

# County of Butler, Pennsylvania

## Office of Clerk of Courts

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April 23, 2014

The Honorable Senator Stewart J. Greenleaf  
Chairman, Senate Judiciary Committee  
Senate Box 203012  
Harrisburg, PA 17120-3012

Re: PA Senate Judiciary Committee Hearing April 29, 2014, Senate Bill 1215

Chairman Greenleaf:

I have been asked to submit a response as one of the Clerk of Courts who is not opposed to SB1215 transferring the Clerk of Courts and Prothonotaries from elected county row officeholders to non-elected state professional manager positions.

Butler County voters elected me as their Clerk of Courts 21 years ago with winning my sixth election last year. Previously, I had worked as Second Deputy Clerk of Courts and as a secretary in the District Attorney's Office while earning my Bachelor's Degree in Public Administration. Our county currently enjoys a positive working relationship between all of the row officers, the Judges, the Court Administrator's Office, and all other county departments.

When I was first asked to come and work at the Clerk of Courts, the office was in constant turmoil. In five years' time, I worked for three different Clerks and four different First Deputies. Amidst all of that, I could see the office sorely needed stability. Our county experienced rapid growth in the early 90's moving us up to a 4<sup>th</sup> class county. We were busy and understaffed. I never imagined running for political office, but it was the only way to make a difference. I could either quit or campaign. Since I loved the work of the Criminal Justice system and had such high respect for our Court, I naively entered the political ring, not as a political party favorite, campaigning vigorously and knocking on many doors.

My message of bringing dedication, experience, professionalism, and stability to the office of the Clerk of Courts resonated with the voters. As I campaigned, many of them would tell me that they could hardly believe the office was not appointed as we don't make policy decisions outside our offices. They also believed that the person holding this record keeping office should be qualified, know their respective jobs, and utmost and foremost, show up for work.

It has been a long haul getting the office on track from purchasing our first computer system in 1994, establishing Butler County's first enforcement program in 1998 making defendants accountable to their victims with a consistent payment plan, and implementing a Document

Imaging Program in 2001. In 2004, Butler County would become one of the initial pilot counties for the newly created Common Pleas Case Management System (CPCMS) created by the Administrative Office of PA Courts (AOPC) in a crucial step towards a unified state judicial system. We would come to forge a solid working relationship with the AOPC under the guidance of the State Court Administrator Zygmunt Pines who now regularly attends our yearly state association convention along with other key members of his administration providing us updates, reports, and the status of new projects on the horizon. CPCMS is a smart, complex system in its now ten-year history growing, changing, and intertwining with many other agencies in the criminal justice system where data is immediately live to the public on our docket sheets posted at the ujsportal web page.

A Clerk must be knowledgeable with the Criminal and Juvenile Rules of Court adopted by the Supreme Court, the Drug Act, Vehicle and Crimes Code, and all the legislative acts in which many of them help us to successfully collect and disburse millions of dollars each year for costs, fines, and restitution to victims of crime. A Clerk must also exhibit great leadership qualities in uniting and mentoring a staff.

I have seen firsthand the many negative effects of politics wreaking havoc in an office. For years, many of these offices were pure politics and held by a figurehead. Many of us have spent years bringing these offices into the 21<sup>st</sup> century with a team of dedicated, hard-working employees that we've successfully assembled. Our biggest fear is that these positions return to a figurehead because of a candidate using these offices as a stepping stone pursuing a higher office or as a politically-favored appointee. It is fully understood also that court appointments can sometimes produce unworthy candidates. If offices would become state-appointed positions, there should be a system of checks and balances and qualifications set up to ensure the office receives the highest qualified candidate. Candidates in most class counties could be interviewed and selected by all Judges sitting on the bench within each county for a more balanced decision. The candidate should be a citizen of the county that he or she would serve to maintain and satisfy that connection to the community.

There is no doubt that our offices are 100% court-related which deserves to be conducted in a consistent and stable environment. We already feel like we are a crucial component of the State Courts. For that reason, I am not opposed and fully support creating professional state court manager positions for the offices of Clerk of Courts and Prothonotary (with safeguards in place). Maybe the time has come for both Prothonotaries and Clerks of Court not to "hold" an office but to "run" an office.

Sincerely,

Lisa Weiland Lotz  
Butler County Clerk of Courts

cc: Joseph Mittleman, Esq., AOPC