



AN EDUCATIONAL GUIDE

# **BUCKS COUNTY** **Government &** **Courts System**

[www.BucksCounty.org](http://www.BucksCounty.org)



## BUCKS COUNTY, PENNSYLVANIA

### HISTORY

One of the original counties established by William Penn in the 17th century, Bucks County was named for Buckinghamshire, England, Penn's ancestral home. It is located in the southeastern portion of Pennsylvania between Philadelphia, Allentown and Trenton, NJ and bounded on the east by the Delaware River. Bucks County was a frontier territory when Penn entered into a purchase treaty with the native Lenni Lenape on July 15, 1682. The land was soon settled by Quakers, Swedes and Germans, skilled tradesmen and farmers who established a government in 1683.

The county seat was at Bristol from 1705 to 1726 when it was moved 10 miles north, to Newtown, which served as the county seat for 87 years. In 1752 the county, which originally extended to the New York Colony line, was reduced to its present boundaries. As settlement crept northward, agitation began for changing the county seat to a more central location. In 1810, Governor Simon Snyder signed an Act appointing a commission to select a new site. The hilltop tract they chose has continued to serve as the seat of Bucks County for 200 years. Since 1812, three successive courthouses have occupied the site.



William Penn

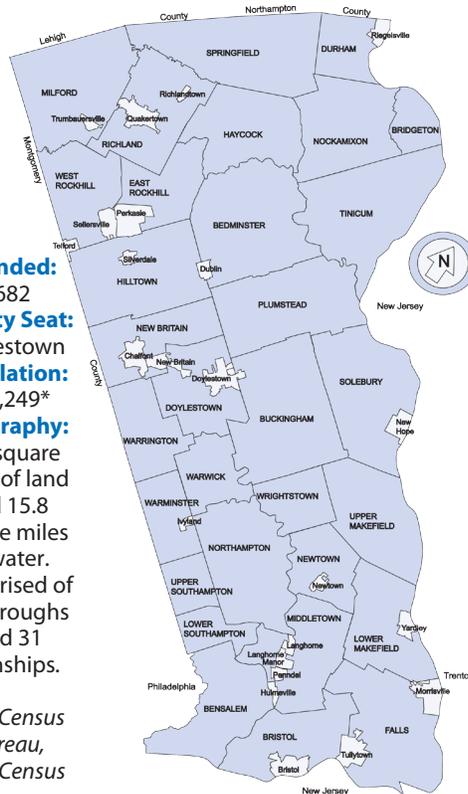
Indeed, the county is rich with history. It is where Gen. George Washington and his beleaguered troops camped before setting out across the Delaware to wage the pivotal Revolutionary War battle in Trenton. Later he would lend his name to the Bucks County site: Washington Crossing.

At one time, several, important colonial figures visited or lived in Bucks County and the small, riverfront community of Morrisville was being considered to become the site of the new nation's capital.

While farming dominated early Bucks County, the past includes a fascinating arts scene. Less than a two-hour drive from New York, the county was a popular retreat for many prominent 20th century writers, artists and Broadway celebrities who established the New Hope ar-

**Founded:**  
1682  
**County Seat:**  
Doylestown  
**Population:**  
625,249\*  
**Geography:**  
608 square miles of land and 15.8 square miles of water. Comprised of 23 boroughs and 31 townships.

*\*U.S. Census Bureau, 2010 Census*



ea's reputation as an artists' colony and the Bucks County Playhouse as a popular summer theater.

Today, over 625,000 people reside in a county with approximately 8,800 acres of county-owned parks, 13,000 acres in state parks and gamelands, colleges and universities, museums, quaint villages, sprawling farms, verdant rolling hills, woodlands and waterways.

Despite a changing landscape and rapid residential, commercial, and industrial growth, the county is steeped in its rich traditions and demonstrates an enduring commitment to its natural resources. Bucks County remains an historic blend of scenic beauty, agriculture, arts and economic growth.

### THE SEAL OF BUCKS COUNTY

In March, 1683, William Penn's Council ordered "that the seal of the County of Bucks be a tree and



a vine." Penn had written that in Bucks County "the woods yield us plums, grapes, strawberries and chestnuts in abundance." The shield came from the Penn family crest. Used to certify official documents until the American Revolution, the seal was eventually supplanted by one with the official device of the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania. The old insignia is still used on County stationary and vehicles to denote Bucks County's rich heritage. Large replicas of it in tile, made by Dr. Henry Chapman Mercer, may be seen at the Mercer Museum in Doylestown and the State Capitol in Harrisburg.

### THE FLAG OF BUCKS COUNTY

The Bucks County flag incorporates the county seal that was inspired by William Penn. With blue and gold adopted as the official county colors in 1962, the Bucks County Commissioners designed the flag as a "gold emblem on field of blue." The green band around the seal represents the natural beauty that continues to inspire people who come to Bucks County. The field of blue is standard flag proportion-2 units vertically to 3 units horizontally. The gold emblem is centered and takes roughly the center third (width-wise) of the flag. It is trimmed in standard gold color fringe.



## BOARD OF COMMISSIONERS



**Robert G. Loughery**  
*Chairman*



**Charles H. Martin**  
*Vice Chairman*



**Diane M. Ellis-Marseglia**

The Board consists of three members who are elected countywide to four-year terms. Both major political parties are represented in accordance with the laws of the Commonwealth. Votes are cast for two of four Commissioner candidates, ensuring minority party representation. The Commissioners choose one of their members as chairperson each year.

The duties of a County Commissioner are wide-ranging. The Commissioners appoint all department heads and most members of the county's 37 boards, authorities and commissions. They approve the hiring of all county employees and, as members of the county salary board, determine employees' compensation along with the County Controller and elected row officials.

They are responsible for all county finances and county properties; compile and execute the county budget and set the real estate tax rate. A county budget is adopted annually by January 1.

Among their other responsibilities are: voter registration, elections, maintenance of the county's 115 bridges, all county buildings, Bucks County Community College and the county's extensive parks system.

## MISSION STATEMENT OF BUCKS COUNTY

Serve the public effectively and efficiently by:

- \* Being responsive to the changing health and welfare, safety and informational needs of Bucks County taxpayers and public
- \* Delivering quality service and administering county, state and federal programs in a people sensitive and professional manner
- \* Managing and targeting our available resources based on the prioritizing needs of the county
- \* Conducting county business with focus on integrity and fiscal responsibility
- \* Coordinating the efforts of the county divisions and departments, and working together for the common good

Each of us is committed to achieving this mission.

## ROW OFFICERS

Each of the county's 10 row officers is elected at large in the county for a four-year term. As specified by the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania law, row officers include the following: Clerk of Courts, Controller, Coroner, District Attorney, Jury Commissioners, Prothonotary, Recorder of Deeds, Register of Wills, Sheriff and Treasurer.

The title of row officer came about in the early years of the constitution when the departments were first listed in a row on the election ballot. Their services might be more familiar to residents than their actual office titles - residents get passports, marriage licenses, and death certificates from these offices. Dog and hunting licenses are issued, as well as sportsman firearm registrations. Row officers prosecute cases, maintain the county's auditing responsibility, enforce the law in court matters, and provide for juries of peers.

Some of the row officers run for election in the same year as the County Commissioners; the others run two years later. In case of death or resignation of a row officer, the governor may make an interim appointment until a successor can be elected, The Court of Common Pleas Board

of Judges makes an interim appointment to the Office of District Attorney.

The row officers receive office space and budget allocations from the commissioners' office, but primarily function independently.

**Mary Smithson**

*Clerk of Courts*

**Raymond McHugh**

*Controller*

**Dr. Joseph Campbell**

*Coroner*

**David Heckler**

*District Attorney*

**Debra DeBlasio**

*Jury Commissioner*

**Theresa Farley**

*Jury Commissioner*

**Patricia Bachtle**

*Prothonotary*

**Joseph Szafran**

*Recorder of Deeds*

**Donald Petrille**

*Register of Wills*

**Edward Donnelly**

*Sheriff*

## BUCKS COUNTY WORKFORCE

The county has approximately 2,600 full and part-time employees. A vast majority are employed in the 24-hour-a-day, seven-day-a-week operations - Neshaminy Manor nursing home, Correction facilities, Youth Center, Emergency Services, Security and 9-1-1.

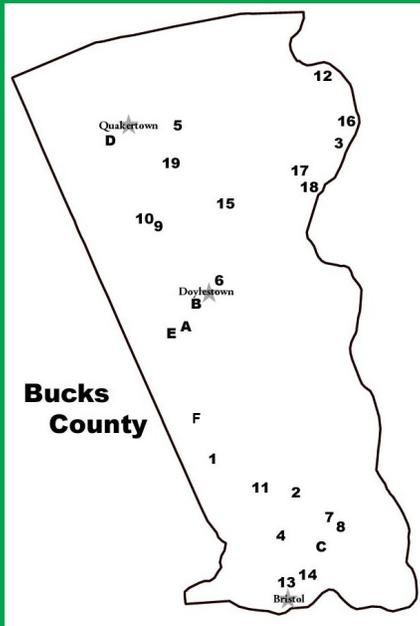
## COURTHOUSE/ADMINISTRATION BUILDING

The current Bucks County Courthouse/Administration Building is a seven-story building at 55 East Court St., Doylestown was built at a cost of \$3.5 million and dedicated in 1960. Three successive courthouses have occupied the present site.

The round portion of the building houses the Bucks County Court of Common Pleas, which includes seven courtrooms, judges' chambers and jury and conference rooms. Family Court proceedings are held in a separate building across the street.

The County Commissioners, Chief Clerk and Chief Operating Officer have offices on the 5th floor of the administration building.

Bucks County is currently in the process of constructing an \$84 million Justice Center, which officially broke ground in July, 2011. When the existing courthouse was constructed, Bucks County had 310,000 residents and four judges. Today, there are 625,000 residents and 13 judges. Since 2005, the number of criminal cases has grown more than 18 percent. In addition, Domestic Relations' caseload - conducted at 30 N. Main St - has led to overcrowding in that facility. The new facility will feature additional courtrooms and conference rooms, and provide for improved security measures.



*Bucks County provides a variety of services to its residents in offices and facilities located throughout the county:*

### GOVERNMENT OFFICES

- A) Almshouse Center
- B) Bucks County Courthouse
- C) Government Services Center (Lower)
- D) Government Services Center (Upper)
- E) Neshaminy Manor
- F) 9-1-1 Center

### PARK FACILITIES

- 1) Churchville Nature Center
- 2) Core Creek Park
- 3) Ervin Stover House
- 4) Frosty Hollow Tennis Center
- 5) Lake Towhee Park
- 6) Moravian Pottery & Tile Works
- 7) Oxford Valley Golf Course
- 8) Oxford Valley Pool
- 9) Churville Nature Center
- 10) Peace Valley Park
- 11) Playwicki Park
- 12) Ringing Rocks Park
- 13) Silver Lake Nature Center
- 14) Silver Lake Park
- 15) Stover-Myers Mill Park
- 16) Tinicum Park
- 17) Tohickon Valley Park
- 18) Tohickon Valley Pool

## BUCKS COUNTY'S COURTHOUSES



1813-1878



1878-1960



1960-Present



*Rendering of future Bucks County Justice Center.*

# PENNSYLVANIA'S JUDICIAL SYSTEM

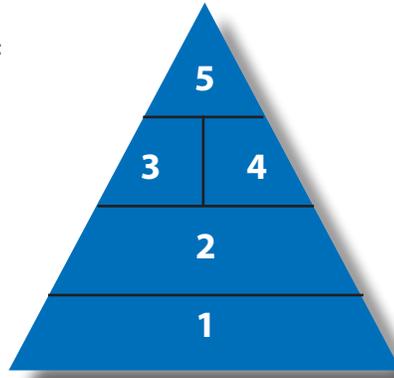
The Commonwealth's Constitution provides for a Unified Judicial System. The entry level into the court system for most Pennsylvanians is at the base of the pyramid.

**1** At the base-level are the **Philadelphia Municipal, Philadelphia Traffic, Magisterial District Judges, and Pittsburgh Municipal Courts**, which hear:

- \* Less serious, non criminal, civil and all traffic cases
- \* Matters pertaining to bail
- \* Whether serious criminal cases, such as murder, should go to Common Pleas Court

**2** At mid-level are the **Common Pleas Courts**, which hear:

- \* All major criminal and civil cases
- \* Appeals from the courts of limited jurisdiction in civil, criminal and traffic matters
- \* Matters involving children and families



The next pyramid level includes two intermediate courts:

**3 Superior Court** hears:

- \* Appeals in criminal cases and most civil cases from the Common Pleas Courts
- \* Appeals from Common Pleas Courts on matters involving children and families

**4 Commonwealth Court** hears:

- \* Original civil cases brought by and against the Commonwealth
- \* Appeals from decisions by state agencies and from Common Pleas Courts involving the Commonwealth and local agencies

**5** At the top of the pyramid is the **Supreme Court**, which is the highest judicial authority in the state. The seven-member court:

- \* Hears discretionary appeals from the Superior and Commonwealth Courts
- \* Hears direct appeals from the Common Pleas Courts in certain matters such as death penalty cases and direct appeals from the Commonwealth Court in cases that have originated in that court
- \* Has the power to take control of any case pending in any Pennsylvania Court
- \* Has administrative authority over the entire Pennsylvania court system

## HOW A COURT OPERATES

A case—whether civil or criminal—may be tried before a judge or a jury with a judge presiding. Juries are primarily available in trials held in Common Pleas Courts. There are no juries in Supreme or Superior courts, and only rarely are juries used in Commonwealth Court. Even when a jury is permitted, both sides in a case can agree to have the case tried before a judge rather than a jury.

## HOW A CASE MOVES

In a jury trial, prospective jurors are released randomly from various sources. Each potential juror is asked questions by either the

judge and/or the attorneys to ensure that he/she is qualified to hear the case. After the jurors are chosen and sworn in, attorneys present an opening statement to the jury to outline what each side believes the evidence will show.

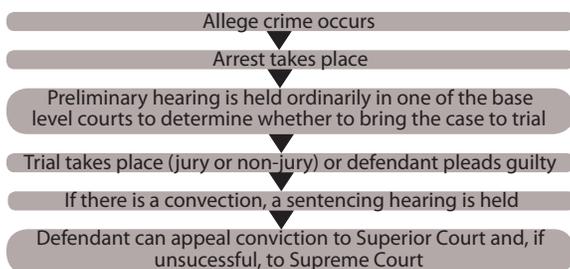
Exhibits and testimony make up the evidence presented by each side in a case. After all the evidence is presented, each attorney presents a closing argument. If the case is tried before a jury, the judge instructs the jury on how to apply the law to the case. Jurors deliberate privately in making a determination. In criminal case, a jury determines whether a defendant is guilty or not

guilty and, in limited instances may determine a penalty. The judge, however, is responsible for formally sentencing the defendant, usually at a later hearing. In a civil case, the jury determines whether the plaintiff has proven the case and, if any, damages to award. Under certain circumstances, the judges may overrule the jury's determination or damage award.

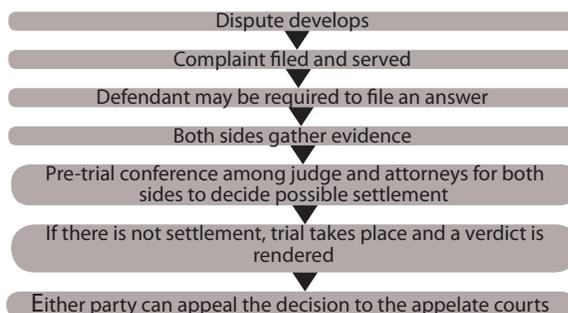
A trial may be held by a judge without a jury's involvement. In this instance, the judge hears all of the witnesses' testimony and attorneys' arguments and determines the outcome of the case based upon established law.

## IN THE CASE OF CRIMINAL VS. CIVIL

In a **criminal case**, the Commonwealth, represented by the District Attorney or Attorney General, brings a criminal charge before the courts because of a violation of the criminal law is considered an offense against the community. An individual can be charged with a felony, misdemeanor or summary offense. Felony charges, such as murder or arson, carry the most severe penalties while misdemeanors and summary offenses carry lesser penalties. If the prosecutor proves to a jury or to a judge hearing the case without a jury, that a defendant is guilty beyond a reasonable doubt, that person stands convicted and can face penalties such as prison, fines or probation.



**Civil matters** include every type of legal action except criminal actions such as: personal injuries, contract disputes, adoptions, divorces and faulty consumer goods. The party bringing suit, or plaintiff, must prove his/her case before a judge or jury by presenting evidence that there is more persuasive than the opposing evidence. This is unlike a criminal case where the proof must be beyond a reasonable doubt. Some aspects of civil cases (notably in divorce, support of child custody matters) may be heard before quasi-judicial officers—masters, hearing or conference officers, etc.



## BUCKS COUNTY COURT OF COMMON PLEAS

The Court of Common Pleas of Bucks County, a class 2A county, is the 7th Judicial District of Pennsylvania. First established in 1683, it hears all Criminal, Civil, Family, and Orphan's (Probate) matters. The Court consists of thirteen judges (and two senior judges), and is located in Doylestown. It supervises all Adult Probation, Juvenile Probation (including the Bucks County Youth Center), and Domestic Relations services, the Law Library, and provides administrative services for a twenty court system of limited jurisdiction courts (special courts) - issuing authority in all felony and misdemeanor cases, and hears all traffic and summary cases. It has concurrent jurisdiction in civil cases where the amount in controversy is less than \$12,000.

### HISTORY

Courts of Common Pleas are Pennsylvania's courts of general trial jurisdiction. They have existed in Pennsylvania at least since the Constitution of 1776, under which they were given constitutional status. Prior to the Commonwealth's Constitution of 1968 there existed in addition to Courts of Common Pleas -- Courts of Oyer and Terminer and General



Jail Delivery, Quarter Sessions of the Peace and Orphans' Courts. The new constitution abolished these latter separate courts and incorporated them into existing Common Pleas Courts.

### COMPOSITION

The Common Pleas Courts are organized into 60 judicial districts which generally follow the geographic boundaries of the Commonwealth's counties; however, seven of the districts are comprised of two counties. Each district has from one to 95 judges. Judges are elected to ten-year terms.

## JURISDICTION

Common Pleas Courts have original jurisdiction over all cases not exclusively assigned to another court and appellate jurisdiction over judgments from the special courts (also referred to as minor courts, presided over by Magisterial District Judges). They also hear appeals from certain state and most local government agencies.

### JUDGES

Hon. Susan Devlin Scott,  
President Judge  
Hon. Rea B. Boylan  
Hon. Alan M. Rubenstein  
Hon. Robert J. Mellon  
Hon. C. Theodore Fritsch Jr.  
Hon. Albert J. Cepparulo  
Hon. Clyde W. Waite  
Hon. Jeffrey L. Finley  
Hon. Diane E. Gibbons  
Hon. Wallace H. Bateman  
Hon. Robert O. Baldi  
Hon. Gary Gilman  
Hon. James M. McMaster

### SENIOR JUDGES

Hon. R. Barry McAndrews  
Hon. John J. Rufe

## DISTRICT COURTS

Bucks County has 20 Magisterial District Courts located throughout Bucks County inclusive of the 20 judges and approximately 113 judicial clerks. Magisterial District Courts are responsible for adjudicating all traffic and non-traffic citations as well as processing criminal and private criminal complaints inclusive of arraignments and preliminary hearings, the handling of civil and landlord tenant complaints up to a jurisdictional limit of \$12,000 as well as parking violations.

The Bucks County District Courts receive approximately 130,000 cases annually, manage approximately \$16,000,000 and process approximately 10,000 criminal cases annually.

Magisterial District Judges' jurisdiction in criminal cases includes parking violations through other summary and misdemeanor and felony offenses including the initial phases of murder offenses. All misdemeanor and felony violations are more commonly called court cases. These categories of cases are filed in the District Courts where they are preliminarily arraigned and afforded a preliminary hearing. At the conclusion of the preliminary hearing the charges are dismissed, waived to court or held for court and referred onto the Court of Common Pleas.

Magisterial District Judges, as officers of the Pennsylvania Unified Judicial System, may administer oaths and affirmations and take acknowledgements.



District Court 07-1-04 in Levittown.

# WHO'S WHO IN THE COURTROOM

## COURT REPORTERS

Court Reporters perform technical stenographic duties in taking and transcribing verbatim notes of legal proceedings, both criminal and civil and prepares a complete and accurate record of such proceedings. Once transcribed, the court reporter certifies the accuracy of transcriptions. Court Reporters may be called upon to read from notes in the courtroom or in Judges' chambers. Court Reporters are also available to take notes at deposition hearings, preliminary hearings, etc. In addition, the Court Reporters provide real-time transcription for the hearing impaired. There are twenty-one (21) Court Reporters employed by the Court in a full time capacity.

## MINUTE CLERKS

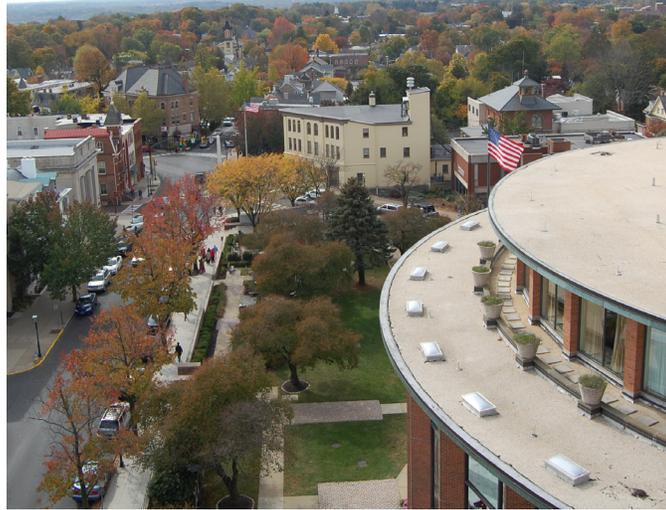
The Minute Clerks are responsible for keeping an accurate record of all courtroom proceedings. They are responsible for swearing in all witnesses and the members of the jury. Responsible for picking up files prior to court hearings and returning them to the appropriate court office for docketing. They aid in the jury selection process by keeping accurate record and keep accurate time records of all jury trials, motions, etc.

## TIPSTAVES

Tipstaves are responsible for maintaining order in the courtroom. Opens court when the Judge enters the courtroom. Tipstaves are also responsible for overseeing the jury and their needs, which include ordering lunch when the jury is deliberating, seeing that they do not read newspapers that may contain details of the trial, and seeing to it that no one involved in the trial; e.g., attorneys, witnesses, reporters, have any contact with jurors. They call witnesses, attorneys, and other persons when needed in the courtroom. Tipstaves will fill any courtroom where the need arises.



*Inside view of Courtroom 7.*



*View of Doylestown Borough from Courthouse roof.*

## JURY SERVICE

Jurors must be U.S. citizens, 18 years of age and be able to read and understand English. Prospective jurors are selected from various sources. Modest juror compensation is set by state law. Citizens are also called to serve on grand juries by a county prosecutor or by the Attorney General.

## MARRIAGE LICENSES, ADOPTIONS, WILLS, DEEDS, CASE FILES

Several row officers maintain criminal and civil records in Bucks County's Common Pleas Court. The Register of Wills and Orphan's Courts maintains wills, marriage licenses and records for adoptions and termination actions. The Recorder of Deeds maintains deeds within the county. The Prothonotary's Office maintains most civil information while the Clerk of Courts maintains criminal information. With the exception of adoption records, civil and criminal court records, deeds, marriage license records and real estate records are generally open to the public.

## CHILD SUPPORT, DIVORCE, CUSTODY, PFAS

The Court of Common Pleas has jurisdiction over family law matters: divorce, property division, alimony, child custody, child and spousal support, paternity and Protection from Abuse orders. While most of these cases originate in the Prothonotary's office, children and family matters are handled in Domestic Relations.

## LAW LIBRARY

The Law Library, which is maintained by the Court of Commons Pleas, acts as a legal information center for the judiciary, prosecutors, public defenders, attorneys and the public. It is located on the 1st floor of the Courthouse.

## JUVENILE COURT

The Juvenile Court decides cases involving children younger than 18 who are charged with misdemeanors or felonies, or who are alleged to be abused or neglected. Judges assigned to Juvenile Court have a wide range of services available for assisting children found in delinquent or dependent, including residential programs and foster care.



*Lake Towhee Park.*



## **BUCKS COUNTY BOARD OF COMMISSIONERS**

Robert G. Loughery, Chairman  
Charles H. Martin, Vice Chairman  
Diane M. Ellis-Marseglia, LCSW

Brian Hessesenthaler, Chief Operating Officer  
Lynn T. Bush, Chief Clerk

## **BUCKS COUNTY COURT OF COMMON PLEAS**

Hon. Susan Devlin Scott, President Judge

## **COMMISSIONERS' OFFICE OF PUBLIC INFORMATION**

55 East Court Street Doylestown, PA 18901  
215-348-6415

**[www.BucksCounty.org](http://www.BucksCounty.org)**