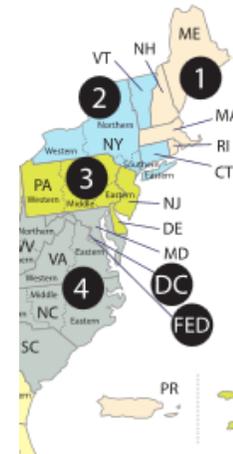
Pennsylvania is divided into three districts. The Eastern District consists of Philadelphia County and the surrounding counties. The Middle District includes Williamsport, Harrisburg, Scranton and Wilkes Barre. The remainder of the Commonwealth falls within the Western District.



UNITED STATES COURT OF APPEALS

The United States Court of Appeals is the intermediate level court. Here, cases are either heard by a panel of three judges or argued through briefs. The Court of Appeals must hear every case appealed from the District Courts.

Pennsylvania, New Jersey, Delaware, and the United States Virgin Islands are in the Third Circuit, so the Third Circuit Court of Appeals hears cases from these areas.



UNITED STATES SUPREME COURT

The United States Supreme Court is the highest court in the nation. The Supreme Court can hear appeals from the state Supreme Courts or the United States Court of Appeals, though it only hears less than 5% of appeals. If the Supreme Court does not hear a case, the verdict is final. For an appeal to be heard from a state Supreme Court, it must involve an issue of federal law.

The Supreme Court is located in Washington, D.C. and nine justices sit on the Court.



UNITED STATES BANKRUPTCY COURT

The United States has a separate court for Bankruptcy. Bankruptcies *must* be filed in federal court. The Bankruptcy Court is separate from the United States District Courts and the District Courts can send a bankruptcy case to Bankruptcy Court.

Each federal district has a Bankruptcy Court. An appeal from a Bankruptcy Court can be made to a District Court, state Bankruptcy Appeals Panel, or the United States Court of Appeals in that circuit.

