

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 County Chesterfield**. As in years past, the Judges were gracious with their time and spoke with candor to Committee members regarding technology, jury trials, and “triage” dockets.

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

2020 has been a challenging year for all courts, and Judge Robbins said Chesterfield Circuit has been no different. He was extremely happy with the ability of the staff, the Judges, and the local bar associations to work together and make things work smoothly through the worst parts of the pandemic upheaval. He said the first few months were akin to building an airplane while flying it at the same time. He wanted to thank the bar for all its help and commends the way the bar stepped up to assist in the logistical challenges.

During these unprecedented times, Judge Robbins urges lawyers to be patient, be flexible and check once, twice and as often as possible on dates for hearings. Since the calendar is in flux to accommodate the docket, routine hearing times may change, and courtrooms may change to accommodate cleanings and the like.

Judge Robbins said that most courts were unprepared for such broad use of video technology in the courts. However, due to the commitment of the staff and other Judges in Chesterfield, the adoption of video technology was quick and has been used very successfully during the pandemic.

Given the disruption caused by the pandemic, Judge Robbins predicts things will return to normal from a calendar and docket perspective within a year, and sees the clerk and court making great gains in returning to normalcy.

As for jury trial logistics, he recommends that each attorney carefully review the jury trial plan that was submitted to and approved by the Supreme Court of Virginia. Some highlights include that one single courtroom has been designated for jury trials, which has to accommodate five (hopefully six by the time this publishes) Judges. Most conflicts on dates will go to those juries that have constitutional implications like criminal speedy trial. The Judge assures all litigants that most of the bugs in the mechanics of trying the cases has been worked out through the tireless efforts of the Circuit Court staff, but everyone is encouraged to call the clerk and schedule a time to “practice” in a room dedicated to the new technology. Several mock juries were performed, and some jury trials have already occurred with good results.

The Court is also empaneling alternate jurors for every case to protect against folks becoming sick or developing symptoms.

To the future, Judge Robbins sees continued use of WebEx video platforms for non-evidentiary hearings as they are infinitely less time consuming than the alternative. Specifically, he sees them put to great use in straightforward situations like status hearings. He also encourages

members of the bar to continue to bring all issues to the Court's attention regarding practice logistics and ideas.

The Honorable Matthew D. Nelson
Chesterfield General District Court

Judge Nelson continues to appreciate the candor, patience, resilience and understanding from the local bar in working with the General District Court throughout this process. He realizes the financial strain that members of the bar have had to endure during this pandemic and the Judges are doing everything they can, within the parameters set by the Supreme Court, to remain operational. At this point everyone's safety is paramount, but they have a keen eye towards the citizens having continued access to justice and to attorneys having continued access to make a living. He wants to extend his deepest thanks as well to his staff members who have truly been phenomenal during the pandemic.

He also commended Judge Hurley, who was Chief Judge until July 1, 2020, for the yeoman's work on making some very difficult and tough decisions in the early stages of the pandemic to make sure things continued to move along.

What they have done in Chesterfield, because the volume of cases is so high, is reduce the number of cases on any given docket, so there are 100-125 case caps on civil dockets and same for traffic cases. He wants to commend the bar on helping the Court by not setting cases on dates that are capped. The list can be provided by the clerk. Judge Nelson reports that the dockets never were backlogged in Colonial Heights and is seeing the Chesterfield docket backlog easing with the addition of Friday afternoon dockets, two Fridays a month. Regardless of docket issues, Judge Nelson wants to reiterate that the safety of the public, staff and the attorneys is paramount and will not be disregarded to speed through dockets.

He also wants to continue to let members of the bar know that the Court is all ears when it comes to ideas, problems, concerns or anything else that need to be brought to the attention of the Court in these times. He says to simply call chambers with these types of issues or questions.

To the future, Judge Nelson sees continued use of technology for witnesses in civil cases and having certain hearings via video as well.

The Honorable Vanessa L. Jones
Chesterfield Juvenile & Domestic Relations District Court

Judge Jones reports that Court is doing extremely well. Like so many other courts throughout Virginia, the Court was forced to suspend all dockets in mid-March of 2020 as a result of the COVID pandemic. The Court did not resume with a sense of normalcy or pace until July of 2020. Faced with a backlog of 5,000+ cases, the Court then set up a "triage" docket in an effort to bring all of those matters into the courthouse. Everyone jumped in to set up new policies and

procedures to ensure an environment that is in compliance with the guidelines of the Supreme Court of Virginia and the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, and safe for all citizens, litigants and staff. This effort was a tremendous success, with a great deal of credit going to former Chief Judge Scott D. Landry, Clerk of Court Laura G. Griffin, the sheriff's office and the clerk's office who have worked "extremely hard." With the new measures in place, the Court began hearing cases in three courtrooms from May through June, ultimately allowing the Court to get back to "normal" in July.

Judge Jones noted that the Court is fortunate to have such a high caliber of attorneys who appear before the Court. The attorneys have been very compliant with the new policies and procedures implemented by the Court. She commended the attorneys for their hard work and professionalism, and for their patience and understanding while everyone has worked through these challenging times over the past year. While the situation remains "fluid" in light of the continuing pandemic, Judge Jones encourages all counsel to ask questions and to continue to maintain open communications with the Court.

During the past year the Court and the lawyers have been able to make good use of the state-of-the-art technology that is now available in all of the Juvenile and Domestic Relations Court courtrooms. In particular, the Court has been able to conduct a number of hearings remotely using the Court's Cisco Webex videoconferencing capabilities which has assisted the Court in keeping up with its docket. Judge Jones urges the attorneys to continue to make good use of these technological upgrades, and to request that hearings be conducted remotely when appropriate.

The Court understands that many of the attorneys appearing before the Court are handling multiple cases, sometimes resulting in overbooking. In the event an attorney is going to be late for a court appearance, Judge Jones wants to remind the attorneys that they should communicate with the clerk's office as soon as possible. Also, if any litigant wants to request a continuance, attorneys should complete and submit a "continuance request form" which is available online at <https://www.chesterfield.gov/1129/Juvenile-Domestic-Relations-District-Cou>. The webpage also contains other forms and additional information that might be helpful to counsel.