



# Franklin County Municipal Court 2024 Annual Report



# 2024 Annual Report

Administrative and Presiding Judge  
Hon. Jessica D’Varga

Judges - top row

**Hon. Gina R. Russo,  
Hon. Jim O’Grady,  
Hon. Mark Hummer,  
Hon. Jodi L. Thomas,  
Hon. James Green,  
Hon. Jarrod Skinner,  
Hon. Zach Gwin, and  
Hon. Andrea Peeples.**

Judges - bottom row

**Hon. Mary Kay Fenlon,  
Hon. Bill Hedrick,  
Hon. Jessica D’Varga,  
Hon. Mike McAllister,  
Hon. Cynthia Ebner,  
Hon. Stephanie Mingo and  
Hon. Eileen Paley.**

Court Administrator  
**Emily Shaw**

Deputy County Administrator  
**John Davenport**





375 SOUTH HIGH STREET • CHAMBERS 13D  
COLUMBUS, OHIO 43215

CHAMBERS OF  
JUDGE JESSICA G. D'VARGA  
PHONE: 614/645-8204  
FAX: 614/ 645-7803

Ladies and Gentlemen:

In accordance with section 1901.14 of the Ohio Revised Code, it is my pleasure to provide you with the 2024 Annual Report of the Franklin County Municipal Court.

The Franklin County Municipal Court remains the largest and busiest municipal court in Ohio. We continually strive to improve our services for every citizen who appears before us and to be efficient stewards of taxpayer resources. We value the financial support that we receive and strive to uphold your trust in our operations.

The ever changing legal landscape and continued diverse needs of the citizens of Franklin County present daily challenges for our judiciary and staff. However, as detailed in this report, we are committed to overcoming these challenges and meeting the needs of all the citizens in our community. Our goal is always to improve on what we have built and to fairly and equitably interpret and apply Ohio laws.

Please feel free to contact me if you have any questions or would like any additional information.

Sincerely,

Judge Jessica G. D'Varga  
Administrative and Presiding Judge



# About the Court

The Franklin County Municipal Court stands apart from the 120-plus municipal courts in Ohio. It is the busiest and largest municipal court in the state, handling 136,614 cases in 2024. It is also the only court to have a separate division focusing on environmental cases, such as animal abuse to illegal dumping property neglect and hazardous waste.

Franklin County Municipal Court Judges work to ensure impartiality, fairness, transparency, and restorative justice. The Court is regarded as a leader in its rehabilitation of probationers for its many programs which focus on specialized individualized treatment programs that have been proven to lower recidivism.

The court's high-volume caseload includes misdemeanor crimes; small claims lawsuits; traffic cases, evictions; civil cases where the damages are less than \$15,000; and environmental criminal and civil matters. In addition, the judges handle initial arraignments for felonies and preliminary hearings if the defendant has not been indicted yet. They interpret the law, manage case proceedings through the court, and have juries determine facts in a trial among their many responsibilities.

Furthermore, the Court's diversion programs are watched and have been emulated across the state.

The Court's widely respected diversionary programs offer a second chance to individuals who have barriers like drug addiction and mental health issues who want to recover and break the cycle of their involvement with the judicial system. The programs offer individualized treatment and mandate defendants follow program requirements in lieu of jail time.

The diversion programs are offered through five Specialized Dockets that offer assistance for veterans, women caught in the sex industry, those with mental health issues and those suffering from opioid or other forms of drug and alcohol addiction.

In addition, court services offer resources for help, case mediation, and assistance with expungements, and case sealings. The Court also provides guidance for unrepresented civil litigants.

The Franklin County Municipal Court has 15 judges, 14 of whom oversee the court's General Division and one Environmental Division Judge. The Environmental Division focuses on a broad range of civil and criminal environmental matters, making it unlike any other court in the state.

Together, the 15 judges, who each serve six-year terms, vote on one judge to serve as the Court's Administrative and Presiding Judge. In 2024, the Judges elected Judge Jessica D'Varga. She serves alongside Judges James Green, Zach Gwin, Mark Hummer, James P. O'Grady, Cynthia L. Ebner, Mary Kay Fenlon, Bill Hedrick, Mike McAllister, Eileen Paley, Andrea C. Peeples, Gina R. Russo, Jarrod Skinner, Jodi Thomas, and Environmental Court Stephanie Mingo.

The General Division has five full-time and two part-time magistrates, who hear all traffic, eviction, and small claim cases. The Environmental Court has a full-time Magistrate and one part-time magistrate.





*Through its innovative and compassionate approach, the Franklin County Municipal Court is reshaping lives and strengthening the community. The Franklin County Municipal Court is the largest and busiest municipal court in Ohio that handles criminal, civil, traffic, environmental, and has court supported services.*

# Franklin County Municipal Court



## Criminal Cases

Municipal Judges adjudicate all criminal misdemeanors and hold felony arraignments and pretrial hearings until the defendant is indicted and the case is transferred to Franklin County Common Pleas. Criminal environmental cases are heard by the Municipal Court.

## Civil Cases

The court hears civil cases with a maximum damage thresholds. For civil lawsuits damages must be under \$15,000 or small claims under \$6,000 in damages. The court also handles evictions and civil environmental claims, which don't have a limit on monetary damages.

## Traffic Cases

All traffic cases are handled in Municipal Court.

## Supportive Services

The court provides life-changing diversion programs for those battling addiction or mental health issues, as well as veterans and victims of sex trafficking overcoming trauma. In addition, the court provides resources through its MARCH program to help for unrepresented civil litigants through its Self Help Center.

## The Court's Jurisdiction

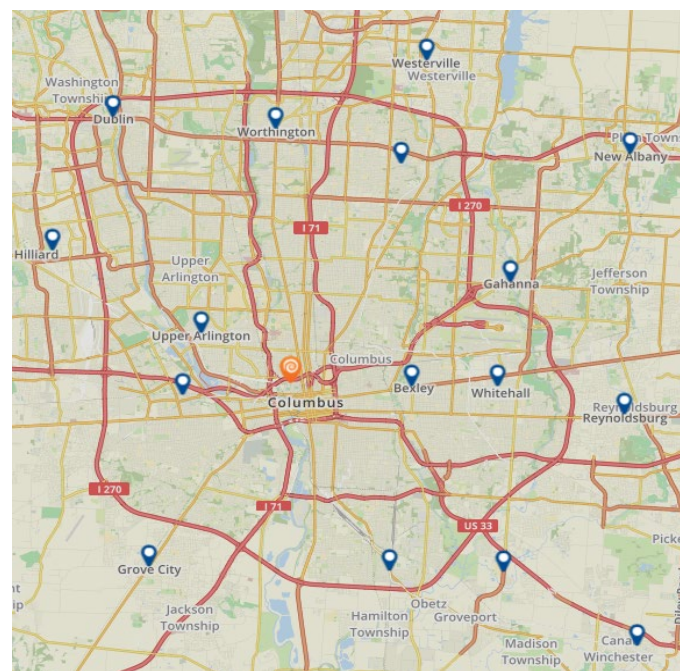
The court's jurisdiction includes all areas of Franklin County and all areas of the city of Columbus that extend outside the county's boundaries and Franklin County Municipal Court Judges have a wide range of authority.

In criminal cases, the Court's Judges can approve law enforcement's search warrants. If a defendant is arrested on a misdemeanor or felony charge, they are arraigned in the Municipal Court, where a Judge accepts a plea, sets the bond, and sets the initial hearing for the case.

The Judges hold arraignments and preliminary hearings on felony criminal cases, but the case is moved to Franklin County Common Pleas Court once a defendant is indicted on felony charges.

Judges also hear various civil cases and perform marriages. Civil cases heard by the Court's General Division include cases where the amount of possible damages does not exceed \$15,000, small claims cases where damages do not exceed \$6,000, proceedings to collect judgments, and rent escrow proceedings, to name a few responsibilities.

The judges hold arraignments and preliminary hearings on felony criminal cases, but the case is moved to Franklin County Common Pleas Court once the defendant is indicted on felony charges.



Map of Mayors' Courts in Franklin County.

# 2024 Annual Report Summary

The Franklin County Municipal Court has evolved since its creation in 1916 and underwent many changes and improvements in 2024. This executive summary highlights some of the changes, which are described in more detail in the pages ahead, including:

- The court began administering a Batterer Intervention Program (BIP), which addresses the root cause of violence through intervention.
- The court's five Specialized Dockets graduated 95 people in 2024. The programs are rooted in changing underlying behavior, such as addiction and mental health issues. The programs provide individualized treatment, to tackle barriers that played a role in their crimi-



Above: March Program Supervisor Ryan Topping shows off the court's new harm reduction vending machine.  
Right corner: Municipal Court Judge Jim O'Grady speaks at a City of Columbus press conference announcing the court's Batterer's Intervention Program.



nal history and help them recover.

- The Probation Department was awarded the Ohio Chief Probation Officer Association's Excellence Award for its stellar work balancing victims' rights while allowing offenders a chance at rehabilitation.
- Probation also added a new testing laboratory that allows defendants to be drug tested in the courthouse.
- The court's resource center called MARCH, which partners with community social services agencies, added a harm reduction vending machine that gives residents access to free products. One of them is Narcan, a medication that rapidly reverses a drug overdose, pregnancy test kits, condoms, and more.



- The Court's Self Help Center, which provides help to civil litigants not represented by an attorney, mediation, and legal resources, helped a record number of residents.
- The Court's Self Help Center hosted the state's largest ever Record Sealing and Expungement Clinic, which helped more than 750 people file applications to have judgments expunged or sealed, lifting a barrier preventing them from hiring or renting homes.
- Jurors saw an increase in the daily stipend provided for their service to \$30 a day.
- With Franklin County and the City of Columbus coordination, judges participated in four Tap In Center clinics in Whitehall. The clinics allow defendants with out-standing court cases that have been lingering months or years, a chance resolve their cases. Judges at the clinic often provided warrant set-asides so defendants can continue with their case without fear of being arrested, and receive a new court date.

**Court Hearings**  
**are on the Rise**

**109,500**

*Hearings scheduled in 2024,*  
**a 5%**  
*increase over 2023.*



Franklin County Municipal Judges from left Jim O'Grady, Eileen Paley and Jarrod Skinner assist residents at the Tap In Center.



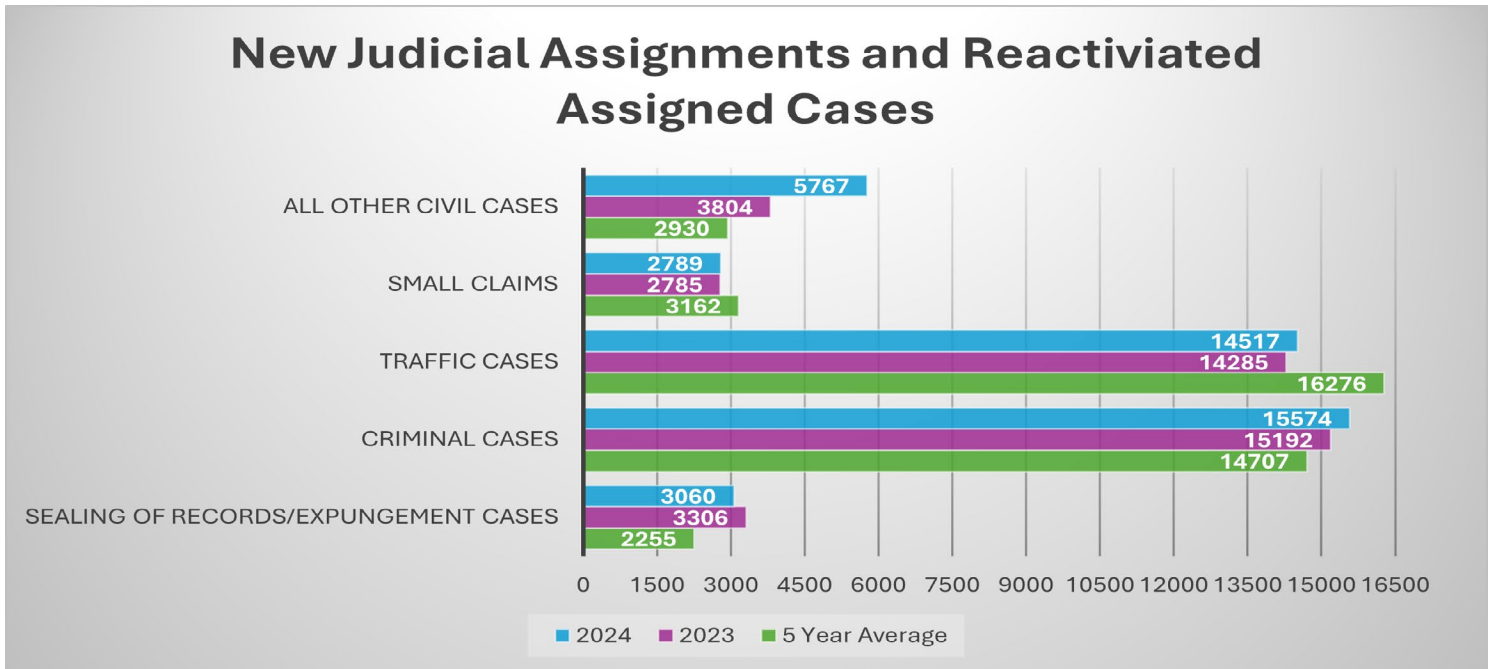
# Assignment Office

The Assignment Office serves the court's core functions, providing case flow management and administrative support to the 15 judges and the General Division's five full-time Magistrates and two part-time Magistrates. The Assignment Office also supports one full-time and one part-time Magistrate in Environmental Court.

Staff includes Assignment Commissioner Dawn Wilson, one Chief Deputy Assignment Commissioner, nine Deputy Assignment Commissioners (D.A.C.s), one Assignment Support Specialist, and four Assignment Case Specialists.

Their work begins when a criminal charge or civil case is filed. Assignment Office staff then randomly assigns a judge or a magistrate. Case management and support continue throughout the duration of the case and can extend beyond a judge's ruling. That is because the office's case support also includes assisting with issues and hearings like vehicle immobilization, probation, expungement, and post-judgment monitors.

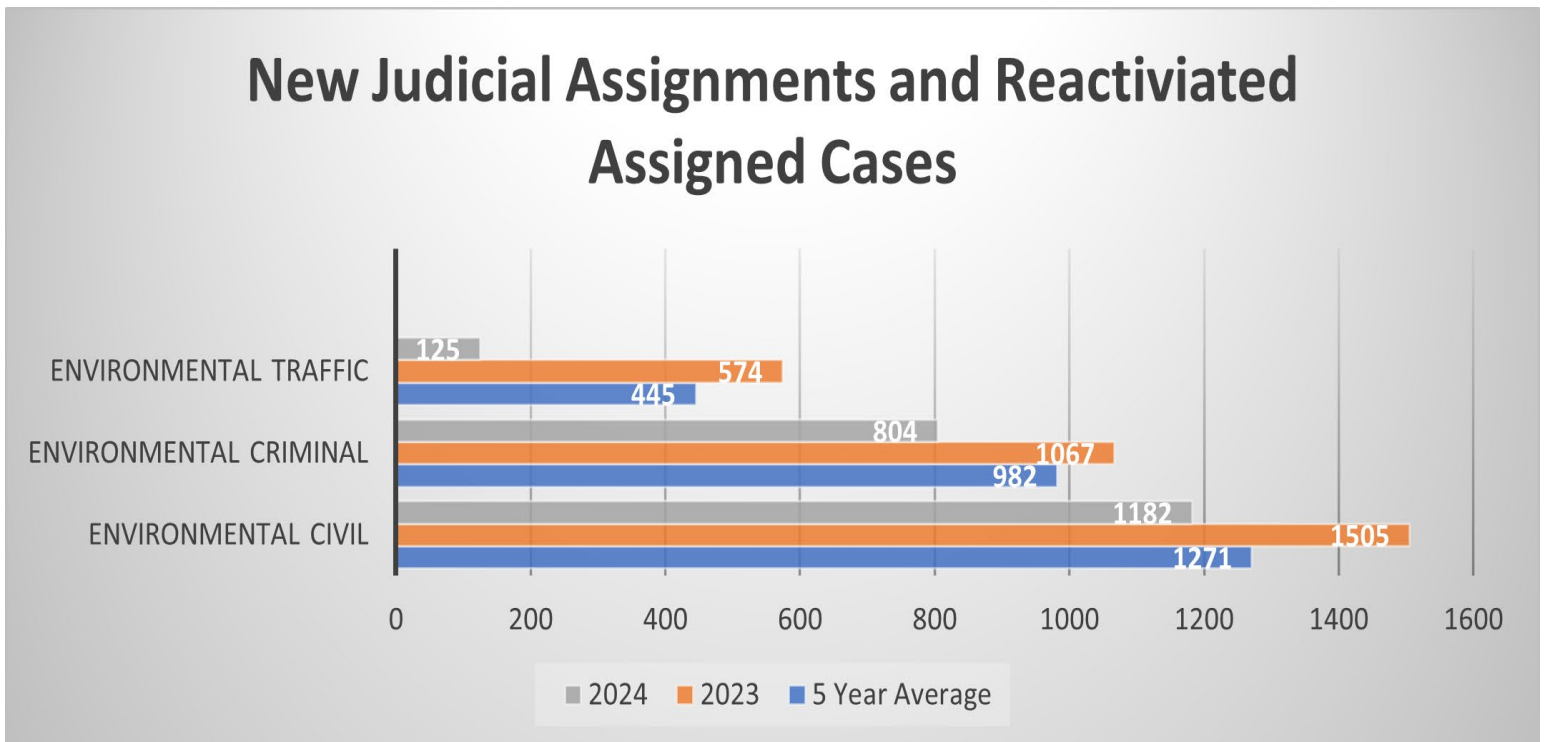
The Assignment Office's work is done behind the scenes and often goes unnoticed because their work ensures that cases move within the court system smoothly. However, the public can interact with Assignment Office staff at a public counter on the 9th floor. That is where Court and Clerk staff, Prosecutors, Attorneys, and the public can go for case information, such as court dates and locations, accepting new attorney database registrations, registered attorney updates and changes, party address changes, scheduling court dates, notary service, directions for other departments within the complex of buildings, and general court information.



Another key function of the Office is updating cases and sending notifications through the Supreme Court of Ohio's Case Management System. All courts in the state require monthly reporting. The Court's Case Management is dictated by Ohio Laws, Rules of Superintendence for Courts, Civil, Criminal and Traffic Rules, and the Courts Local Rules. For example, the Ohio Revised Code ensures hearings occur on time and speedy trial requirements are met.

**Other key functions of the office include:**

- Determining the single assignment of criminal and traffic cases to judges.
- Scheduling hearings for criminal, civil, and traffic cases.
- Processing motions and objections.
- Monitoring and verifying cases, including reactivating cases if there is a probation violation.
- Notifying parties about scheduled hearings by fax, mail, and/or email.
- Managing case flow on cases referred to mediation, diversion programs, and specialized dockets.
- Providing daily court docket sheets and case reports to the judiciary and others upon request.
- Creating monthly and yearly statistic reports.
- Managing all aspects of cases the Ohio Supreme Court assigned due to case recusals, block recusals, or specific time request assignments.



**Who the Assignment Office assists:**

- The Municipal Court’s General Division, which is responsible for criminal, civil, and sealing of record or expungement cases.
- The Environmental Court, which handles housing, zone, animal, and health code criminal and civil violations.
- The Court’s Magistrates who are responsible for hearing small claim cases.
- The Court’s Specialized Dockets and other diversion programs, which offers defendants a detailed program that focuses on individualized treatment in lieu of jail time.
- The Clerk’s Office, who initiates all cases and is the keeper of the record.
- The public at their counter window on the 9th floor.
- Attorneys, Prosecutors, and court officials.

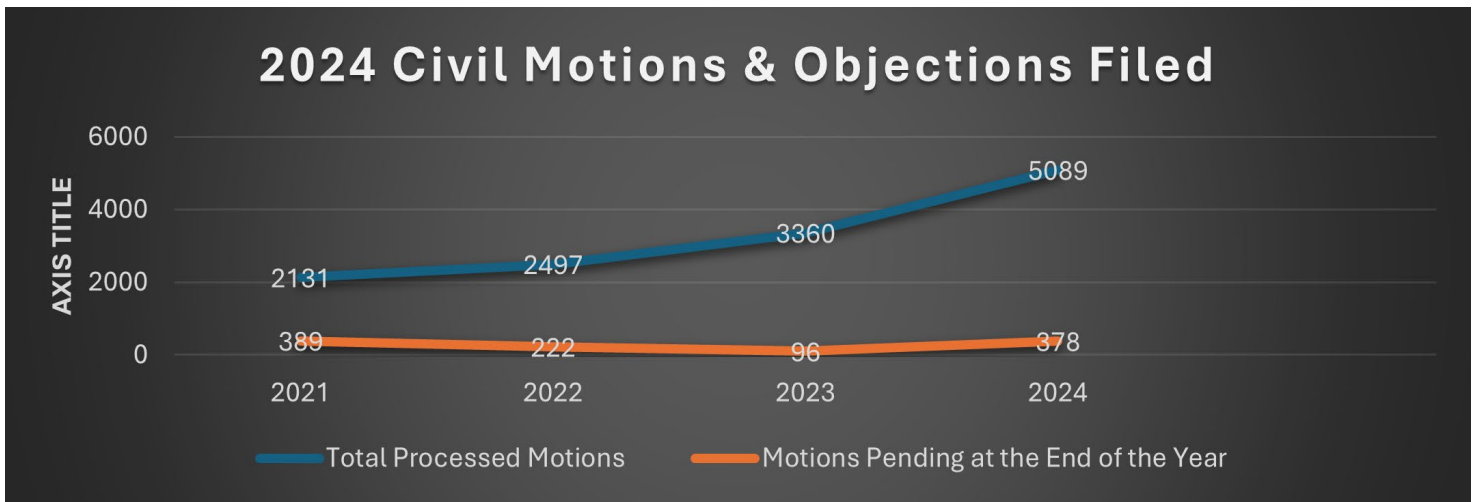
**Additional Highlights include:**

- All Environmental categories decreased in 2024. The most significant drop was in environmental traffic cases, which declined 78%.
- Civil case assignments had the most significant increase, up 52% over 2023.
- The Office scheduled approximately 109,500 hearings, an increase of almost 5% over 2023.
- Of the hearing notices issued, only 2.8% were returned, a decrease of 8.1% over 2023.
- The Court had 14 Judicial Assignments by the Supreme Court of Ohio in 2024, a 17.7% decrease, and 83 hearings scheduled, a 46.8% decrease over 2023.
- Of those total motions, 2.9% of cases were pending in 2023, and 7.4% were pending in 2024.
- Of the civil cases assigned, 2,412 General Division cases were referred to mediation, and 2,440 cases with Applications and Affidavits for Online Removal on F.E.D. cases and one small claim.
- Judicial Clearance rates for 2024 were 99% for the General Division and 105% for the Environmental Division.
- Speed Enforcement Cases (a CSV case type) were new for 2024. Of the 4,101 cases filed from September 9, 2024, 195 were assigned, and hearings were scheduled.

**Jury Trials**  
**14,392**  
*trials were scheduled in 2024.*  
*This is a **9%** increase over 2023.*

The Franklin County Municipal Court continually strives to improve its programs and operating procedures to increase efficiency and save valuable public dollars. The Assignment Office has and continues to play a key role in this. Some of those accomplishments thus far include:

- Processing all civil speed violations “paperless” through the Case Management System. When full payments are made, the Assignment Office cancels any future court date. This streamlines the processing of the case, notifications, and hearing scheduling.
- The Assignment Office has also been taking steps to reduce the time it takes for case files to move within the Court complex, which speeds up the time needed from case filing to scheduling and issuance of the complaint. The System Notification system is now also employed for other pleadings,





# Court Administration

The Court Administration oversees the administrative and operational functions of the Court, implementing non-judicial policies and providing support and direction to the Court's 280 employees. It is led by Administrator Emily Shaw and Deputy Administrator John Davenport who oversee personnel management, budgeting, fiscal management, purchasing, liaison with other courts and agencies, public information, the appointment of counsel, court services, court security, interpreter services, and technology management.

<b>Breakdown of General Fund Operating Budget 2024</b>	
Personnel	\$24,618,219
Materials and Supplies	\$208,281
Services	\$3,152,596
Other Expenditures	\$490,000
<b>Total General Fund</b>	<b>\$28,469,096</b>

The Court Administrator serves as the chief non-judicial officer. The Court's General Fund Operating Budget for 2024 amounted to \$28,469,069, with an additional \$923,200 allocated to the Secure Facilities Fund and a \$327,784 budget for the Computer Fund. The Court is very fiscally conservative spending only \$3.8 million on expenses other than personnel, including programming.

The court gets a majority of its funding from the City of Columbus, Franklin County and a myriad of federal grants.

## Courtroom Bailiffs

A bailiff is assigned to work with each judge and reports to him/her directly while running the courtroom efficiently. Among their many duties, bailiffs:

- Assist with day-to-day courtroom operations, such as monitoring the arrival of defense, prosecutors, and defendants so they can signal the judge when all parties are present.
- Manage the flow of case files for the judge.
- Serve as a liaison between attorneys, court personnel, the public, and the judge.
- Scheduling future court hearings and trials.

The judicial bailiffs now also assist members of the public with resolving various matters if applicable, including:

- Extending time to pay fines and court costs.
- Delaying the start of court-ordered incarceration.
- Issuing or modifying limited driving privileges.
- Withdrawing warrants or orders-in.
- Assisting with impounded vehicles.
- Helping with Bureau of Motor Vehicle (B.M.V.) issues.
- Continuing court dates.

The court also has a bailiff for the duty room and two arraignment bailiffs.

# Court Reporters



Court Reporters make a verbatim record of court proceedings, prepare a transcript from the record of court proceedings upon request, and maintain records of exhibits introduced at court proceedings. Court reporters also prepare transcripts from digital recordings of proceedings upon request. The Court must provide a transcript of all proceedings upon request of a party, and there must be a court record of all pleas and waivers.

In 2024, the Department was staffed by Chief Court Reporter Carolyn Scales, who also holds a full-time court reporter assignment, seven full-time court reporters, and three part-time court reporters. They provided 519 transcripts and/or digitally recorded proceeding requests.

# Court Support Services

The Court Support Services Department is an essential component of the Municipal Court in its day-to-day support of operations and ensuring that the court's critical functions occur seamlessly and efficiently. Their support is wide-ranging including arraignment bailiff coverage, vehicle sanctions, forensic psychological services and support of the Duty Room.

Judges rotate in the Duty Room weekly handling critical functions like approval of Magistrate decisions, ruling on motions filed on all non-assigned civil cases, conducting civil wedding ceremonies, signing search warrants, and addressing show cause hearings, exemption requests, objections to Magistrate's decisions, warrant set-asides, and other miscellaneous duties.

Support Services does this all with a team of only five full-time employees under the direction of Director Christopher Boyd.

This Department has also helped the Municipal Court accomplish more with less. In 2024, Support Services eliminated the Court Services Unit, and with it two full-time positions citing a decrease in its utili-

A long, perspective view of a hallway with barred doors on both sides. The floor is light-colored. Overlaid on the image is the text 'In custody arraignments' in red, followed by a list of statistics in black. The number '1' is visible on a door to the left.

**In  
custody  
arraignments**

- 18,240 Jailed Defendants
- 276 Medically unable to appear
- 441 Refused to appear
  - 152 Unruly
- 442 Appearance waived

Interpreters were used 722 times

zation. The tasks were transferred to the judicial bailiff assigned to the Duty Room.

The judicial bailiffs now assist members of the public with resolving various matters, including:

- Extending time to pay fines and court costs, or continuing court dates.
- Delaying the start of court-ordered incarceration.
- Withdrawing warrants or orders-in or assisting with impounded vehicles.

- Helping with Bureau of Motor Vehicle (B.M.V.) issues or modifying limited driving privileges.

State law mandates that vehicles operated by defendants convicted of repeat O.V.I. offenses (operating a vehicle while under the influence of alcohol or drugs) or driving under certain court or B.M.V.-related suspensions must be immobilized or forfeited. In cases related to the Financial Responsibility Act or wrongful entrustment of a vehicle, the court decides whether to immobilize or forfeit the vehicle.

## Duty Room By the Numbers

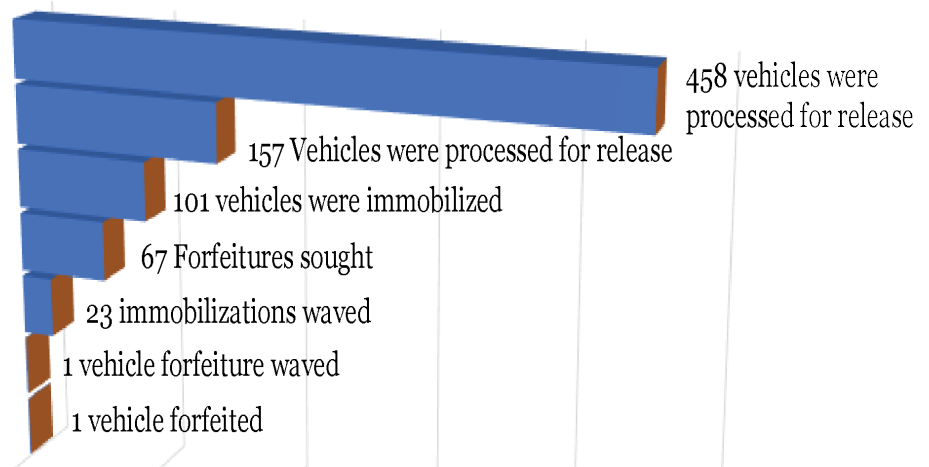


In 2024, the Duty Room handled:

- 46 cases which sought hearings for show cause.
- 408 objections to a Magistrate’s decision or to stop a set out
  - ◊ 292 claims that were denied or overruled.
  - ◊ 116 were set for hearings.
- 1,125 civil wedding ceremonies were preformed.

The Court Support Services Department serves as a vital liaison facilitating communication between the court, law enforcement, and defendants to ensure strict compliance with the court’s orders regarding the defendant’s vehicle. The court is committed to maintaining the highest standards of professionalism and compliance in all interactions with stakeholders involved in these matters.

## Vehicle Sanctions



## Forensic Psychological Services:

In May 2023, the Court’s forensic psychological services were moved under the Court Support Services Department. This effort involves the management of required competency evaluations, probate commitments, forensic restorations, and administrative communication with the Judges regarding each case, ensuring efficient and effective handling of forensic psychological cases. Franklin County Municipal Court contracts with Behavioral Sciences LLC for forensic psychological services.

### 2024 Psychological Forensic Cases in the Franklin County Municipal

- 436 defendants were referred for evaluation.
- 68 defendants were referred for outpatient competency restoration.
- 61 defendants were referred for inpatient competency restoration.
- 57 defendants were referred for commitment via Probate Court.



# Environmental Court

The Franklin County Municipal Court's Environmental Division, also known as "The Environmental Court," has successfully implemented unique sentencing strategies to address vacant and abandoned properties and persistent offending landlords. The Environmental Court, under presiding Judge Stephanie Mingo, handles nuisance abatement cases involving various types of properties, such as derelict hotels, businesses violating health department orders, liquor establishments violating the law, drug houses, and other residential and commercial properties engaged in illegal and nuisance activities. These activities can include drug sales, underage alcohol sales, violation of health department orders, human trafficking, and violence.

The Environmental Court also hears cases related to environmental crimes, code violations, and other environmental matters filed within the County, including animal abuse and neglect, dog fighting, wildlife violations, littering, illegal dumping, air and water pollution, hoarding, and code enforcement violations. In 2024, the Environmental Court had 2,342 new criminal and 646 new civil cases filed, including vacant and abandoned properties adjudicated through the Court's receivership docket. The Court-appointed receiver rehabilitated and/or sold 33 properties with requirements for the new owners to maintain compliance with all applicable laws and codes.

Presiding Judge  
Stephanie Mingo  
Franklin County  
Municipal Judge  
2009 to present

Presiding over the only  
Environmental Court of  
its kind in Ohio.



Defendants can be assigned or chose to do public service with the Environmental Court's Cleanup Crew. Crews take areas, like on the left, and clean them up until they look like the alley shown above.



As the only Court in the county handling code enforcement cases, the Environmental Court employs unique techniques to restore communities and neighborhoods impacted by nuisance properties. The Court orders property owners to bring their properties into compliance under the supervision of the Court's chief environmental specialist and the Environmental Investigations Section. Penalties may include daily fines, jail time, and completion of community service hours in the Court's Community Cleanup Crew program. The Environmental Court



prepares and issues compliance plans and timelines for defendants to follow.

In 2023, environmental specialists conducted approximately 1,300 property inspections and participated in 14 community events. The environmental specialists also assisted in operating and overseeing the Municipal Court's Community Service Program, also known as The Community Cleanup Crew. The Environmental Court operates two courtrooms simultaneously, with Judge Mingo presiding over civil and criminal hearings and one full time Magistrate conducting civil case conferences. The court also has one part-time magistrate to fill in as needed. The Court is supported by three environmental specialists, a staff attorney, two bailiffs, and an administrative assistant. The Probation Department also has a designated probation officer to supervise defendants.

The Environmental Court also oversees the Municipal Court's Community Cleanup Crew. The crew provides defendants with an opportunity to give back to the community by completing community service hours through neighborhood clean-up and beautification efforts. The crew consists of a community service coordinator and a part-time community service specialist. The Environmental Court remains committed to education and outreach efforts throughout Franklin County. Judge Mingo and the Environmental Court's staff continue to develop and strengthen partnerships with stakeholder agencies and neighborhood groups with a shared vision of safe and clean communities.

Court staff also participate in community resource fairs and host regular legal outreach events throughout the county. The court also provides educational outreach tools, which are available online, empower community partners, neighborhoods, businesses, and citizens to make meaningful changes in their environment.

# Interpreter Services



Judge Jarrod Skinner utilizes a Sign Interpreter via video for a Valentine's Day wedding.

Few departments in the Court have experienced as much growth as Interpreting Services in 2024.

The Interpreting Department employs two full-time Spanish and one full-time Somali interpreter and contracts with three part-time Spanish and one part-time Nepali interpreter. Additionally, the Court has multiple contracts with outside vendors to provide interpreters in more than 45 other languages, as well as American Sign Language.

In 2024, the many requests were handled with on-site and remote interpreters. The foreign languages for which interpreters are most requested include Spanish, Somali, Nepali, Haitian Creole, French, Arabic, Tigrinya, Amharic, Mandarin, Russian, and Kinyarwanda. In addition, the Court covers requests for the deaf and hard of hearing with interpreters in American Sign Language and Certified Deaf Interpretation.



Use this QR Code to schedule an interpreter

## Some of the Languages Translated at the Franklin County Municipal Court in 2024





# Jury Commission

The Jury Commissioner's Office works closely with its software provider, the Board of Elections, and the Court's Technology department to update a new list of prospective jurors yearly. This collaboration ensures that courtrooms for the court's 15 judges and eight magistrates have the necessary number of jurors available daily to cover jury trials in the Municipal Court.

When a jury is requested, the Jury Commissioner's Office efficiently organizes and assigns qualified potential jurors to the respective courtrooms. The office also tracks demographic information from the reporting group weekly and compiles it at year's end. The reports ensure that juror sampling comes from Franklin County jurisdictions.

On Oct. 21st, 2024, the court made several improvements to the jury system, which is directed by Jury Commissioner Carmen Shroyer. Jurors are only required to serve a week or for the duration of one trial. Jurors now also report in person daily. The court previously utilized an on-call system and required jurors to serve two weeks.

The changes ensure that the Municipal Court has roughly 60 jurors every Monday. If a juror is not impaneled by Wednesday afternoon, they are released from service for the rest of the week. With this change, four jury trials can be held a week.

The per diem stipend paid to jurors was increased by \$10 a day in 2024. Jurors are also provided a bus pass or a daily a parking voucher, if needed.

In total, the juror payroll expenses, which include on-call and on-site daily reporting, reached \$55,560, with jurors being utilized 46.98% of the time.

In 2024, jurors rated their experience highly given its efficiency, transparency, and all the accommodations provided to jurors by the staff. Last year, the Municipal Court asks jurors to complete a survey and then averaged the results for the year. Jurors gave the Municipal Court a 4.49 out of 5.



This is the jury room where roughly 2,700 jurors report to Municipal Court each year.

Jury Reporting Requirements and Reimbursements	
Reporting Period	1 trial or 1 week*
Per diem	\$25 a day**
Bus voucher	\$5 a day
Previous per diem	\$15
Parking vouchers	\$5 vouchers for one of two parking garages
* Prior to a change made in 2024, jurors had to report for two weeks.	
** The daily stipend was increased in October 2024 from \$15 a day.	

# Legal Research

The Legal Research Department plays a crucial role in supporting the Court by researching and preparing memoranda on pending issues, maintaining research and reference materials, and ensuring the Court's compliance with new case law. The department under Magistrate Gene Edwards also reviews pending legislation that may impact the Court and advises judges and employees on new legal developments and the application of current law to court procedures. In addition to these responsibilities, the Legal Director serves as a part-time magistrate and acts as a liaison to the Court's Self Help Center.

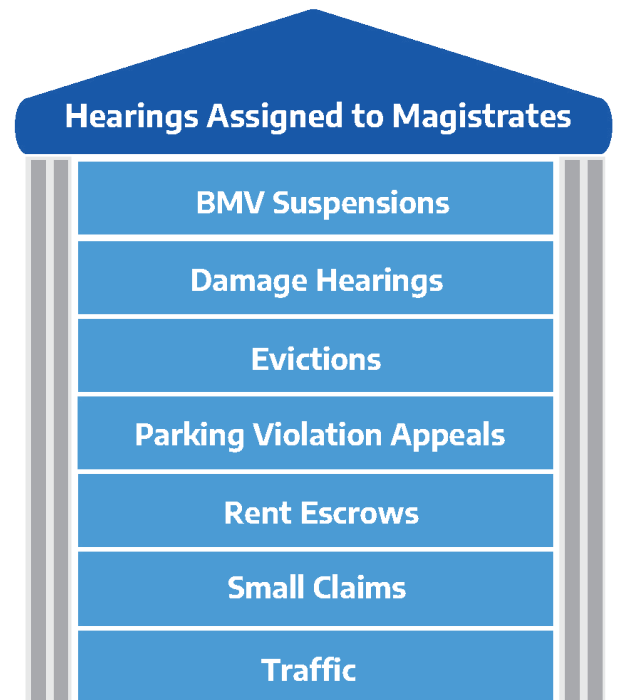
## Magistrates

The Franklin County Municipal Court's General Division has five full-time magistrates and two part-time magistrates who are appointed to hear a wide variety of cases. The Environmental Court also has one full-time and one part-time Magistrate. The dockets assigned for hearings by a Magistrate include Driver's License suspension by the B.M.V., eviction proceedings, traffic violations, and small claims cases.

Magistrates may also be assigned specific cases referred to them by a Judge.

After hearing a case, Magistrates issue a Magistrate's Decision, which states their findings, conclusions, and recommendations for judgment. A Judge reviews each Magistrate's Decision and may accept, reject, or modify it. If the reviewing judge accepts a Magistrate's Decision, they issue a Judgment Entry consistent with the Magistrate's Decision.

In 2024, Magistrates handled 2,771 new small claims cases, as well as 18 that were reactivated and 957 cases carried over from 2023.



Magistrates in the top row from left: Danielle Sparks, Gene Edwards, Raenell Nagel, and Kirk Lindsey.

Magistrates in the bottom row from left: Michael Allbritain, Jessica Karrasch, Administrative Magistrate Tony Paat and Tanya Askew.

Not pictured: Ron Wadlinger.





# Department of Pretrial Services and Probation Services

The Department of Pretrial and Probation Services (DOPPS) serves the Franklin County Municipal Court Judges under the direction of the Court Administrator. With a staff of approximately 120 individuals, DOPPS is the Court's largest division. The department is widely recognized for:

- its commitment to excellence in rehabilitation through evidence-based practices.
- reducing recidivism.
- changing offender behavior.
- fostering accountability, and
- promoting community safety.

The department had more than 12,000 active cases last year. DOPPS has a highly trained and professional staff to manage such a caseload, with all probation officers required to hold a bachelor's degree or higher. Fifteen percent of this skilled workforce has a master's degree, 8% have a counseling, social work, or chemical dependency license, 2% are Certified Trainers for the Supreme Court Judicial College, and 30% are certified facilitators in various cognitive-behavioral intervention programs.

DOPPS strictly follows evidence-based models and utilizes a tiered-risk model that mandates more from high-risk offenders, including random urinalysis. Offenders can help select some of the agreed-upon goals and benefit from residential programming, cognitive-behavioral interventions, behavioral health assessments, educational programs, and counseling for mental health and/or substance abuse needs.

This multifaceted approach, using evidence-based practices and skilled staff who promote rehabilitation while fostering accountability and promoting safety, has led to high success rates. For example, the Department's Work Release Program boasts a 98% overall participant success rate.

In 2024, the Ohio Chief Probation Officer Association awarded DOPPS its Excellence Award for the



Some of the Municipal Court's Probation Department staff.



department's significant contributions to community corrections and overall excellence, as seen in its evidence-based practices, partnerships with industry experts, and cohesive teamwork that provides leading outcomes.

In 2024, DOPPS was assigned 4,199 new post-disposition cases. Offenders were divided into five levels: Low, Low-Moderate, Moderate, Intensive, and Extremely High-Risk supervision. Depending on risk level and an offender's needs, those under supervision may benefit from sex offender-specialized mental health, soliciting/human trafficking, CAP IT LGBTQ+ program, electronic monitoring/home confinement, Work Release, or the Court's Specialized Docket programs. High-risk offenders may work with DOPPS's Strategic Enforcement Response Team (SERT).



### Chief Probation Officer

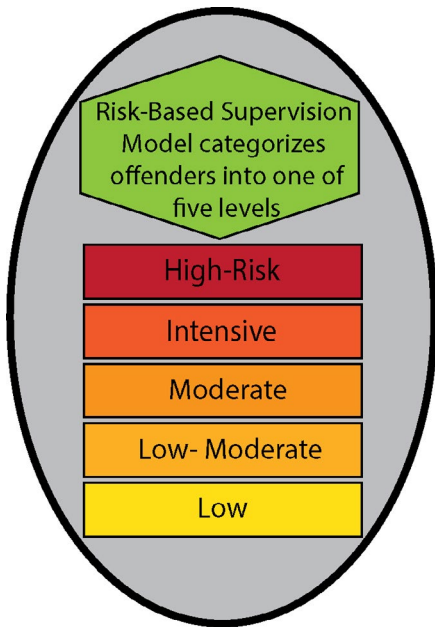
Elisha Zerman is the department's Chief Probation Officer (CPO), who oversees the department's

overall operations, manages the operating budget and ensures efficient departmental operations. Probation User Fees support essential DOPPS supervision programs and initiatives, with defendants paying approximately \$254,568 in 2024, an average of \$21,214 monthly.

Chief Probation Officer Association's Award of Excellence given to the Municipal Court's Probation Department.

The Chief Probation Officer and Court Administration utilize a conservative fiscal policy leveraging grant support. The department has more than \$4 million in grants across varied fiscal schedules and reports quarterly outcomes to stakeholders.

It takes many units within the department to rehabilitate, foster accountability, and promote safety.



### Batterer Intervention Program (BIP)

In October 2024, the Franklin County Municipal Court's Department of Pretrial and Probation Services began offering a Batterer Intervention Program within the FCMC. The court took over an existing BIP program that had previously been out-sourced and made many improvements, which have been proven effective in changing Intimate Partner Violence (IPV) behavior for some men placed on community control.

These changes are also expected to improve participation and completion rates. For example, the program is now free for defendants and meets with male/female co-facilitated sessions held at the courthouse. Each defendant is assessed for low, moderate, high, and extremely high risk to reoffend. How long they report to the program depends on their risk assessment. Probationers at moderate risk of re-offending will be referred to the Duluth model BIP. This education-based model meets for a minimum of 26 weeks.

Probationers who are at high or extremely high risk of re-offending are referred to the Emerge mod-

el. This model lasts a minimum of 40 weeks. The first eight weeks are education-based, and increased participation is expected thereafter. Each enrollee must complete a competency step before completing the program, which requires a detailed ownership of an abusive incident within the confines of their co-facilitated group.

By the start of 2025, 39 defendants were enrolled, and additional groups are expected to be created. The long-term goal is to reduce barriers for those likely to re-offend so that change is more likely.

### **Community Sanctions Unit (CSU)**

The Department's Community Sanctions Unit is a critical section that supports and manages various department functions. The CSU has five full-time officers and one supervisor who monitor defendants who are ordered to complete Community Service hours instead of fines and court costs as part of a plea agreement. The Community Sanctions Officer ensures compliance with the required hours and files a notice with the Municipal Court Clerk regarding the completion or non-completion of the hours once the deadline has passed.

In 2024, the CSU monitored 407 cases for Community Service compliance, not including cases referred for placement and monitoring of Community Service. In 2024, CSU also took on 575 new cases for Provided No Convictions (PNC) and continued to monitor 846 PNC cases carried over from the previous year. The CSU oversees PNC cases for new criminal convictions. In 2024, the Court ordered restitution of \$404,074.69 in 621 cases, with \$213,030.24 collected and disbursed. The remaining cases are still in the process of payment, revoked, or on warrant status. Additionally, the CSU assists with managing and supervising the Court's Non-Reporting Community Sanction Response (NRCS). In 2024, there were 1,384 new cases assigned to the NRCS caseload for monitoring new criminal activity and compliance with court-ordered conditions, bringing the total number to 2,243.

### **Electronic Monitoring**

The Electronic Monitoring/Home Confinement (EMHC) Program is a cost-effective sentencing option that allows a defendant to reside in the community while being continuously monitored electronically. Judges can impose monitoring as a condition of pretrial release, post-disposition supervision, or response to non-compliance/probation violation. The EMHC Program allows defendants to seek or maintain employment, participate in approved programming/treatment, and attend to critical medical needs or conditions.

In 2024, the EMHC Program officers monitored the whereabouts of 279 defendants who served 13,952 days on community supervision. Of the 279 defendants, 184 completed their EMHC condition (70%), and 44 were successfully carried over into 2024. Unfortunately, 51 of the 279 were terminated unsuccessfully (18.3%). The 279 defendants placed on EMHC consisted of 236 men and 43 women. Among the men, 153 completed their monitoring (64.9%), and 40 continue to be monitored in 2024. Of the women, 35 completed their monitoring (81.4%). On average, the defendants sentenced to an EMHC condition served 50 days of monitoring.

All 14 General Division Judges of the Franklin County Municipal Court utilized the services of the



Restitution  
*The court ordered*  
**\$404,074.69**  
*in 621 cases in 2024.*  
**\$213,030.24**  
*was collected and*  
*disbursed.*

### **Electronic Monitoring or Home Confinement**

**279**  
*defendants  
served*

**13,952** days of  
*supervision in 2024.*

EMHC Program in 2024. EMCH usage is a condition of pretrial release and post-disposition sentencing. Defendants had various charges, including but not limited to OVI, Domestic Violence, Assault, Telephone Harassment, Resisting Arrest, Theft, Menacing by Stalking, Violation of Protection Order, Possession of Drugs, and Soliciting. In 2024, 279 of the 279 defendants (100%) placed on EMHC were declared indigent by the Court for purposes of EMHC monitoring payment.

### **Electronic Monitoring or Home Confinement**

**184**  
*of*  
**279**

*defendants on electronic  
or home monitoring  
successfully completed  
their supervision in 2024.*

### **Human Trafficking/Soliciting**

The Department's Partnership for Advocacy, Care, and Treatment (PACT) Program plays a vital role in supervising defendants convicted of soliciting, but not participating in the CATCH Court. It provides a community response with specialized and intensive supervision and comprehensive and coordinated community programming. The PACT Program, which is a collaborative effort among community partners and the department, offers individualized and comprehensive bio-psycho-social assessments, specialized case management, alcohol and drug treatment, medication-assisted treatment options, trauma services, mental health services linkage, and wrap-around services, such as safe housing, transportation, peer mentors, and GED.

Moreover, the PACT program is currently piloting and collecting data on the Women's Risk Need Assessment (WRNA), a gender-responsive risk. The WRNA needs assessment is a scoring tool that factors women's risk factors and criminogenic needs associated with recidivism and future misconduct, supporting case planning. In 2024, the PACT program enrolled sixteen (16) clients in treatment. The PACT Program aims to provide customized treatment and case management services through various community partners. Clients who consistently engage with their treatment plans and work closely with their providers across the PACT Program partners are most likely to achieve successful completion.

### **Intake Unit**

The DOPPS Intake Unit is committed to reducing recidivism by assigning individuals to an appropriate probation officer. The unit has streamlined the processes, with clients initiating the probation intake by entering their information on a kiosk and immediately receiving their Intake Probation Officer assignment following sentencing. Intake Probation Officers conduct assessments and screenings to determine the appropriate supervision level for clients. All team members are certified in the use of the Ohio Risk Assessment System (ORAS) and are completing the Community Supervision Tool (CST), Impaired Driving Assessment (IDA), and Intimate Partner Violence Assessment (IPVA).

In 2024, the Department continued to develop the Intake Assessment project, which conducts comprehensive assessments before case assignments are made and reduces the time between intake and supervision assignments. The team completed 1,667 assessments in 2024, with an average time of 15 days. This





process has dramatically improved staff time and the direct linkage of defendants to their assigned officers based on their assessed risk level.

### **Investigation Services**

The DOPPS provides investigation services to the Court through its Investigation Unit, which has six officers and three probation officer supervisors. In 2024, the Investigation Unit completed 14 presentence investigations and 2,299 sealing of record investigations. The Investigation Unit also incorporates the Department’s risk assessment tools into its Presentence Investigation reports, providing the Court with the defendant’s assessed risk level and appropriate supervision placement if the defendant is under community control supervision.

### **MARCH**

MARCH (Medically-assisted treatment. Assessments. Referral. Collaboration. Hope.) collaborates to connect individuals needing resources and treatment with appropriate programs and services. The MARCH program is known more commonly as the departments resource and referral center.

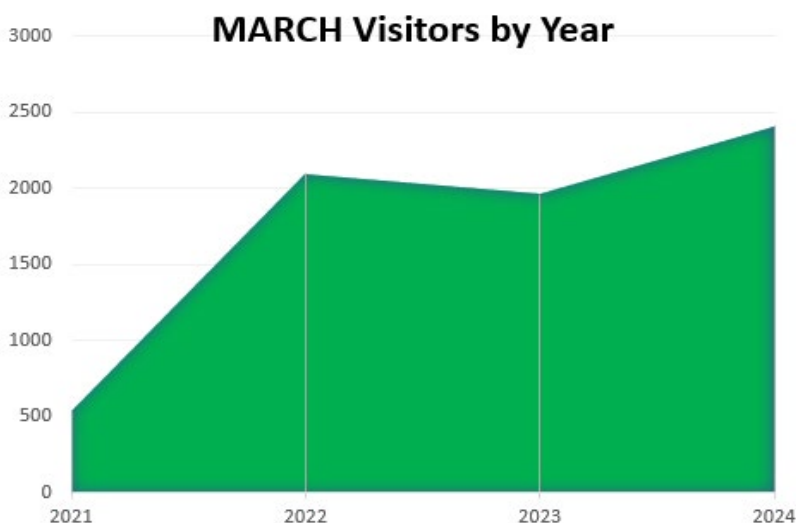
The MARCH Program not only helps those who are justice-involved, but also provides tailored help to any courthouse visitors. The program starts with a complete basic needs assessment to determine how a person can be helped. MARCH staff then connects visitors with many kinds of assistance, including links to treatment and other social services, government phones, vocational services, access to computer workstations, and free harm-reduction items offered through a new vending machine added in 2024.

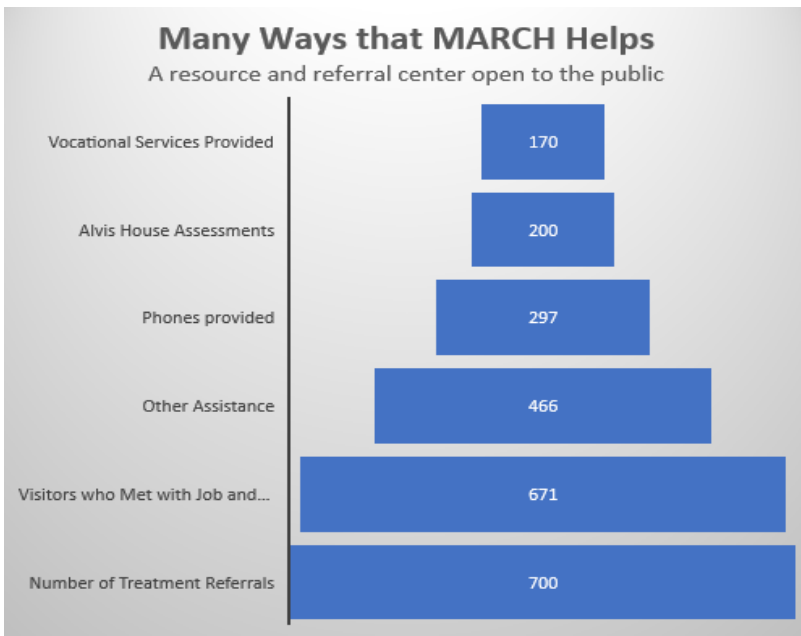
In 2024, the MARCH Program’s staff of two case managers, one special programs coordinator, three probation officers, and one program manager assisted 2,404 visitors. Of those visitors, 671 were linkages to the Franklin County Department of Job and Family Services (JFS), 700 referrals to treatment providers, and 200 Alvis assessments completed on-site. 2024 also saw the introduction of a harm reduction vending machine provided by Columbus Public Health to offer free safety resources to the public.

The MARCH Program also manages the Court’s Suzanne Hopper Act and coordinates placements into the Department’s residential treatment programs. It works with planning teams for a Department’s halfway house program (HHRP), day programming response (Comprehensive Community Care), Safe Housing, and the Court-house MAT programs.

### **Investigation Services**

*In 2024, the unit completed*  
**14**  
*presentence investigations*  
*and*  
**2,299**  
*record sealing investigations.*





In addition, the MARCH Program also partners with various service providers so that additional onsite resources are available at the courthouse. Every week, JFS staff connects visitors with access to government assistance. Other service providers available through MARCH include Lighthouse Behavioral Health, WIC, The Ohio State University James Cancer Center, House of Hope, Basecamp, First Step, Equitas, Community Medical Services, Ray of Hope, and Alvis. The center is self-sustaining and offers resources through grants.

## Mental Health and Developmental Disability Supervision

DOPPS has a established Mental Health Specialized Caseload designed to provide appropriate supervision for individuals diagnosed with mental health and/or developmental disability. The objective is to ensure personalized care tailored to their unique needs. The Mental Health Specialized Caseload is part of the risk reduction structure. A mental health specialist is responsible for conducting or reviewing relevant assessments, developing a case plan, and referring defendants based on their criminogenic and responsive needs. The assessment tools and case plan assist in selecting behavioral health treatment programs, medication, and case management services. Staff also regularly communicate with partner agencies to ensure the necessary services and monitoring are provided. The mental health supervision and development disability caseload included 56 cases in 2024.

## Probation Assisted Victim Empowerment Division - PAVED

The U.S. Department of Justice’s Violence Against Women Act (VAWA) grant partially funds the Probation Assisted Victim Empowerment Division (PAVED) of DOPPS through the Franklin County Office of Justice Policy and Programs and federal Victims of Crime Act funds through the Ohio Attorney General’s Office. Thanks to the sustained support of these grants, PAVED has four victim assistants and one victim assistant supervisor on staff.

PAVED is committed to being proactive and ensuring that the Court complies with Marsy’s Law. The program communicates with victims regarding all changes in the defendant’s probation status, such as when a defendant is eligible for early termination or if there is a request to have his supervision changed. The victim assistants complete these notifications so that each victim can express their opinion or concern before the probation status is altered. Additionally, PAVED staff partner with GPS/Electronic Monitoring officers to ensure immediate notifications are made whenever a GPS violation occurs. This notification protocol is initiated anytime a defendant removes the GPS tracker, enters an exclusion zone, or allows

**Highly Trained**  
 Probation’s **120**  
 employees  
 received an average  
 of **61** hours of  
 training last year.

the GPS tracker's battery to die, including after business hours.

PAVED also works closely with the eight probation officers assigned to the SERT Unit, who are responsible for extremely high-risk domestic violence offenders. An assigned PAVED victim assistant provides extra support to the victims in these cases. PAVED also designates a victim assistant to work specifically with the CAP IT Program, which has appropriate resources for the LGBTQ+ population and defendants enrolled in any of the Specialty Dockets. A victim assistant works closely with the designated CAP IT Officer to ensure that victims of same-sex domestic violence cases receive specialized responses with appropriate and relevant referrals.

The Victim Assistant also works closely with the court officers who handle the Specialized Docket caseloads to ensure that victims are notified of entrance into the programs, graduations, etc. In 2024, PAVED staff began work with the new in-house Batterers Intervention Program facilitators to ensure that victims are notified once the defendant has been enrolled in the program, is close to completion, and has successfully graduated. PAVED staff routinely use the danger and stalking assessment tools to help domestic violence and stalking victims understand the risks they face and develop safety plans.

The program collaborates with the City Prosecutor's Office of Domestic Violence Prosecutors and Victim Advocates to provide continuity of support for victims once the defendant is on probation. In 2024, the PAVED Unit provided 4,864 victims with direct services (attending court hearings for/with the victim, safety planning, referrals to community partners for various resources, one-on-one meetings with the victim to collect information of no-contact order violations and victim affidavits). The PAVED Unit usually contacts each victim multiple times throughout the defendant's supervision.



### **Pretrial Services**

The Pretrial Services Unit has 11 bail investigators, seven pretrial supervision officers, and three supervisors whose goals are to:

- Prepare and provide the Court with bail investigation reports, including a validated pretrial risk assessment and release recommendations on eligible defendants in custody awaiting an initial appearance; these reports provide judges with the information they need to make informed bail decisions.
- Provide appropriate supervision and monitoring of defendants released by the Court on pretrial supervision to help ensure that they are engaging in their community-based release plan, making their Court appearances, and not engaging in new criminal activity.

In 2024, the Pretrial Services Unit completed 3,500 bail investigations and supervised 2,431 pretrial defendants. In 2024, bail investigations implemented the Public Safety Assessment (PSA) to better identify the probability of new domestic violence, failure to appear, and the probability of a new violent offense. Pretrial services also monitor defendants placed on



PAVED Advocates Jeri Lausch, Diane Lewis, Hailey Rorie, Keionna Ashcraft, and Julie Pavlic.



supervision who remain in custody.

The Ohio Department of Rehabilitation and Correction's Bureau of Community Sanctions provides a grant to support the Pretrial Services Program. In 2024, the Pretrial Services Unit focused on programming and services for domestic violence cases during the pretrial phase. Additionally, the Pretrial Unit continued use of the Building Healthy Relationships Pretrial Domestic Violence Program. This unique educational program aims to provide programming and support during the pretrial phase.

To improve the unit's growth and program functions, DOPPS worked with a national consultant to review program policies and procedures and provide pretrial-specific training, which will continue into 2025.

### Professional Development

In 2024, staff completed 7,362.90 total training hours, which includes 4,460 hours dedicated to changing offender behavior. The Ohio Department of Rehabilitation and Corrections' Bureau of Community Sanctions funds the Department's Training and Development Project Manager, allowing the Department to focus on continuous quality improvement.

Twenty-five additional officers were also trained in the following Facilitator Trainings: Thinking for a Change (T4C), Anger Control (ACT), Decision Points (DP), and Cognitive Behavioral Interventions- Substance Use Adults (CBI), Emerge and Duluth. Several officers are cross-trained to facilitate multiple programs. In the fall of 2024, DOPPS expanded group programs to include offering Batterer's Intervention Program (BIP) to receive in-house services, which will likely expand to accommodate low-risk and female clients in 2025.

The Court also worked to enhance the Ohio Community Supervision System, known as OCSS, a web-based probation case management system, and completed 7,478 video appointments and 24,931 in-person appointments in 2024. The Department invested in electronic intervention tools and techniques provided by the Carey Group to ensure effective interventions are available to clients outside treatment programs.



Training and development goals for 2025 include further enhancement and utilization of OCSS, continuing the Continuous Quality Improvement process, 24 hours of mandatory evidence-based practices/changing offender behavior training for all officers, facilitator training and booster training for officers in cognitive-behavioral interventions, and ongoing implementation of in-person group programming.

### Student Development/ Internships

In 2024, the Department continued to provide internship opportu-



nities to students. The Department and students collaborate to establish objectives and to create a positive and productive partnership in learning. The internship enables students to develop professional skills in community corrections and bridge the gap between theoretical concepts learned in the classroom and practical work-related experiences. The aim is to demonstrate how probation/community control can promote change and rehabilitation. The internship orientation process encompasses an overview of the Court and the Department, including the case assignment process, evidence-based practices, supervision structure, and risk levels. A mid-point review and wrap-up session upon completion, followed by a final evaluation by the intern and Department supervisor, are also part of the process.

### **Substance Testing Laboratory**

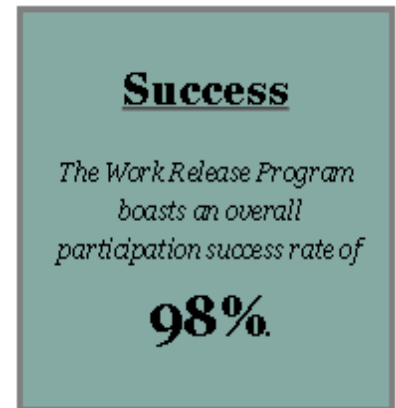
The Franklin County Municipal Court launched a substance testing lab through the Department of Probation and Pretrial Services in April 2024. The lab can run urinalysis samples through its analyzing machine and have these results available within the same day. Since its implementation in the spring of 2024, the lab processes an average of 100-120 daily tests. Lab technicians, who are trained and certified, obtain and handle these samples. Defendants can be ordered randomly by the court's probation intake process or directly by their probation officer or judge. Oral swabs can also be taken by the court's lab technicians and shipped to an off-site lab for results. The addition of this lab in 2024 has expedited urinalysis results and provided financial savings to the court. The Lab is expected to continue to grow and improve.

### **Work Release**

The Work Release Program is a residential alternative to jail for court-ordered individuals, serving as a community response to mandatory jail sentences, pretrial release or probation supervision, and noncompliance/probation violations. It aims to facilitate the successful reentry of individuals into the community through monitoring, programming, and management of their community access, with drug and alcohol testing conducted at random. Participants are confined to the program except for verified employment and/or court-approved programming, providing an opportunity to pay court-ordered fines, costs, child support, and restitution.

During Fiscal Year 2024, 88 defendants were admitted to the Work Release Program, serving 1,342 days instead of jail time. Of those defendants, 88 completed the program, consisting of 64 men and 24 women, while two terminated unsuccessfully. All 15 of the Franklin County Municipal Court General Division Judges utilized the services of the program for a variety of charges, including but not limited to OVI, Domestic Violence, Theft, Drug Abuse, Aggravated Menacing, Violation of Protection Order, Disorderly Conduct, Assault, Telephone Harassment, and Driving under Suspension.

The program collected \$45,147 from defendants during their Work Release term and saw a savings of \$88,091 in jail per diem costs. The Work Release Program continued to grow, working towards pre-COVID participation numbers. The Work Release Program also boasts a 98% overall participant success rate. The value of the Work Release Program to the community continues to be highlighted by these statistics, and the value to the participants of the WRP is even higher. Thus, it continues to be a popular sentencing option by the Franklin County Municipal Court Judges.





# Self Help Center and Dispute Resolution

2024 was another successful year for the Self Help Center and Dispute Resolution Department. The Department experienced major accomplishments as it continued expanding and implementing innovative ways to help residents. Under Director Robert Southers's leadership, the department remained a national best-practice model as jurisdictions nationwide continued replicating the department for their courts.

For example, Department staff assisted Hamilton County Municipal Court create a new mediation program. It hosted visitors from Cleveland Municipal Court to showcase the Department's services related to housing and mediation. The Department's director also consulted with Guam, Chicago, and Utah, who were looking to replicate the Municipal Court's Self Help Cen-



From left: David Vernon, Justin Livingston, Robert Southers, Luis Gomes-Ortega, Chris Page, and Markia Wright.



Above - Franklin County Municipal Judges who volunteered at the Driver's License Clinic from left to right: Jarrod Skinner, Gina Russo, Mark Hummer, Mike McAllister, Jessica D'Varga, Mary Kay Fenlon, and Jim O'Grady.



ter. In addition, the Department was featured on the National Association of Court Managers' Court Leaders Advantage podcast.

This was while the Department experienced record-breaking demand from Franklin County residents in 2024. Noteworthy demand or improvements include:

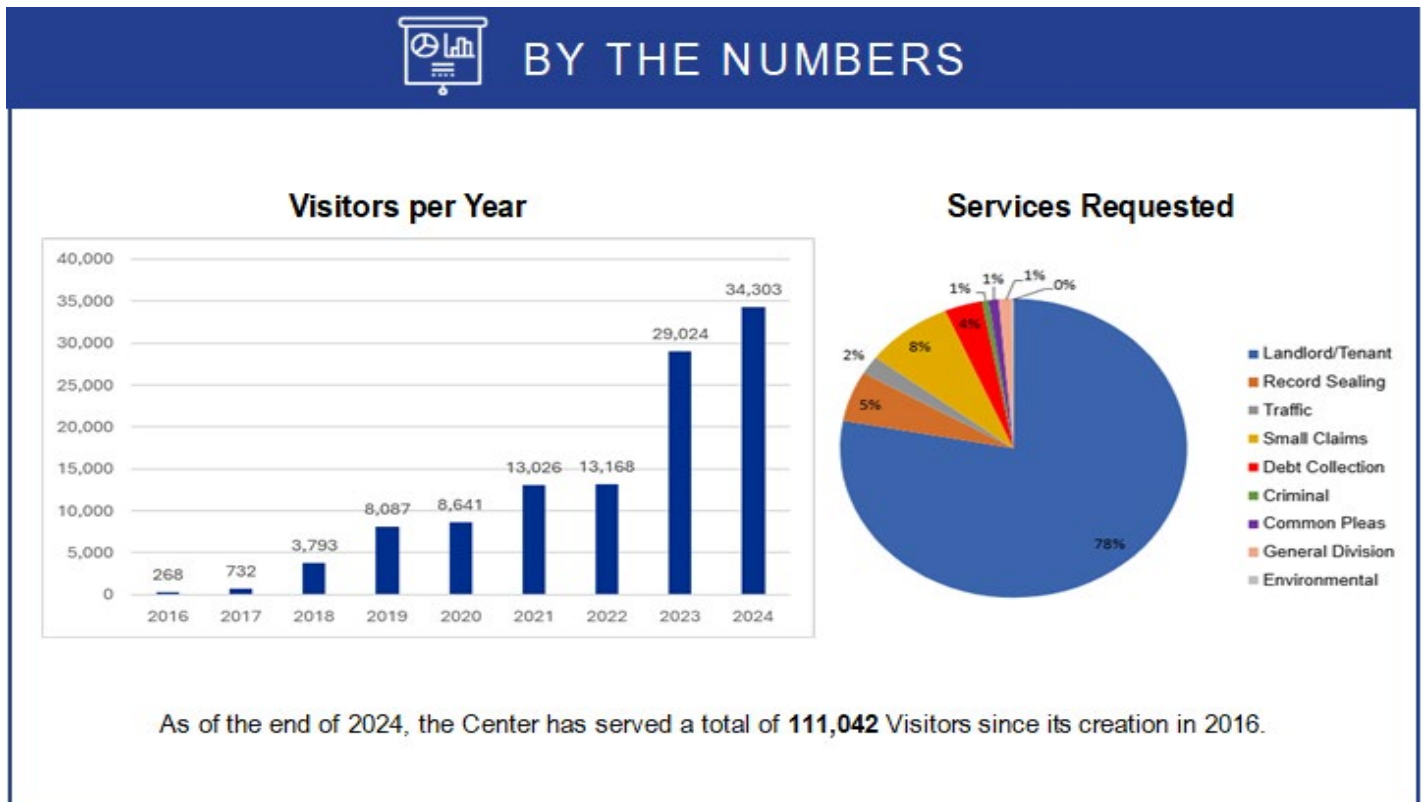
- 5,000 more visitors in 2024 than in 2023.
- Resolved nearly 1,000 more cases in the Mediation Program than in previous years.
- Hosted two expungement clinics that served more than 1,000 people.
- Assisted with the Franklin County Clerk of Courts' driver's license rein-

statement event.

- Hired a new bilingual Self Help Center staff attorney to assist Spanish-speaking visitors better.
- Partnered with Ohio Legal Help to create new online tools for debt collection answers and small claims complaints.
- Launched the JusticeTech program in partnership with The Ohio State University's Moritz College of Law.
- Expanded its relationships with local law schools, allowing future lawyers to learn more about mediation while expanding the program's capacity.

More entities also sought to hear from Department staff and help educate others about its services:

- 10TV featured the Center in a story about eviction assistance in Franklin County.
- Staff presented to the Supreme Court of Ohio and the Columbus Bar Association about dispute resolution services offered in the department.
- Southers presented to the Washington State District and Municipal Court Judges Association about creating services for self-represented litigants at the Self Represented Litigation Network's annual conference.
- Center Staff Attorneys Lisa Armour and David Vernon taught CLEs on criminal record sealing and expungement.







## DISPUTE RESOLUTION

The Dispute Resolution program received significantly more referrals from judges and magistrates in 2024. With an increase of nearly 1,000 referred mediations, department staff worked to find new efficiencies to manage the higher caseload. Dispute Resolution staff look forward to continuing relationships with programs at the Moritz College of Law and Capital University Law School to continue expanding the program's capacity. In addition to the referrals listed below, the program also mediated rent escrow cases and pre-file mediations.

	Referrals	Participation Rate	Settlement Rate
Referrals (2023)	1,751	90%	55%
Referrals (2024)	2,740	92%	60%

**Note:** this data reflects the current statistics as of the end of 2024. Some 2024 cases are still being mediated. Participation and settlement rates for these cases are not reflected.

- Staff attended numerous community events and met with community partners to improve community awareness.
- The Center completed program reviews from Mighty Crow, LLC and Policy Research Associates, demonstrating the value of the Center's social worker and navigator programs.

All of the services within the Self Help Center and Dispute Resolution Department are free. The Self Help Center is located on the 16th floor of the 375 S. High St., courthouse. The center takes walk-in appointments only between 9 and 2:30 p.m.



## OVERVIEW

- ◆ Total Visitors: 34,303
- ◆ Average Daily Visitors: 129
- ◆ The Center surpassed its goal of serving 30,000 Visitors in 2024.



## OTHER SERVICES

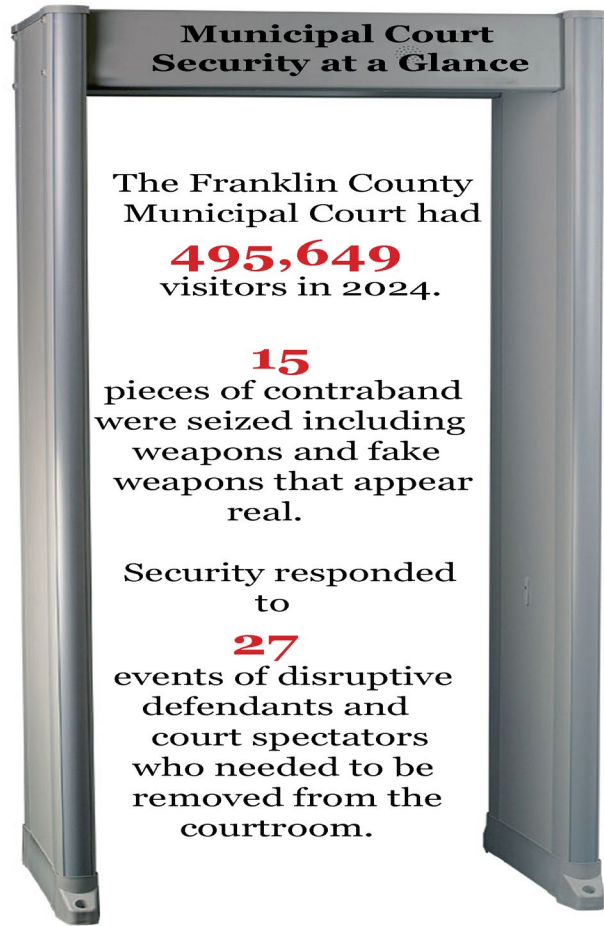
The Center provides assistance with all civil matters in the Municipal Court and some other general information questions.

- ◆ Traffic: 641
- ◆ Small Claims: 2,626
- ◆ Debt Collection: 1,125
- ◆ Criminal: 197
- ◆ General Division: 391
- ◆ Common Pleas: 302
- ◆ Environmental: 49

Center staff provided services at the Center's 16th floor office, outside Eviction Court, via webchat on the Court's website, and at various community events throughout the year.

### Percentage of services provided by location:

Main Office: 34%, Eviction Court: 59%, Webchat: 6%, Events: 1%



# Security

The Municipal Court Security Department is responsible for the safety and security of the largest and busiest Municipal Court in the State of Ohio.

The Security program strives to maintain a safe environment for judges, employees, and all others who have business in the courthouse. The security plans are within the Security

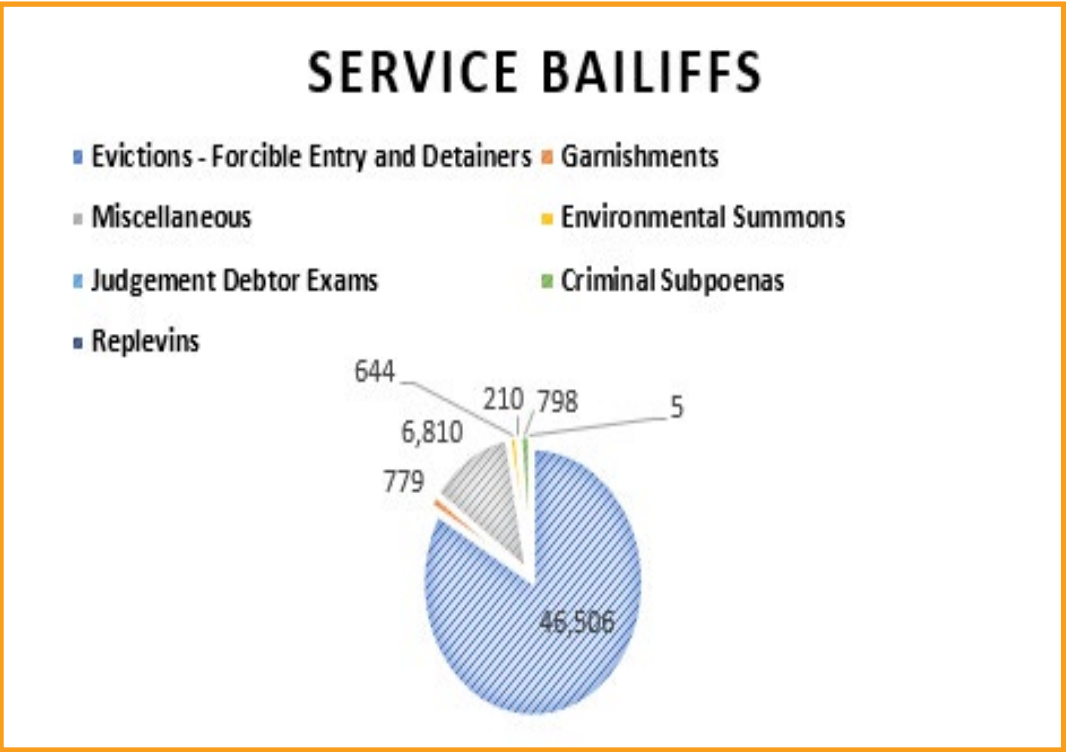
Standards set by the Supreme Court and offer interoperability with other City of Columbus and Franklin County policies and equipment.

Court security responded to more than 600 incidents in 2024 and can be seen anytime during court hours at the court's entrance and in the various courtrooms and hallways.

# Service Bailiffs

A unit at the Municipal Court serves court documents on behalf of the Court, litigants, and attorneys. These service bailiffs deliver complaints, summonses, criminal and civil subpoenas, garnishments, juror letters, and probation revocation hearing notices. These documents enforce pre-judgment and post-judgment remedies. The work is done by 11 Street Deputy Service Bailiffs and Deputy Chief Bailiff Les Yost.

Demand for these services was high in 2024, with 55,752 legal documents being served. This required the bailiffs to drive 92,900 miles across Franklin County in 2024.



# Specialized Dockets

## Franklin County Municipal Court Specialized Dockets



**CATCH Court**  
Presiding Judge  
Jodi L. Thomas

Contact CATCH Court:  
CatchCourt@  
FranklinCountyMuniCourt.org



**L.I.N.C. Court**  
Presiding Judge  
Gina Russo

Contact L.I.N.C. Court:  
LINC@  
FranklinCountyMuniCourt.org



**MAVS Court**  
Presiding Judge  
Jarrod Skinner

Contact MAVS Court:  
MAVS@  
FranklinCountyMuniCourt.org



**h.a.r.t. Court**  
Presiding Judge  
Jodi L. Thomas

Contact h.a.r.t. Court:  
hartCourt@  
FranklinCountyMuniCourt.org



**Recovery Court**  
Presiding Judge  
Jessica G. D'Varga

Contact Recovery Court:  
Recovery@  
FranklinCountyMuniCourt.org



### **Participants in the Specialized Dockets programs receive benefits including:**

- Taking part in the most successful intervention available to help overcome barriers in life.
- Receiving a chance for recovery.
- Potentially avoiding lengthy jail sentences.
- Programming that provides a holistic and individualized approach to overcoming underlying issues.
- The possibility of charges being vacated or dismissed upon program completion, making it easier to seek jobs and housing.
- Involvement with programs that have a history of saving lives.
- Connection to peer recovery supporters.

### **Individualized services and supports include:**

- connection to a wide range of social services in the community, such as housing and transportation, and support within the justice system.
- behavioral health programming, such as mental health and substance use treatment, and peer support.
- resources and support to becoming financially stable including linkage to employment and education.

### **Program requirements can vary, but typically include:**

- active participation in programming for approximately two years.
- a referral by a defense attorney, prosecutor, or judge.
- a new criminal charge in the Franklin County courts.
- weekly meetings with the specialized docket judge and regular engagement with docket staff including probation and docket coordinators.
- randomized drug testing.





# CATCH Court

*Creating Autonomy Through Collaborative Healing*

## **Presiding Judge Jodi L. Thomas**

*CATCH is committed to the liberation of all women who have experienced the cycle of abuse embedded within human trafficking, and the sex industry.*

**Number of program participants 2013 -2022:**

**366**

**Number of 2024 graduates:**

**14**

**Recidivism rate:**

**42%**

### Presiding Judge

Jodi Thomas

Franklin County

Municipal Judge

2017

to present

CATCH Court  
was founded  
in 2009.



### **Contact**

#### **Information:**

CATCH Court  
375 S. High St., 6th floor  
Columbus, Ohio 43215  
For more information,  
contact CATCH Court  
Program Leader Gwen  
England and other CATCH Court staff at  
[CATCHCourt@FranklinCountyMuniCourt.org](mailto:CATCHCourt@FranklinCountyMuniCourt.org)  
[FranklinCountyMuniCourt.org/CATCH](http://FranklinCountyMuniCourt.org/CATCH)

Judge Thomas hugs a CATCH Court participatee as she is being awarded her diploma in the Graduation Ceremony.

# h.a.r.t. Court

*Helping Achieve Recovery Together*



## **Presiding Judge Jodi L. Thomas**

*h.a.r.t. addresses the needs of defendants who use opiates and whose history of insufficient treatment has resulted in criminal charges by establishing effective treatment as an alternative to incarceration, improving quality of life, and increasing the safety of the community by providing court oversight and linking defendants to appropriate treatment and service providers.*

**Number of program participants  
between 2014-2022:**

**885**

**Number of 2024 graduates:**

**29**

**Recidivism rate:**

**31%**



**Presiding Judge Jodi Thomas**  
**Franklin County Municipal Judge**  
**2017 to present**

h.a.r.t Court was founded in 2014.



A quote from one of the h.a.r.t. Court graduates at the 2024 Graduation Ceremony

### **Contact Information:**

h.a.r.t. Court  
375 S. High St., 6th floor  
Columbus, Ohio 43215  
For more information,  
contact h.a.r.t. Court staff at  
[hart@FranklinCountyMuniCourt.org](mailto:hart@FranklinCountyMuniCourt.org)  
[FranklinCountyMuniCourt.org/hart](http://FranklinCountyMuniCourt.org/hart)





# L.I.N.C. Court

*Learning to Identify & Navigate Change*

## **Presiding Judge Gina R. Russo**

*The L.I.N.C. program aids defendants in navigating the legal and behavioral health system. The program works to promote public safety by providing structure for participants to link to appropriate treatment, all while being held accountable for their actions.*

**Number of program participants  
between 2013 -2022:**

**351**

**Number of 2024 graduates:**

**11**

**Recidivism rate:**

**39.6%**

### **Contact Information:**

L.I.N.C. Court  
375 S. High St., 6th floor  
Columbus, Ohio 43215  
For more information,  
contact L.I.N.C. Court staff at  
[LINC@FranklinCountyMuniCourt.org](mailto:LINC@FranklinCountyMuniCourt.org)  
[FranklinCountyMuniCourt.org/LINC](http://FranklinCountyMuniCourt.org/LINC)



**Presiding Judge  
Gina R. Russo  
Franklin County  
Municipal Judge  
2021  
to present**



L.I.N.C. staff surround Judge Russo, who is second from the left in the front row.

L.I.N.C. Court  
was founded  
in 2004.



# MAVS Court

*Military and Veterans Services*

## **Presiding Judge Jarrod Skinner**

*The MAVS program helps Veterans overcome severe mental health and substance use disorders through appropriate treatment, supportive services, and Veteran-specific resources, in an effort to reduce recidivism among these individuals*



**Number of program participants  
between 2014- 2022:**

**186**

**Number of 2024 graduates:**

**11**

**Recidivism rate:**

**31%**

### Presiding Judge Jarrod Skinner

Franklin County Municipal Judge

2017 to present

MAVS Court was founded in 2012.

#### **Contact Information:**

MAVS Court

375 S. High St., 6th floor

Columbus, Ohio 43215

For more information,  
contact MAVS Court staff at

[MAVS@FranklinCountyMuniCourt.org](mailto:MAVS@FranklinCountyMuniCourt.org)

[FranklinCountyMuniCourt.org/MAVS](http://FranklinCountyMuniCourt.org/MAVS)



Right: Judge Skinner second from left and a few of the MAVS team.



# Recovery Court

*Effective Treatment as an Alternative to Incarceration*

## **Presiding Judge Jessica D’Varga**

*Recovery Court addresses the needs of defendants whose primary dependency on alcohol or non-opiate drugs results in criminal charges and low-level felonies. The Court utilizes treatment instead of incarceration, thereby improving quality of life for those battling addiction and increasing community safety with proven lower recidivism rates.*



**Presiding Judge  
Jessica D’Varga**  
Franklin County  
Municipal Judge  
2019 to present

**Number of program participants  
between 2016 -2022:**

**486**

**Number of 2024 graduates: 30**

**Recidivism rate: 18.5%**

### **Contact Information:**

Recovery Court  
375 S. High St., 6th floor  
Columbus, Ohio 43215  
For more information, contact Recovery Court  
staff at [Recovery@FranklinCountyMuniCourt.org](mailto:Recovery@FranklinCountyMuniCourt.org)  
[FranklinCountyMuniCourt.org/Recovery](http://FranklinCountyMuniCourt.org/Recovery)



Recovery Court  
was founded in 2010.

Right: Judge D’Varga  
speaks with one of the  
Recovery Court  
participants at the  
2024  
graduation.





# Specialized Dockets



A few of the Specialized Docket staff.: Mercedes Anderson, Samantha Barbarek, Jody Morgan, and Gwen England.

What do you get when you take tailored programming and treatment, combined with a passionate staff, social service assistance, peer support, and therapy entrenched in the belief that success is within reach?

The result is half the chance of recidivism, recovery from drugs and alcohol, escape from the sex industry, proven effective assistance to continued sustained recovery and help with mental health and Post Traumatic Stress Disorder.

The docket's combined recidivism rate is 32.5%, while the national average is 65% – 70%.

The Specialized Dockets provide these services within a restorative justice program that offers recovery in lieu of incarceration and provides all high-quality programming for high-risk, high-need individuals based on evidence-based practices.

The Specialized Docket Department serves the Franklin County Municipal Court Judges and accepts some criminal charges from the Franklin County Common Pleas Court. Specialized Docket Manager Melinda Brooks oversees the programs and reports directly to the Court Administrator. The manager works closely with the Specialized Docket Judge's Committee and holds bi-annual meetings with the Specialized Docket Advisory Board to set department goals and direction. The department includes five specialized dockets, two educational programs, thirteen coordinators, and an assistant manager who assists in managing day-to-day operations.

The Specialized Docket Department's offices are on the 6th floor of the Municipal Court Building. They include space for status review hearings, education classes, and community meetings. In addition, the Specialized Docket Department is conveniently located next to Medication-assisted treatment Assessment Referral Collaboration and Hope (MARCH), the court's comprehensive behavioral health resource center.

The Specialized Dockets Department benefits from and manages three federal grants totaling over \$1.6 million. These funds support a probation officer for the h.a.r.t. program, a coordinator for the L.I.N.C. program, and critical peer support for all programs, as well as other peripheral but key programs including case management system enhancements, documents translated, and life skills classes.

## **STAFF**

The program staff are highly educated behavioral health specialists with expertise in mental health, substance use disorders, and criminal justice. Among these positions are eight social workers, three



chemical dependency counselors, one licensed counselor, and one dual licensed counselor/marriage and family therapist. One of the L.I.N.C. staff also serves as a Community Outreach Coordinator, assisting in vetting treatment agencies and carrying information about the Specialized Dockets to community engagement events.

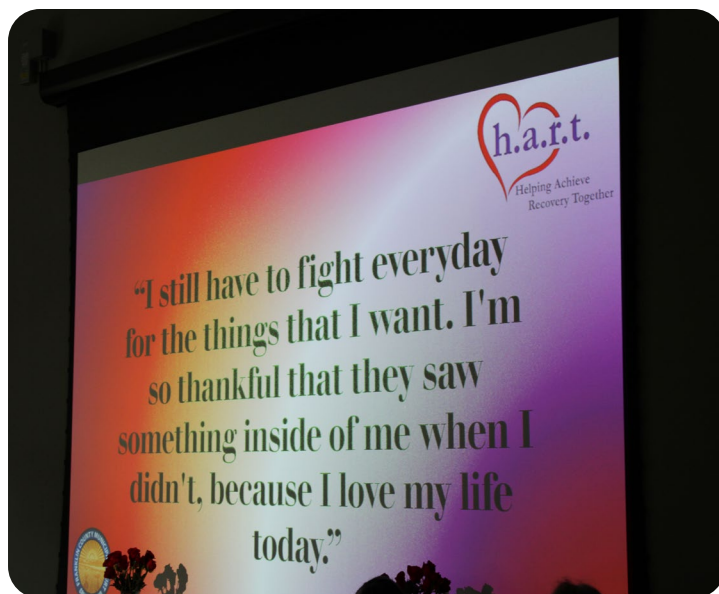
While Specialized Dockets staff work throughout the courthouse to manage referrals and participants' needs, the department collaborates closely with Pretrial and Probation, the Self Help Center, and the MARCH program. Specialized Docket Probation Officers are key collaborative team members, addressing compliance issues while supporting and encouraging participants throughout their programs.

Upon completion of the programs, participants are referred to the Self Help Center to review their records for eligibility for cases to be sealed or expunged, and packets are prepared for graduates. Staff interact regularly with the MARCH program to schedule participants with Franklin County's Department of Job and Family Services, employment and vocational connections, and its on-site harm reduction vending machine.

Peer Support Specialists are a key part of success for program participants. The Specialized Docket Department contracted with multiple peer support specialists in 2024. Of those, two of these individuals are graduates of the programs that they serve. These contracted peers have proven to be an integral and critical point of contact for participants, whether providing general support by phone or text after traditional court hours, sharing their lived experiences and walking alongside participants in their recovery journey, or linking them directly with services and support. These positions are currently grant-funded; however, the department is actively exploring sustainable funding sources to expand the number of peer support specialists in the future.



Judge Skinner congratulates a MAVS graduate in 2024.



A quote from a h.a.r.t. Court graduate is displayed at the graduation ceremony.

The staff is committed to building strong community treatment teams and working to enhance the knowledge of stakeholders and the larger community. The Department also strives to be a model for the state and advance Specialized Dockets' mission wherever possible.

The programs use a treatment team approach consisting of the presiding judge, coordinators, designated probation officer, defense attorney, prosecutor, and representatives from community treatment providers. The treatment team meets weekly to review potential admissions and progress of current participants, make referrals, evaluate individualized treatment plans, and determine appropriate interventions and dosage. The goal is to move participants through the program phases as they demonstrate their ability to internalize concepts and apply coping skills in their daily lives. Rewards are frequently used, and sanctions, including limited jail time, can be imposed.

The Judge presides over weekly status review hearings, which serve as participant check-ins. A sense of

community is cultivated among participants, and the Judge initiates progress checks with everyone to ensure that they receive personalized care and adhere to the agreed-upon treatment plan. Consideration is given to a participant's capacity, barriers, and life events as they progress through the program phases at a pace they determine, which may span up to two years. The programs strongly emphasize engagement, open discussion, and the development of recovery competency, compliance, trust, and self-efficacy.

The dockets are all certified by the Supreme Court of Ohio. The process requires the submission of program documentation, which includes the administrative order, program description, participation agreement, and participant handbook. Secondly, Supreme Court staff conduct a site visit to observe the treatment team meeting and the Status Review Hearing and provide feedback to the presiding judge and staff. Certification requires the Court to meet or exceed all Supreme Court standards and current practice guidelines and is valid for three years.

In 2024, HART and LINC completed their latest certification processes, while CATCH and MAVS are expected to complete in 2025.

## **EDUCATION PROGRAMS**

There are also two educational programs that are sentencing options: CATCH 101 is for victims of human trafficking and Drug Education Program (D.E.P.) is for felony drug charges reduced to a misdemeanor.

### **CATCH 101**

CATCH 101 is an education program that offers resources for women who are currently engaging in the sex trade and have been charged with a solicitation offense. This course is often delivered out of arraignment for a charge dismissal. CATCH 101 includes education about sex work, human trafficking, and trauma bonding. It also provides resources for treatment, counseling, local pantries, and drop-in centers. The newest addition to the curriculum includes harm reduction information on sex work and substance use.

CATCH staff provide the women with a sex worker's safety checklist card to carry with them if they are not ready or are unable to exit the sex trade due to being trafficked. The goal is to keep them alive and as safe as possible. Due to barriers women experience with transportation, the program has been condensed to be completed in one day. Thirty-eight women completed the education program in 2024.

### **D.E.P.**

Another notable program managed by our Court is the Drug Education Program (D.E.P.), which serves as an educational intervention for individuals charged with 4th and 5th-degree felony drug possession



CATCH Court held a graduation ceremony in the Ohio Statehouse atrium on Sept. 12, 2024.





L.I.N.C. staff from left: Penny Tobler, Kade Johnson-Barnett, Jody Morgan, Judge Russo and Amy Tate.

charges. Referred by the Franklin County Prosecutor’s Office, defendants who participate in D.E.P. and enter a guilty plea receive a reduction in their felony charges to a first-degree misdemeanor. While the County Prosecutor makes most referrals, admission to D.E.P. is also open to defendants facing misdemeanor charges. The Court mandates participation in D.E.P. at the time of sentencing.

The monthly D.E.P. educational session focuses on practical content designed to motivate change. Topics covered include the disease model of substance use, the recovery model of healing, peer-lived experience, and a review of community resources.

In 2024, there were 265 attendees and 193 successful completions.

### **BEST PRACTICES**

The Specialized Docket Department is unwavering in its commitment to developing and implementing best and promising practices. The department proactively generates innovative programming to address gaps in service, actively participates in research and pilot projects, and takes a leadership role in driving innovation that contributes to the advancement of the field.

The department began work in 2024 to implement updated standards into their programs. The Specialized Dockets use Best Practice Standards set by AllRise. This allows progress to be tracked on elements that align with social determinants of health, such as family, financial stability, housing, health and wellness, pro-social activities, and transportation.

### **STUDENT INTERNSHIP PROGRAM**

In 2024, the Specialized Docket Department continued its commitment to providing field instruction to students from various disciplines, colleges, and universities. The Court placement offers a highly professional and complex environment at the intersection of criminal justice and behavioral health, providing invaluable learning opportunities for students from diverse fields of study, including behavioral health, substance misuse, criminal justice, public



Judge D’Varga congratulates Recovery Court graduates.



health, statistics/data analysis, and other related disciplines.

The student internship program offers a wide range of opportunities to meet with a judge and screen an incarcerated defendant. Interns are exposed to evidence-based practices, program development, grant implementation, data analysis, and policy change, equipping them with valuable skills and knowledge to address the community's needs.

### Specialized Docket Goals

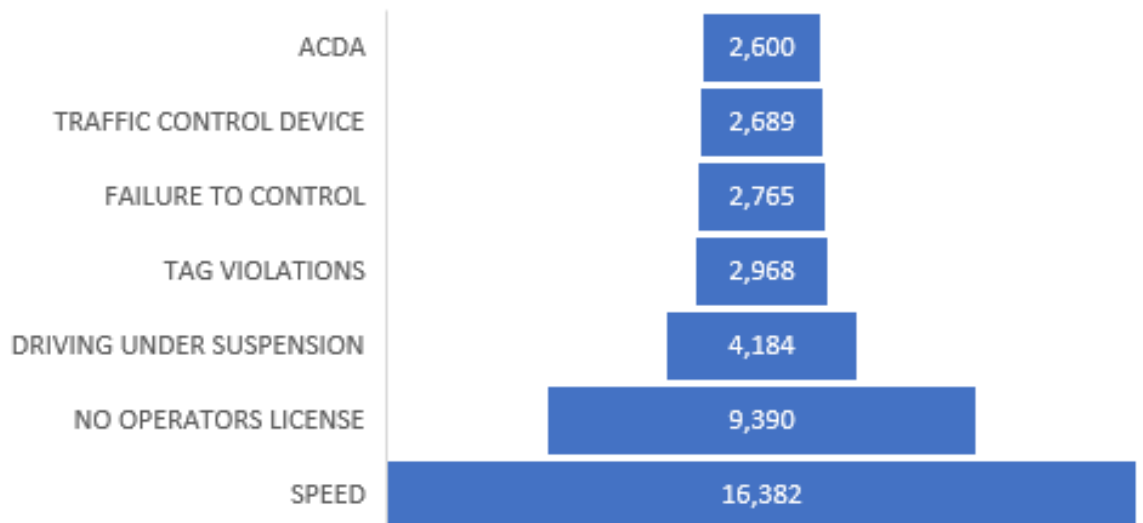
Looking ahead to 2025, the Specialized Docket Department has the following goals:

1. Identify barriers and make program and policy changes to increase specialized docket access to under-served populations.
2. Provide culturally specific, trauma-competent programming.
3. Collaborate with community partners to vet and support culturally specific, trauma-competent treatment options.
4. Maintain full staffing by filling vacant positions as needed.
5. Evolve department data collection methods and analysis to illustrate better the value of the department's work for the Court and the community.
6. Continue successfully implementing federal grant programs and building sustainability plans for key components.
7. Continue to develop policies and procedures for using the Ohio Community Supervision System (OCSS) for case management and data analysis.
8. Increase visibility and community access through cohesive messaging on multiple platforms, including community engagement, technology, media, and print material.
9. Increase intensive peer support in the Specialized Docket Department.
10. Provide and support participant and family-centered engagement.
11. Increase funding and expansion through grants and matching funds.
12. Champion best practices and innovation that contribute to the national conversation.

# Traffic Court

## Traffic Cases Filed

These are some of the most common State of Ohio and City of Columbus traffic charges filed in 2024.



Traffic Court is a perennially busy section of the Franklin County Municipal Court. Traffic court cases are overheard by magistrates who handled 51,709 cases in 2024. The court operates Monday - Friday in courtrooms 1A and 1B.

# Weddings

Once a year, the Franklin County Municipal Judges and staff convert a courtroom into a festive wedding chapel on Valentine's Day. In 2024, sixty-six couples said their "I dos" in a courtroom adorned with frills to commemorate the joyous occasion. Walk-ins were accepted and couples were only charged the traditional \$25 court filing fee. (By law, couples must also obtain a marriage license from the county's Probate Court.)



Above: The Franklin County Municipal Judges who performed the Valentine's Day weddings.

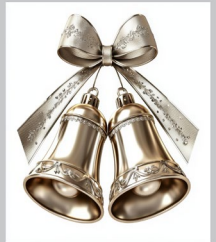
Below: A bride shows off her wedding ring.



Judge Eileen Paley weds a couple at one of the Valentine's Day weddings at the courthouse.



Interested in booking a wedding at the Franklin County Municipal Court?



[franklincountymunicipalcourt.org/Weddings](http://franklincountymunicipalcourt.org/Weddings)

Below: A young girl celebrates as her mom and dad are wed.





For more information about the court go to  
[Franklincountymunicourt.org](http://Franklincountymunicourt.org)  
or visit the court at  
375 S. High St.  
Columbus, Ohio 43215  
614-645-8214



