



June 2024 Volume 4, Issue 2

JUSTICE JOURNAL

Presented by the Mahoning County Prosecutor's Office
Gina DeGenova, Prosecutor

Mahoning County Welcomes the Blue Envelope Program

Prosecutor Gina DeGenova is proud to announce the launch of the Mahoning County Blue Envelope Program. This program is designed to assist individuals during interactions with law enforcement and emergency personnel. The program will promote inclusivity and serve as an enhanced communication awareness tool between law enforcement officers and community members with a condition or disability such as autism, anxiety, a physical disability, or other conditions that might require additional accommodations or awareness during an interaction with law enforcement.

The Blue Envelope Program consists of an envelope and easily identifiable promotional items available to the public to provide essential information to law enforcement officers during a traffic stop. The envelope is designed to contain a copy of the individual's license or state id, vehicle registration, and proof of insurance. The outside of the envelope has space to name emergency contact(s), as well as basic information about the individual and the program.

In the instance of a traffic stop or situation resulting in police response on the road, a participant would hand the officer his/her blue envelope, containing all relevant documents. Based on the information reported on the outside of the envelope, the officer would have a better understanding of any accommodations the individual may need, such as more time to formulate responses, sensitivity to flashing lights and loud sounds or a medical condition requiring additional time to exit the vehicle.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

____ PAGES 1-2

BLUE ENVELOPE

____ PAGE 3

NEW
APPOINTMENTS

____ PAGES 4-7

COMMUNITY
OUTREACH

____ PAGES 8-12

CIVIL
&
CRIMINAL NEWS

____ PAGE 13

NEWS
AROUND TOWN

BLUE ENVELOPE PROGRAM HELPING DRIVERS

"We recognized a critical need for a tool that helps bridge the communication gap between individuals with autism or other special needs and first responders," said Mahoning County Prosecutor Gina DeGenova, "The Blue Envelope Program is a proactive step towards creating safer and more supportive communities for everyone."

Sheriff Greene echoed this sentiment, stating "The Blue Envelope Program provides a level of support to those who voluntarily enter the program, to positively impact interactions with Law Enforcement."

The Blue Envelope Program was developed through collaboration between the Mahoning County Prosecutor's Office, the Mahoning County Sheriff's Office, the Mahoning County Board of Developmental Disabilities, and the Board of Mahoning County Commissioners. The flagship program was established by the San Diego Sheriff's Department, which we have worked with to bring the program to Mahoning County. DeGenova and Greene have also partnered with The Public Library of Youngstown and Mahoning County, whose locations will serve as distribution points for the Blue Envelope kits across Mahoning County. Kits are available at your closest library location.

"The Public Library of Youngstown and Mahoning County is very pleased to partner with Prosecutor DeGenova and Sheriff Greene and other community partners to help distribute Blue Envelope kits to the community," said Aimee Fifarek, Public Library of Youngstown and Mahoning County (PLYMC) Director and CEO. "We are one of the few organizations that have a presence all across Mahoning County, so we can reach many families in need of this service. And mental health programming has become a much larger part of our overall work here at PLYMC," Fifarek added.

By fostering a network of support, the program seeks to empower individuals with a disability to feel more confident and secure in their communities. For more information about the Blue Envelope Program and how to obtain a Blue Envelope kit, or to subscribe to updates about the program, please visit our website at <https://prosecutor.mahoningcountyoh.gov/blue-envelope-program/> or contact our office at (330) 740-2330.



MAHONING COUNTY
BLUE ENVELOPE
PROGRAM

OFFICE NEWS

NEW APPOINTMENTS

This summer, the Mahoning County Prosecutor's Office is hosting a group of dedicated and ambitious interns. Each intern brings a unique background and set of career aspirations, contributing to a diverse and dynamic team.

Jonah Bacho is an incoming senior at the University of Mount Union, where he is pursuing a dual major in Exercise Science and Sport Business. A graduate of Boardman High School, he aims for a career in collegiate facility management, driven by his passion for creating environments that promote safety, accessibility, and wellness.

John Beshara recently graduated with a Bachelor's in Political Science and attended high school at Mineral Ridge. He aspires to become a Health Law Attorney and work in consulting, using his education to navigate the complex intersection of health and law.

Julia Gregory, a junior at Kent State University, is majoring in Criminal Justice with double minors in Sociology and Psychology. A South Range High School alumna, she has long been motivated to work with victims, a career goal rooted in her deep desire to support and advocate for those affected by crime.

Kelly Szolek is a sophomore at Indiana University of Pennsylvania, majoring in Economics with a minor in pre-law. After graduating from South Range High School, she set her sights on law school to earn her JD and practice as an attorney, aiming to blend her economic expertise with legal practice.

Alexis Blessing graduated from Austintown Fitch High School and recently earned her degree from Youngstown State University. Now a second-year law student at Akron and starting the MTAX program, she is active in the Business Law Society and Women in Law, balancing her academic pursuits with her love for shopping and baking.



OFFICE NEWS

Community Outreach

Victim Services Art Contest

This quarter, Prosecutor DeGenova hosted the inaugural Victim Services Art Contest!

Our office was inspired by the incredible artistry displayed by students from Mahoning County centered around the theme of hope and healing.

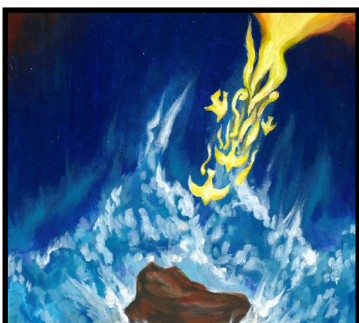
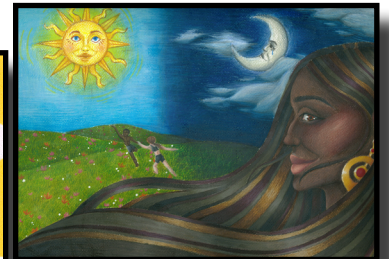
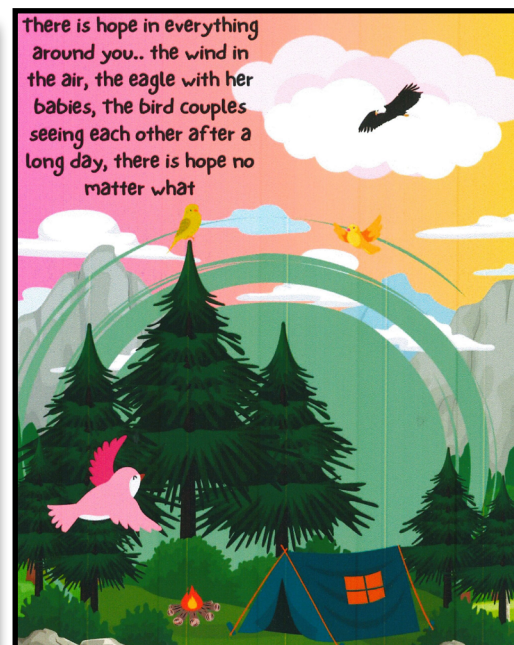
We want to thank Joyce Mistovich, Director of Education at the Butler Institute of American Art, for her collaboration in making this program possible.

We also want to support our judging panel, including Terri DiGennaro of the Helms Foundation, Edie Davidson, Jennifer Bonish, Chief of the Special Victims Unit, and Joyce Mistovich, who lent their expertise in selecting the most impactful pieces.

A special shoutout to the talented students of Boardman Local Schools, Jackson Milton Schools, and Chaney High School for pouring their hearts into their artwork, which will be displayed outside of our Victim/Witness office as well as on our website. We hope that these pieces of art offer comfort to those navigating the criminal justice system.

A big thank you to everyone who attended, including many of our Mahoning County elected officials and participating students and families.

Everyone's presence made this event truly memorable. We're thrilled to announce that this is just the beginning! Stay tuned for more exciting events like this in the future. Together, we're fostering a community of hope and healing.



OFFICE NEWS

Community Outreach



Prosecutor DeGenova and Assistant Prosecutor Dawn Durkin at Canfield Village Middle School talking to students during career day. Thanks to Canfield Local Schools and everyone who took part in educating the students and giving them insight into future careers.



This quarter, Prosecutor DeGenova was nominated for the prestigious Athena Award! The ATHENA Award honors individuals who strive toward the highest levels of professional accomplishment: women who excel in their chosen field, have devoted time and energy to their community in a meaningful way and also open doors so that others may follow in their path.



Members of the Ohio Turnpike and Infrastructure Commission (OTIC), including OTIC Executive Director Ferzan Ahmed, gave Prosecutor DeGenova and State Rep. Lauren McNally a tour of the Mahoning Valley (westbound) Turnpike Service Plaza. The tour's goal was to view camera technology implemented to ensure travelers' safety and combat criminal activity like human trafficking.



This quarter we attended the successful reverse parade organized by the Mahoning County Board of Developmental Disabilities. We handed out some great information to those in attendance about our Special Needs Registry. Participation is always vital to the program's success.



Prosecutor DeGenova discussing our office's programs to the St. Elizabeth's Auxiliary group at the Immaculate Heart of Mary Church Parish Center in Austintown.

OFFICE NEWS

Community Outreach



Prosecutor DeGenova and Assistant Prosecutor Kristie Weibling celebrating the Pinwheels for Prevention event held by Mahoning County Children Services.



Prosecutor DeGenova and members of our Office working at the the Dylan's House event in Canfield. Dylan's House is a non-profit organization that helps provide housing and support to adolescents, young adults, and families impacted by Autism.



Jennifer Bonish, Chief of the S.V.U., speaking at the Youngstown Lions Club, about the dangers of Human Trafficking and what our Office is doing to prevent it.



This year's Warriors event at the Canfield Fairgrounds was amazing. The Autism Society of Mahoning Valley created an inclusive opportunity for all families in the Mahoning Valley. This year's Warriors event was nothing short of a great time. Our Office was able to connect with so many different valley organizations and families. This year our team won the tractor pull competition!



Prosecutor DeGenova and members of our Office cutting the ribbon for the brand-new Animal Charities building. Their brand-new facility has the capacity to house 400 animals. In 2023, Animal Charities reported taking in over 800 animals. This facility will go a long way in helping house animals of all different varieties, including dogs, cats, snakes, farm animals, fish, and many more.

OFFICE NEWS

Community Outreach

Prosecutor's Office celebrates *Brown v. BOE*; Hosts Civil Rights Activists

This May, we were proud to co-sponsor the 70th anniversary celebration of the landmark *Brown v. Board of Education* decision alongside the Youngstown City School District and Mahoning Valley Sojourn to the Past. The Mahoning Valley chapter of the NAACP hosted the event.

This historic event marked a pivotal moment in the civil rights movement and its impact on education and equality in America. Prosecutor DeGenova had the honor of introducing our keynote speaker, the inspirational JoAnn Bland.

The event was a heartfelt tribute to the ongoing struggle for civil rights and a celebration of the progress we've made. A special congratulations to the students from the Youngstown City Schools and Mahoning Valley Sojourn to the Past who were recognized for their outstanding essays on the civil rights movement and its significance. Your voices are vital in continuing the legacy of *Brown v. Board of Education* and striving for justice and equality in our community.



Together we reflect on our past and look forward to a future of equal opportunities for all. Thank you to everyone who made this event a success.

HOPE'S CORNER

HOPE PASSES Canine Good Citizen

Hope is on her way to finishing up her training to become a comfort therapy dog. Hope and her handlers recently passed the Canine Good Citizen test. Jenny Falvey and her team at Dogsmartz Unleashed worked hard to accomplish this. Hope has come a long way, she still has some way to go, but she is inching closer to her ultimate goal of becoming a comfort therapy dog for victims and witnesses! Continued Thanks to Blackwood Pet Food and the Austintown Veterinary Clinic for all of their donations. We are extremely excited for our girl's future and we hope (no pun intended) you are too.



CRIMINAL DIVISION NEWS

NOTABLE CASES

State v. Dandre Lamont Williams

Dandre Williams and his girlfriend were a homeless couple living in a detached garage on Crandall Avenue in the City of Youngstown. On or about August 17, 2023, after it became dark, the couple got into an argument. Mr. Williams beat his girlfriend in the garage to the point that she became unrecognizable. He then strangled her until she passed out. The following morning, the victim woke up and left the garage, bruised and bloody and barely able to see as both eyes were nearly swollen shut. She was seeking help. In a bloody sports bra and pants, she managed to walk to the home of her cousin on Norwood Avenue, who called 911. The victim was taken by ambulance to Mercy Health, St. Elizabeth Hospital where she was admitted for treatment of her extensive injuries. Dandre Williams, in the meantime, was found by police after hiding behind a house off of Norwood. He had some scratches to his forehead. He claimed he had a headache and needed medical attention. Mr. Williams was placed under arrest and was charged with Felonious Assault (F2); Strangulation (F2) and Domestic Violence. He pled guilty to these charges and was sentenced on March 8, 2024, to four to six years in the Ohio Department of Rehabilitation and Corrections.

Daniel Yozwiak, Assistant Prosecutor, First Chair.



Daniel Yozwiak
Assistant Prosecutor

State v. Mehki Lamire Venable

A jury returned a guilty verdict following a week of trial against 20 year-old Mehki Venable for the shooting death of 21 year-old Jacob Moore. Venable shot and killed Moore on New York Avenue in the City of Youngstown in September of 2022. During a verbal argument, Moore challenged Venable to a fistfight, to which Venable agreed. Moore, who had a valid CCW permit, was carrying a firearm, which he placed on a parked vehicle once the fistfight was agreed to. Once he disarmed himself, Moore approached Venable's vehicle, where Venable was sitting in the driver's seat. When Moore arrived at Venable's vehicle, Venable fired numerous close-range shots at Moore, striking him multiple times. Venable immediately sped away from the scene, ultimately fleeing to Georgia, while Moore was taken rushed to the hospital where he succumbed to his wounds. During the trial, Venable took the witness stand claiming self-defense. He testified that he had other encounters with Moore and people who were with him during that day had guns but never shot at him and let him walk away. Venable testified that he did not call the police after because he was afraid that Moore's people would shoot up his house where his mother and girlfriend were staying. He said he was afraid for his life when he shot Moore and he did not know what happened to the gun he used. Police and prosecutors were able to prove that Venable shot Moore as the two were about to have the fistfight. Moore dropped his gun, but Venable instead fired from the gun he had, killing Moore. Venable was charged with Aggravated Murder, an Unclassified Felony (UF); Murder (UF) and Firearm Specifications. Following the week-long trial on April 19, 2024, the jury found Venable guilty of Murder (UF) with accompanying 3 and 5 year Firearm Specifications. On May 16, 2024, Judge Maureen Sweeney sentenced Venable to life in prison. He will be eligible to apply for parole after he serves 23 years in prison.

Patrick R. Fening, Assistant Prosecutor, First Chair

Robert J. Andrews, Chief Assistant Prosecutor, Second Chair



Patrick R. Fening
Assistant Prosecutor



Robert Andrews
Chief, Criminal

NOTABLE CASES

State v. Christopher Mack Edmondson, Jr.

Shandale Johnson first met Christopher Mack Edmondson, Jr., through a Facebook dating app. They communicated via phone and Face-time for about a month when Miss Johnson bought Mr. Edmondson a bus ticket to come to Youngstown. They were together for about a week. On December 6, 2023, they were in the parking lot of the Boardman Plaza looking for a parking space when they got into a verbal argument. After Miss Johnson managed to park her car near Ace Hardware, an argument continued and Mr. Edmonson became enraged, grabbing Miss Johnson's keys from the ignition and throwing them out the window. Where she managed to get her keys back, Edmondson exited the vehicle and followed, yelling and threatening an elderly couple on the sidewalk. Edmondson managed to take her keys again with the wallet attached. When Miss Johnson attempted to take her keys and wallet back, Edmonson began beating her on the sidewalk, in broad daylight, in front of onlookers from nearby store fronts. A video recording shows her falling to the ground, unconscious. She sustained a facial laceration, periorbital hematoma and a concussion with loss of consciousness. After his arrest, Mr. Edmondson was charged with one count of Aggravated Robbery (F1) and one count of Felonious Assault (F2). At a pretrial on May 13, 2024, the Defendant entered pleas of guilty rather than proceed to trial. He pled guilty to one count of Robbery (F2) and one count of Felonious Assault (F2). He received a sentence of four to six years in the Ohio Department of Rehabilitation and Corrections.

Kevin R. Day, Assistant Prosecutor, First Chair.



Kevin Day
Assistant Prosecutor

State v. Keylon White

A purported love triangle resulted in Keylon White being charged with Murder (UF) for the August 9, 2023 shooting death of James Merchant, 28. The victim's body was found in an SUV parked in the driveway of a home on Alameda Avenue in the City of Youngstown. The driver's side window was shattered and Merchant was found slumped over the center console with a black handgun beside him. After the police arrived, a woman standing on the porch stated that Merchant was her on again-off again boyfriend. The woman, Breona Smith, stated that she had been receiving text messages from Merchant describing how he wished to kill himself. She did not know he was parked in her driveway until she looked outside after hearing gunshots. It was first thought that Merchant's death was a suicide however the police later concluded that his death was the result of a homicide. On April 12, 2024, the Defendant pled guilty to the charge of Involuntary Manslaughter (F1). On June 14, 2024, a sentencing hearing was held in front of Judge Maureen Sweeney. The State of Ohio argued for a sentence of 8 to 12 years in prison, while the Defendant argued for a sentence of 4 to 6 years. After hearing arguments from the parties and victim impact statements from members of Mr. Merchant's family, Judge Sweeney sentence the Defendant to 8 to 12 years in prison.

Patrick R. Fening, Assistant Prosecutor, First Chair.

Robert J. Andrews, Chief Assistant Prosecutor, Second Chair.



Patrick R. Fening
Assistant Prosecutor



Robert Andrews
Chief, Criminal

CIVIL DIVISION NEWS

New collaboration with YSU students

In the 2024 Spring Semester, the Mahoning County Prosecutor's Office partnered with Youngstown State University to offer a community engaged learning class. The program was formulated by Mahoning County Prosecutor Office Program Director Isabella Caruso-Harris and Chief Assistant Prosecutor Linette Stratford who also teaches the course. "Most of the students in the course are working toward a career in law, and we were pleased to give them an opportunity to gain insight into the work of this office and, hopefully, inspire some future young prosecutors and lawyers," said Chief Stratford.

Philosophy of Law is typically taught as a lecture course with exams and a lengthy paper. The course is important because it teaches the nature and limits of law, the justification of the legal system, the relationship between law and morality, state punishment of individuals, citizen rights and issues of privacy, liberty, discrimination, and civil disobedience. Most lawyers, including those in a prosecutor's office, are not exposed to these historical and philosophical aspects of the law and how certain philosophies of law apply over time to impact the laws we make and enforce today.

Under the new Community Engaged Learning format for the course, students met in class with members of the Mahoning County Prosecutor's Office, law enforcement, judiciary, and community partners to see and hear firsthand how law is implemented and impacts the community. Throughout the course, the students participated in a roundtable discussions with members of the Mahoning County Prosecutor's Office, judiciary, and community partners. A special thank you to Penny Wells, Director of Mahoning Valley Sojourn to the South, for sharing her experience and thought regarding the student's reflection on philosophy of law and Martin Luther King's Letter from a Birmingham Jail and to Pat Kerrigan, Director of The Oak Hill Collaborative for sharing his story and thoughts on rehabilitation and corrections. Also, thank you to Mahoning County Sheriff Jerry Green for providing a very insightful information on corrections and a tour of the Mahoning County Jail.

The course was also designed to allow the students to provide content for our internal publications of the Mahoning County Prosecutors Office. The students identified a quote that connects to the course material, answering the target question: how would you translate philosophy of law to your peers. The students then selected graphics that coincide with the quote with the goal of creating content to be disseminated on social media. Additionally each student wrote an op-ed piece analyzing the legal aspects of contemporary issues by applying the course materials to explain how different legal philosophies impact the law and/or the interpretation and application in a particular case.

Each quote and op-ed piece was evaluated by Program Director Caruso-Harris, the MCPO Justice Journal Committee and the Prosecutor for publication in our Justice Journal and on our social media platforms. Selected quotes and op-ed pieces will be published periodically.



Based on the feedback from everyone who participated, the course was a success. "We hope our collaboration will contribute to a positive career for each student and introduce these future lawyers to the importance of our office and engaging with the community," said Mrs. Caruso-Harris.

OP ED: Ethical Use of AI in the Legal System

We have had access to generative AI for some time now. This new technology has been cautiously integrated into daily life by some and outright rejected by others. For the legal community, the questions of AI take on a unique moral dimension. We are inclined to ask practical questions of AI in manufacturing; we want to know if it will perform as needed. But for the legal community, we are dealing with concepts of human interaction. It is not enough to ask if AI can do something. We must also ask what we want AI to do and how do we want AI to do it? If we are building a car the answer is simple, I want an AI to build a car as efficiently as possible. But for the legal system, the desired output is more complicated. Some desire a legal system that is hard on criminals as to deter further crimes. Others desire a legal system that is more lenient, and which takes systemic issues of race and gender into consideration. Since we are now faced with the opportunity to create a machine that is uniform and efficient, we must consider what it is that we want from our legal system.

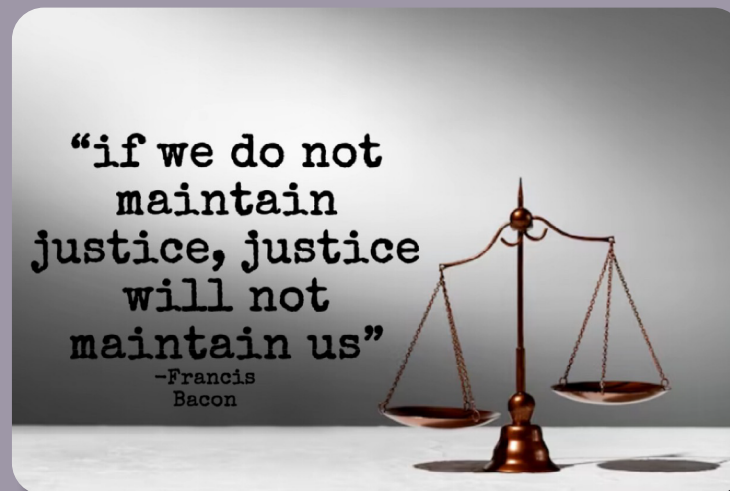
To start, we must recognize that our current AI systems are limited. When we think of AI, we tend to think of 'metal humans' for lack of a better term. We see them as beings that are like you and me. While this is true to some extent, current conceptions are

misleading. AI works more as a word calculator. AI doesn't think or understand, it guesses. We put data into the AI and the AI uses that data to create something. For example, if I gave the AI all of Elvis Presley's songs and then asked the AI to write an Elvis Presley song, it could produce a song that sounds like an Elvis Presley song. However, if I asked the AI to write a Queen song, it wouldn't be able to.

The fact that AI works entirely based on what we give it raises moral and practical questions.

Chief among these questions are, 'What do we give the AI?' and 'What do we want the AI to give us?' Depending on how you view the purpose of our legal system, you may answer these questions in very different ways. To bring it back to the limited nature of AI, we must recognize that AI doesn't always give us the answers we are looking for. A major practical and moral issue is AI's tendency to fabricate information.

AI doesn't know what a motion for summary judgement is; it only knows what it looks like. So, if I asked the AI to create a motion for summary judgement, it may make up case law to support my argument. Lawyers have already faced consequences for filings that, unbeknownst to them, contained fabrications.



PRODUCER CONSCIOUSNESS

**IF WE ACTUALLY UPHOLD JUSTICE, IT WILL IN
TURN NURTURE AND SUSTAIN OUR COLLECTIVE
PROGRESS AND FLOURISHMENT**

Written by: Brandon N. Tabak

OP ED: Ethical Use of AI in the Legal System

Another major concern is AI's propensity for bias. AI, as explained earlier, works exclusively on the data we give it. AI is incapable (at present) of seeing the reasons behind the data. This has led to accusations of racial bias. It is true that AI at present has a serious problem with racism. For example, facial recognition software struggles to recognize black faces because they are trained on more white faces than black faces. If an AI was ever to be implemented into our legal system, ensuring that it treats all people equally is a necessity.

It is not all doom and gloom for AI. In fact, AI has the potential to greatly improve our legal system. AI can analyze documents much faster than a human lawyer. AI can also compile research much faster than a human could. This assumes the AI just draws from existing cases and law rather than generating it by itself. These uses can be greatly beneficial to the legal community. More efficient legal work could mean cheaper and faster legal work. More people could have access to justice if AI is implemented correctly.

Now comes the difficult part, implementing AI. To start off, we must act cautiously. Silicon Valley likes to move fast and break things. While that works very well if you are the one moving fast and breaking things, it is not as appealing if you are getting broken. There is potential for great harm if AI is used recklessly, so caution must be a component of the implementation.

There are two major philosophies that people look to when judging the ethics of an action, utilitarianism and deontology. To put it simply, utilitarianism looks to consequences and deontology looks to rights and duties. From a utilitarian perspective, creation and implementation of AI should be made for society's benefit. The AI should be implemented in such a way that we are all better off for it. This vision

is very appealing. After all, who doesn't want to live in a safer and more secure world. But the flaws in that approach are not hard to see. We don't want to be treated as numbers on a spreadsheet; we want to be treated as people. We want the judge to consider not just society, but the individual. Perhaps what is best for society is not what is best for the individual. An AI purely geared towards society may be overly punitive and lacking in empathy. Conversely, a deontological AI would consider the defendant and plaintiffs as individuals. For a deontological AI, the only thing that exists are the plaintiff and defendant. It would not consid-

er the needs of society because the rights of those individuals are more important.

But we see the appeal in both positions. We want a society that is both safe and just. We want solutions that consider society and the individual. In my view, the best way to square this circle is through the philosopher John Rawls. Rawls argued that when we create rules for society, we make them based on utilitarian principles. For example, we make speeding illegal because that is best for society. Yet,

when we apply these rules, we act deontologically and permit exceptions for individuals. Take the speeding example: if a husband was speeding to get to the hospital because his wife was going into labor, we would be inclined to permit that. To date, AI is not capable of this nuance. Perhaps as AI itself evolves and progresses, this will become possible.

When considering AI in the legal system, we must keep one thing in mind. AI are tools. They are revolutionary, but not magic. We must be aware of their pitfalls in order to use them properly. When used properly, with the right moral guidelines, we will most certainly benefit from their use. If we keep in mind that the output is biased depending on the input and the design and we account for this bias, AI can be an excellent tool to advance the legal system.

"Justice cannot be for one side alone, but must be for both."

-Eleanor Roosevelt



The production of justice is not just for one, but to be for both consumers and producers.

NEWS AROUND TOWN

Longtime Boardman Officer Retires



In June, longtime Boardman Police Officer Mike Salser was honored by the Board of Trustees.

The Board thanked Officer Salser for his long and distinguished law enforcement career.

Congratulations Mike and enjoy your retirement!

Local Leader wins Advocacy Award



This May, Jennifer Gray from COMPASS Family and Community Services was awarded the Mahoning County Mental Health & Recovery Board's 2024 Adult Advocate of the Year.

Congratulations to Jennifer and we look forward to watching you continue your hard work and dedication.