

In its continued effort to promote the administration of justice in the Richmond area and to facilitate cooperation between the bench and the bar, the Administration of Justice Committee recently concluded its annual interviews with the **Honorable Judges for the Courts of the County of Chesterfield**. As in years past, the Judges were gracious with their time and spoke with candor to Committee members regarding new rules and forms, motions and the need for pro bono volunteers.

The Honorable Edward A. Robbins, Jr.
Chesterfield Circuit Court

Judge Robbins reports that the Court continues to appreciate the professionalism of the local bar. Civil, criminal, and family law attorneys as a group all practice at a high level.

The Court wishes to continue to remind the bar to be respectful of the Court's and hearing participants' time by being punctual. The Court continues to stack jury trials. Judge Robbins requests that parties notify the Court of settlements as soon as possible. Sufficient notification of settlement allows other parties to try their case without delay.

Judge Robbins also urges parties to contact an individual judge's law clerk or administrative assistant regarding each judge's preferences as to courtesy copies and other case administrative matters. The Court welcomes inquiries from practitioners in this regard. Judge Robbins does note, though, that parties must file all pleadings with Clerk's office in advance of hearings irrespective of providing courtesy copies to chambers. The Clerk's Office accepts filings via mail, courier, and hand delivery. The Court does not accept filings via the internet, email, or fax. The Clerk's Office public service hours are 8 AM – 4 PM. Sliding pleadings through the door of the Clerk's Office or Judge's Chambers after hours is not acceptable for filing.

Court-appointed lawyers continue to do good work. The most frequent complaint that the Court continues to hear from clients of court-appointed counsel is that counsel has not communicated adequately with the client. Judge Robbins urges court-appointed counsel to confer with their clients sufficiently in advance of court appearances and most certainly prior to the date of trial.

The Court is very excited to report to the bar that it is in the process of installing state-of-the-art courtroom technology in all courtrooms, thanks to resources that Chesterfield County has provided. The General District and Juvenile and Domestic Relations District Courts of Chesterfield County are also undergoing a similar upgrade.

The Court's upgrades include a courtroom audio-visual system that allows counsel to connect laptops to screens throughout the courtroom, including in the jury box, from counsel's table and the podium via HDMI connection. Courtrooms will also receive easy-to-use document viewers that allow projection of documents and other objects (ranging from contract documents to phones showing text messages) onto screens throughout the courtroom.

Please be on the lookout for updates from the Court on training sessions for the Court's new technology. The Court hopes that parties will make good use of the Court's major technological upgrades. The Court, though, urges all parties to test courtroom technology before the day of trial by working with the Court to schedule a pretrial courtroom visit. The Court cannot accommodate technological delays on the day of trial.

Bar members and their staff should consult the Court's website at <https://www.chesterfield.gov/1127/Circuit-Court-Clerk> for additional information regarding docketing procedures as well as the Court's technology rollout.

The Honorable Keith N. Hurley
Chesterfield General District Court

A representative of the Administration of Justice Committee of the Richmond Bar Association met with Chief Judge Keith N. Hurley of the Chesterfield General District Court on January 28, 2020. Judge Hurley expressed his excitement with the technological developments in the courtrooms, his general pleasure with the practitioners in his court and the remarkable efficiency of the clerk's office at a time when they are understaffed.

The technological upgrades that have been made thus far are part of a three million dollar program bringing improvements to the general district, circuit, and juvenile and domestic relations courtrooms. Included among those improvements are new audio equipment and video screens that will, among other functions, allow documents to be placed under a reader and projected onto a screen on the bench. Those documents can then be examined, marked up, and printed from the bench for admission into evidence. Likewise, litigants who maintain documents on their cell phones will be able to place those phones under the document camera and the presiding judge will be able to view same without risking alterations to the phone itself¹. Judge Hurley notes that this is particularly useful in personal injury cases and early feedback suggests attorneys are also pleased with the improvements. Other areas in which the upgrades are expected to have impact include conducting pre-trials via video allowing all parties to communicate, helping unrepresented litigants present evidence, and, in the future, could allow sign language and other interpreters to assist remotely from their offices.

Like any large project, while the logistics of installing the improvements are a challenge, Judge Hurley is hopeful the upgrades will be completed over the summer. With respect to learning the new system, Judge Hurley notes that it is relatively easy and encourages any practitioner who would like to take advantage of the technology to arrive a few minutes early to familiarize themselves with the program.

While volume in the court has continued to increase, in particularly on the civil side, the Chesterfield County General District Court Clerk's Office has been recognized across the state as a role model of a high-performance clerk's office for its ability to handle the increased workload. Notwithstanding their demonstrated efficiency, the clerk's office remains understaffed and while

¹ Cell phones are not allowed in the courthouse, and only in certain matters may a litigant obtain permission, verify same with the sheriff's deputy before bringing the phone into the courthouse, and then be escorted with the phone to the courtroom.

the need for twelve to fourteen additional clerks has been identified, the proposed budget only has funding for an additional thirty clerks this year, and thirty clerks next year, statewide. Judge Hurley is hopeful that Chesterfield will receive funding for at least two positions should that budget pass.

In follow up to last year's report on the then recent scheduling changes, Judge Hurley reports that those have worked well, especially on the civil side, and notes that they still watch traffic and criminal to avoid back-ups on the docket. With respect to the civil dockets, he further notes that there is an increased availability of trial dates and that trials can be scheduled relatively quickly should the litigants so choose.

Judge Hurley again commends the professionalism of the practitioners who appear in his court. He encourages any attorney who appears in Chesterfield to first check in with the courtroom clerk. That way should the attorney be delayed in another courtroom when their matter is called, the court can then be made aware that the attorney is at least present in the courthouse. Further, he reminds all practitioners, especially new attorneys, to always introduce themselves to the court. Chesterfield is a collegial bar and while it is easy to become familiar with those who frequently appear, it is helpful to all participants be reminded of names in case someone has forgotten.

Lastly, for anyone interested in being included in the court appointed panel, please submit a letter to the court and introduce themselves to the judges. Judge Hurley compliments the members who are part of the court appointed panel and encourages those who are interested to apply.

The members of the Committee thank the Judges for their time and candor and look forward to another year.

The Honorable Scott D. Landry
Chesterfield Juvenile & Domestic Relations District Court

Judge Landry advised on behalf of the Judges of Chesterfield County and City of Colonial Heights Juvenile & Domestic Relations District Court appreciation for the opportunity to address the members of the Richmond Bar Association and to provide information about practice in the Twelfth Judicial District. Consider visiting the website www.chesterfield.gov/jdrcourt for the Court's docketing policies, schedules, contact information and resource material. Also, please feel free to contact the Clerk of Court, Laura Griffin (Chesterfield County) at 804.748.1379 or Evelyn Hall (Colonial Heights) at 804.524.8741 for copies of forms mentioned or to inquire about any matter pertaining to the Court.

“We're Grateful”

The Judges of the Chesterfield County and Colonial Heights JDR Court are very grateful for the service provided by attorneys and quality representation they see daily. The Judges look forward to continue to work with attorneys who are on time, prepared, aware of local rules and practice, endeavor to know the rules of evidence and procedure, and extend courtesy to the bench, opposing counsel, court personnel, and the public.

“We Appreciate Feedback”

The Judges of the Chesterfield County and Colonial Heights JDR Court hope you feel vested in assisting the Court in serving the public better and would like to receive constructive feedback.

In 2018, all six judges, the Clerks of Court (Chesterfield County and City of Colonial Heights) and the supervisors for pre and post clerks met for several hours for the Court’s first “Consistency Summit”. The lengthy summary of survey responses from several stakeholder groups (deputies, clerks, DCSE and DSS counsel, CCS and CSU officers, etc.) pertaining to several topics was discussed in detail to learn of any observed variance, consider the impact of varied approaches and contemplate a uniform approach. The bench appreciates that in many instances predictability of approach assists the public served, members of the Bar and the extended Court community. The bench also honors the ability of each judge to serve as their experience and sound discretion dictates. The next “Consistency Summit” has been scheduled for early 2020.

In advance of the next “Consistency Summit” stakeholders will be sent an e-mail asking for feedback. All responses are sent to the Clerk and then provided anonymously to the Judges. Each and every response will be reviewed at the “Consistency Summit” so Judge Landry asks that you please respond to this e-mail so that as many suggestions as possible can be reviewed and considered.

Chesterfield County and Colonial Heights JDR Court is one of 20 courts nationwide participating in the “Implementation Sites Project” through National Council of Juvenile and Family Court Judges (NCJFCJ). The project is committed to improve dependency, foster care, and CHINS cases through collaborative teams formed from courts across the country. Teams compare notes and ideas on how family law cases are handled in their respective court. A representative from the project has already made a site visit in Chesterfield and met with stakeholders with an effort to gather data on how the court is serving the public.

“Consider How You Practice Law”

Of great import Judge Landry offered was how you practice law impacts others. For example, how you practice law impacts clerks being able to complete their job.

The Chesterfield County and Colonial Heights JDR Court is the third largest court in the state for filings. In 2018, the court had approximately 19,000 filings and 50,000 hearings. So far this year, the clerk’s office has received 35,000 calls to the main phone number and the clerk’s office pre-court staff have each spent 400 hours on the phone. Each pre-court clerk has duties to perform and they also rotate time at the front window. Members of the clerk’s office are already staying late and working weekends – up to 5 people working on a Saturday – to get through all the matters filed with the Court.

There are 23 total clerks, including the Clerk of Court and two supervisors, working in the Chesterfield Juvenile Court Clerk's office. According to the last needs assessment, they should have 4 more. With vacation, sick days, and some working part-time schedules, there are 17 clerks on average working on any given day with 6 of those clerks needed to be in the courtrooms, 2 working the front counter, and others needed to process the cases before the court.

To assist the Clerk, the Court recommends the following:

- Use state-provided district court forms which are designed for faster processing than drafting your own motions.
- Get back in touch with the Clerk's office when you receive a call so they can set hearings, issue process, etc. Email is the preferred method of communication.
- Keep continuance requests to a minimum. Continuance requests take a lot of time and resources to process the request and take that case out of the normal order of operations.

“Improvements to courtrooms and other courthouse spaces”

Judge Landry offered thanks to the efforts of many and the receptive Chesterfield County administration for support of significant technological upgrades/improvements for Circuit, General District and JDR Courtrooms and conference rooms which have been approved and funded. Improvements are now being made. Judge Landry's courtroom is currently being equipped to display digital evidence in an effective and secure manner.

The training room is now equipped with video presentation capabilities and the space is being used by different groups, including the “Hope and Resilience Art Show” which presented artwork and poetry by children in detention and at the Child Advocacy Center. The artists and their families were invited to attend and participate with other stakeholders in the art show. Judge Landry thanked the Chesterfield Bar Association for providing water and snacks. The children's artwork and poetry is still currently on display. The Court hopes to repeat the art show each year.

The clerks and courthouse staff now have the benefit of a “Wellness Room,” designed provide those working in the courthouse a break from the stress of the job. Vicarious trauma is experienced by many in the courthouse and the space is designed with a wall to draw on, relaxing places to sit and rest, and information on self-care.

The Chesterfield Juvenile courthouse now has a bi-lingual (Spanish and English) directional sign just beyond the metal detectors at the front door. The Court hopes to add additional bi-lingual signs in other areas of the courthouse.