



## PROBATE COURT OF CUYAHOGA COUNTY

DIVISION OF THE COURT OF COMMON PLEAS

1 LAKESIDE AVE. W.

CLEVELAND, OHIO 44113

ANTHONY J. RUSSO  
Presiding Judge

October 31, 2023

Chris Ronayne  
Cuyahoga County Executive  
2079 East Ninth Street  
Cleveland, OH 44115

Pernel Jones Jr., President  
Cuyahoga County Council  
2079 East Ninth Street- 8th Floor  
Cleveland, OH 44115

Re: 2024/2025 Probate Court Budget Statement

Dear Mr. Ronayne, Mr. Jones, and members of County Council:

I am Judge Anthony J. Russo, Presiding and Administrative Judge of the Probate Court since 2009. Thank you for the opportunity to be here today to discuss the vital services we provide to the citizens of Cuyahoga County.

The Probate Court continues to strive for excellence in performance, serving our citizens with courtesy, competence, and respect. We are constantly searching for more effective ways to perform the necessary functions mandated by the Ohio Constitution and the Ohio Revised Code.

The Probate Court is projected to have over 13,500 new case filings by the end of this year. We issued 6,678 marriage licenses in 2022 and project to issue approximately 5,500 by the end of 2023.

The Court dramatically expanded its electronic filing system to facilitate the needs created by the COVID-19 pandemic, and that expansion has continued over the last budget cycle. Nearly all of our case types are available for electronic filing. 17,020 individuals are registered e-file users, of which 3,544 are attorneys.

After working in partnership with the Cuyahoga County ADAMHS Board, the Cuyahoga County Probate Court established its Assisted Outpatient Treatment (AOT) Program to reduce the incidence and duration of inpatient psychiatric hospitalizations, homelessness, and interactions with the criminal justice system among persons with severe mental illness. The Probate Court conducts monthly meetings with grant participants diagnosed with Severe Mental Illness (SMI) and their treatment managers to encourage commitment to treatment goals. The Court also meets on an as-needed basis to assist in times of crisis. We have developed meaningful relationships and established regular communication with key community partners. The participants have experienced great success.

Court proceedings involving the death of a loved one and guardianship issues are often emotional and confusing. We opened our Court's Resource Center in February 2019 to assist self-represented parties in dealing with simple estates, guardianships, and name changes, including general review of probate forms and procedures. The Resource Center is now staffed four days per week with 14 attorneys offering their services one day each month. Since the inception of the program, the Resource Center has assisted more than 4,800 self-represented individuals. The program is funded by the Court's restricted funds and not from the County's general fund.

The Cuyahoga County Probate Court created its Guardian Partners Program in 2020. The Court currently has 7,255 adult wards under guardianship in Cuyahoga County. This program was created to ensure that the most vulnerable residents of our community who are unable to care for themselves due to physical or mental disabilities receive proper care. Graduate level students and social workers have been recruited to make wellness visits to the adult wards at nursing homes, assisted living facilities, group homes and private residences. After these visits, a report is filed with the Court to ensure that the needs of the wards are being met. The onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in March 2020 forced the court to suspend Guardian Partners. The Court restarted this program in October of 2022 and it has been very successful. There are

currently 33 Guardian Partners and six individuals on the waiting list to become Guardian Partners. To date, we have 2,328 resolutions or completed visits, with reports filed and reported to the Court. The Court uses its own restricted funds and is not requesting additional appropriation from the general fund over the next biennium for this program.

The Probate Court has partnered with the Office of the Executive to successfully launch the Great Estates Program this fall designed to help residents avoid unnecessary costs and delays in settling estates. The Great Estates program provides guidance and documents for real estate, bank accounts, motor vehicles and other personal property to ensure that assets are passed directly to the intended beneficiary. This program launched with three community events in October of 2023 at libraries in Warrensville Heights, Parma, and Westlake. These events were so well attended that they had to be broken up into two separate sessions per event. Due to the high volume of community interest and attendance, future events are in the process of being scheduled, and Court looks forward to continuing this partnership.

Since submitting the DEI Equity Lens paperwork earlier this year, the Probate Court has participated in Cuyahoga County's DEI All Staff Town Hall Trainings and the follow up "What's Next" webinars which built upon the "All In" principle of the initial DEI Trainings. We found the programs to be informative and helpful and our staff is looking forward to continued participation in the next scheduled sessions.

The Probate Court has consistently been an effective partner with the County in developing our budget. Since 2009, we have always worked within the budget appropriated by this Council; we have every expectation to continue to do so. The Court expects to generate approximately \$1.5 million dollars in filing fees and costs this year to offset against our budget. The Ohio Department of Mental Health and Addiction Services (OhioMHAS) reimbursed Cuyahoga County general fund in 2023 in the amount of \$95,737.40. Reimbursement is anticipated again in 2024. The Court also contributes funds from its special revenue funds to offset general fund appropriations.

We therefore respectfully request that you approve the 2024/2025 budget being recommended by the Office of Budget and Management and the County Executive.

On a personal note, I would like to commend OBM Director Walter Parfejewiec, OBM Manager Tiffany Sebastian and our budget analyst Mark Campbell for the outstanding effort they have extended to myself and my administrative staff.

Thank you for your time and attention.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'A. Russo', enclosed within a large, hand-drawn oval shape.

Anthony J. Russo  
Presiding and Administrative  
Judge of the Probate Court  
One Lakeside Avenue West  
Cleveland, OH 44113