

2025 ANNUAL REPORT
HIGHLAND COUNTY COMMON PLEAS COURT
GENERAL AND DOMESTIC RELATIONS DIVISIONS

This is the eighteenth annual report prepared by Judge Rocky A. Coss to inform the public of the operations of the Court during the past year and to compare the case filings and activities of the Court to past years. It covers activities of both the general and domestic relations divisions.

ANNUAL CASE FILINGS

Total case filings in 2025 increased over 2024. The total number of cases filed or reopened in both divisions in 2025 was 910 compared to 819 in 2024, an 11% increase. The General Division had 607 filings while the Domestic Relations Division had 303. The overall average annual case filings since 2020 is 733 cases.

This was the second consecutive year in which overall case filings have increased after a steady decline in annual filings since 2006. The 910 total filings was the highest number since 2015.

CRIMINAL CASES

Criminal case filings in 2025 were similar to those in 2024. There were 161 new and reopened criminal cases filed in 2025 compared to 168 filed in 2024. The 161 total is the lowest number filed since 2003. The average annual criminal case filings over the past five years is 206, making the 2025 case filings nearly 22% lower than that five year average.

These statistics are based on the requirements for filing case management reports with the Ohio Supreme Court. A new case represents arraignment on an indictment, and a reopened case is one which had been closed prior to adjudication such as a defendant being unavailable after arraignment. The total number of cases does not include indictments filed in 2025 with the Clerk that have not yet been served on the defendant or cases bound over to the grand jury in which indictments were not returned. Therefore, there is always a variance between the Clerk of Courts' annual case numbers and this report.

Statistics regarding criminal cases do not include any post-conviction proceedings such as probation violations, restitution hearings, modification of probation conditions, judicial release hearings, sealing of records, drug court sessions and other proceedings that occur in many criminal cases after they are closed for reporting purposes.

FORECLOSURE CASES

There were a total of 104 new and reopened foreclosure filings in 2025 compared to 67 in 2024. This represents a 55% increase over the past three years' average of 66. The lowest number of foreclosure filings since 2003 was 24 in 2021.

OTHER CIVIL CASES

There were 338 new and reopened civil cases filed in 2025 compared to 299 filed in 2024. This represents an increase of 13% following a 27% increase in 2024. The five-year average for annual civil filings is 248 cases. The 335 case filings is the largest number since 2003. The previous high since that year was 313 in 2010.

JURY TRIALS

The Court conducted only 3 jury trials in 2025 compared to 7 in 2024. The Court has averaged 7 jury trials per year since 2009.

DOMESTIC RELATIONS CASES

Domestic Relations cases increased slightly. There were 156 new cases and 147 reopened cases filed in 2025 for a total of 286 which represents a 6% increase over 2025 when there were 150 new and 136 reopened cases filed for a total of 303. The average number of annual case filings over the past five years is 279. Reopened cases include motions filed after a case was completed such as modification of child custody/parental rights, modification of child support, motions to enforce property issues in a prior decree or motions to cite for contempt of orders in prior decrees.

CASE MANAGEMENT

The Supreme Court has adopted time guidelines within which cases should be completed. In 2025, the time guideline for criminal cases is six months from the date of arraignment. The guideline for foreclosures to be completed is twelve months from the date of filing and for most other civil cases it is twenty-four months. There have been no past pending criminal cases in the General Division of this Court since April of 2009 and no past pending civil cases since March of 2010. There have been no past pending cases in the Domestic Relations Division since March of 2010.

New time guidelines became effective for 2026 that generally provide for a requirement that 95% of cases be completed within the guidelines. However, Judge Coss will continue to manage the court's docket in 2026 using the 100% compliance standard.

DRUG COURT DOCKET

The New Way to Recovery Drug Court Docket received its original three-year certification in December of 2019 and a renewal of its certification by the Ohio Supreme Court Commission on Specialized Dockets for additional three-year periods in December of 2022 and December of 2025. The judge that succeeds Judge Coss February 9, 2027, will have to determine whether to continue the drug court docket and obtain certification to continue at that time.

There are currently 21 active participants in the drug court docket. Since July of 2019, 116 offenders have been accepted in the docket. 61 participants have graduated since the program's start. 28 have been terminated as unsuccessful.

Due to the number of offenders in the drug court docket, the Court conducts drug court docket sessions on both mornings and afternoons of the second and fourth Fridays of each month so that the sessions will be shorter and allow more time for review of individual participants' cases. Drug court sessions are open to the public but are not live streamed.

The docket consists of four phases that must be successfully completed with a minimum participation period of 18 months and 12 months sober prior to graduation.

REMOTE HEARINGS AND AUDIO-VIDEO TECHNOLOGY PROGRAMS

In 2025, the Court conducted 28 video hearings through its courtroom teleconferencing system primarily in cases in which defendants are incarcerated in prisons throughout Ohio. The Court also conducted 520 Zoom hearing sessions in the General Division, many of which involved multiple cases. The Domestic Relations Division conducted 28 hearings by zoom. Since March of 2009, the Court has conducted over 6,500 remote hearings.

The utilization of remote technology allows parties and attorneys to save both time and expenses by avoiding travel time and parties having to take off work to appear for brief hearings. It saves the county sheriff's office significant expenses in transporting defendants from prisons throughout Ohio to the court, as well as transport of defendants in the Highland County Justice Center almost daily. In many instances, the parties and attorneys request hearings be conducted by Zoom rather than in person.

The Court's audio-video recording system allows the Court to live-stream the proceedings in the general division on its You-Tube channel which has increased the public's access to court hearings. The Court's You-Tube channel currently has 2,150 subscribers. The most viewed live-streamed hearings are usually jury trials which have had 80 or more viewers during a single trial. During jury trials, the recordings are not accessible to ensure that witnesses and others cannot view them in violation of the separation of witnesses rule. After the trial is completed, the recordings are made public once the trial is completed and can be viewed by the public. Domestic Relations cases and Drug Court Docket hearings are not livestreamed.

CASE MANAGEMENT TECHNOLOGY UPGRADES

Recent legislation requires all courts in Ohio to have some form of electronic filing for cases. This Court has accepted filings by email and facsimile since 2011. Voluntary E-filing was implemented for civil cases in 2023, and the Court implemented that for criminal cases and domestic relations cases in 2024. E-filing allows the electronic filing of documents directly with the case management system and eliminates the need for the Clerk's office to copy and mail out copies of many documents in the file.

FISCAL MANAGEMENT

The Court's 2025 general fund budget was \$327,589. The actual general expenditures for the year were \$298,953 which was 11% under budget. Each year since 2009 except for 2010 when a capital murder case required large expenditures of unbudgeted expenses, the Court has spent less than the amount appropriated for general fund expenses. For historical comparison, the Court's 1998 general fund budget was \$218,296.88.

SELF REPRESENTATION AND AI

There has been a noticeable increase in parties electing to represent themselves rather than employ attorneys. This has been the trend in domestic relations cases over the past ten years, and it is now increasing in the general division in civil cases. The increasing use of AI has resulted in many persons preparing pleadings themselves assuming that since they are prepared by AI from information on the internet, that they will always be accurate and appropriate.

However, the increased use of AI in courts by both self-represented parties and attorneys has shown that there is a substantial risk of what is sometimes referred to as "AI hallucination" meaning that AI will invent or misquote cases, citations and other "legal authorities" in support of the documents prepared. This has been a concern in many state and federal courts the past two years and it has occurred in this court.

Courts must be very cautious in accepting AI prepared pleadings and the authorities cited them without reviewing them and confirming their accuracy. Cases are often dismissed because of defects in pleadings or the claims alleged. The use of AI in legal proceedings will continue to be a major concern for the courts as its use evolves and likely increases in the future.