

THE RICHMOND LAWYER



THE OFFICIAL PUBLICATION OF THE RICHMOND BAR ASSOCIATION
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FROM

RICHMOND

Virginia

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2026

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EQUITY OPPORTUNITY

By: Andrew T. Landrum

Judge Robert
Merhige, Jr.
Documentary &
History at the RBA

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The Richmond Lawyer, published by the Richmond Bar Association (RBA), holds the primary goal of keeping RBA members informed about the latest happenings, events, and developments within the organization. *The Richmond Lawyer's* mission is to provide timely and relevant information that supports the professional and personal growth of our members.

The Richmond Lawyer welcomes submissions of articles concerning legal topics of interest to Richmond legal professionals. Criteria for publication include the article's quality, its substantive value, its interest to Richmond lawyers, and the originality of its subject matter. Submissions that relate to cases pending before any court or agency will not be accepted.

The Richmond Lawyer maintains editorial independence to ensure unbiased reporting and to avoid conflicts of interest, with editorial decisions made without undue influence from external parties or RBA leadership. It is important to note that opinions expressed in articles do not necessarily represent the explicit opinions of the RBA. The Richmond Bar does not provide legal advice. The Richmond Bar staff does not perform independent research on submitted articles.

Any errors will be corrected promptly and transparently, with corrections clearly marked and published in the subsequent issue. The publication is committed to protecting the privacy of its members, ensuring personal information is not shared without consent and used solely for publication purposes.

By adhering to this editorial policy, *The Richmond Lawyer* aims to provide a high-quality, informative, and engaging publication that serves the needs of the Richmond Bar Association community.

Readers are encouraged to provide feedback and contribute to the publication, with feedback directed to aholland@richmondbar.org. *The Richmond Lawyer* accepts advertisements relevant to the legal profession, with all advertisements adhering to our ethical standards and subject to approval and payment.

Full Editorial Policy & Calendar available upon request

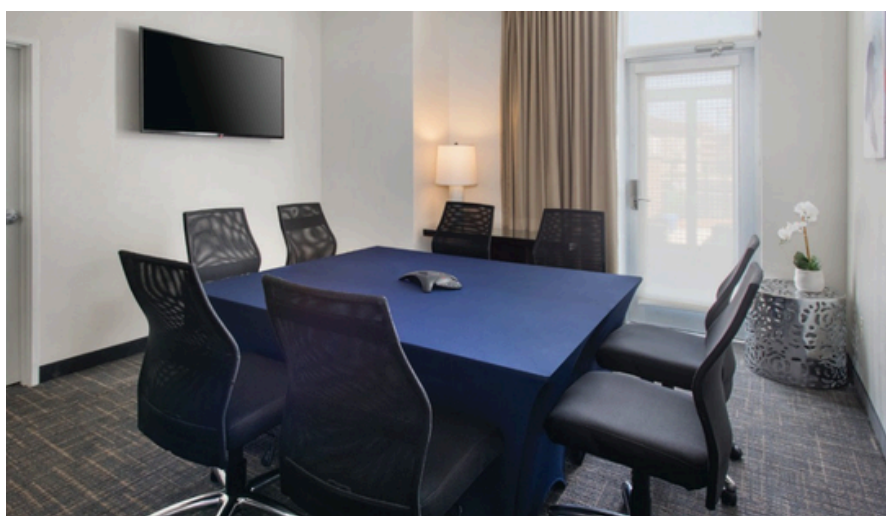
Articles for submission, feedback, and other communications regarding *The Richmond Lawyer* should be sent to Annie M. Holland, Executive Director via email at aholland@richmondbar.org or by mail sent to P.O. Box 1213, Richmond, Virginia, 23218.

IN THE NEWS

If you've recently landed a new job or promotion, share the good news with the Richmond Bar. Include your full name, your company's name and location, your new title and your areas of concentration in your email. Announcements can be e-mailed to aholland@richmondbar.org or mailed to Annie Holland, at P.O. Box 1213, Richmond, VA 23218.

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THE RBA PURPOSE

The purposes of the Bar Association of the City of Richmond are to:

- cultivate and advance the cause of jurisprudence;
- to facilitate and improve the administration of justice;
- to promote the delivery of legal services to the entire community;
- to promote an increased understanding by the public of the legal system and respect for the law;
- to inculcate and enhance the highest standards of ethical conduct, integrity, dignity and honor;
- to continue the legal education of its members; and
- to encourage courtesy among all members of the legal profession, including Bench and Bar.

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TAYLOR STEFFAN, JD, LCSW**

MARK YOUR CALENDARS

- SEPT 09** **RBA MEMBER APPRECIATION SOCIAL
5:30-7:30 AT RIVER CITY ROLL**
- OCT 12** **RBA GOLF TOURNAMENT
12:00 AT LAKESIDE GOLF CLUB**
- OCT 20** **BENCH-BAR CONFERENCE
8:00-2:00 AT GREATER RICHMOND
CONVENTION CENTER**
- NOV 10** **RBA AWARDS LUNCHEON
12:30 AT THE RICHMOND MARRIOTT**
- DEC 08** **RBA HOLIDAY COCKTAIL PARTY
6:00 AT THE JEFFERSON HOTEL**

OPENING STATEMENTS

FROM THE DESK OF THE PRESIDENT

W. Benjamin Pace



Welcome to the Richmond Bar Association's 2026-2027 bar year. I am honored to serve as RBA President and to succeed our Past President Jen West. Our Association owes a deep debt of gratitude to Jen, whose service to the RBA extends well beyond her outstanding stewardship as President.

As someone who has participated at every level of the RBA over the last twenty-four years, from simply attending luncheons to chairing committees and serving on the Executive Committee, I can attest to the many benefits the RBA affords its members. As a young lawyer, I was fortunate to have access to our local judiciary, a supportive network of attorneys, and leadership opportunities through the RBA. Our Association welcomes all attorneys, and our many programs, committees and sections inculcate the traditions of collegiality and professionalism that define the Richmond Bar. We are fortunate to practice law in Richmond, and I believe the RBA is the foundation upon which our outstanding legal community is built.

If you have not already, I encourage you to renew your membership and to actively participate in our sections, committees and programs this year. Please review our calendar of events and prioritize attending as many as you can. Finally, bring a young attorney or colleague along with you, as an introduction to the RBA is the best gift you can give a Richmond lawyer.

I look forward to the year ahead and to meeting more of you along the way.



FROM THE EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

Annie M. Holland

I spent a few days in Chicago recently for the NABE Annual Meeting, and one keynote has stuck with me since. The speaker's whole message centered on relationships: how the strongest bar associations aren't built on programming calendars or member counts, but on the connections happening in the room. That's not a new idea to us here at the Richmond Bar, but hearing it framed that way was a good reminder of what makes the RBA work. Every lunch, CLE, and cocktail party the RBA hosts is really just an excuse to get lawyers talking to each other. That's the job, and I think we do it well.

Speaking of which, membership renewal season is in full swing. If you haven't renewed yet, now's the time. If you're at a firm, take a minute to check in with your colleagues and make sure that they have renewed, an easy renewal reminder from you can go a long way toward keeping our numbers strong and our programming full.

Fall is shaping up to be a busy one. Our Brown Bag Lunch Series with the federal bench is underway now through November, giving members a rare chance to sit down with judges in a small, informal setting. Our mentoring program has matched two dozen pairs for the year, connecting newer attorneys with experienced ones across the city. Both are examples of the same idea from that keynote in Chicago: relationships are built one conversation at a time.

I also want to officially welcome Ben Pace as our 2026-27 President, along with the rest of our Board, Section, and Committee leadership. It's a great group, and I'm looking forward to another good year together.

As always, thanks for being part of the RBA.





**2026-2027 DUES
STATEMENTS HAVE
BEEN SENT**

Dues should be paid by September 1st
to remain in good standing



ABOVE: The Richmond Bar Membership Committee held the 3rd Annual Summer Associate Breakfast in June at the Country Club of Virginia.



LEFT: Members enjoyed the Richmond Ivy Soccer Game



RIGHT: The RBA Pro Bono Committee held it's first meeting of the year in person at Williams Mullen.



ABOVE: The Richmond Bar held the first Brown Bag Lunch with Judge Hudson at the Federal Courthouse.

MEET ME

at the
RICHMOND

BAR



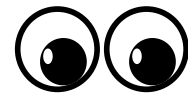
MOCKTAIL OF THE MONTH



Cucumber Spritz

½ cup cucumber, peeled and chopped
1 tbsp fresh lime juice
1-2 tsp simple syrup
4-6 fresh mint leaves
½ cup sparkling water

- 1** Muddle cucumber, mint, and simple syrup in a shaker until fragrant.
- 2** Add lime juice and ice. Shake well.
- 3** Strain into a glass filled with fresh ice.
- 4** Top with sparkling water and gently stir.



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SAVE THE DATE



**The Annual
Richmond Bar
Association Holiday
Cocktail Party will
be held on
DECEMBER 8TH at
THE JEFFERSON.
More details to
come!**



The Richmond Bar
Association

PRO BONO BULLETIN

The Richmond legal community's guide to pro bono opportunities throughout the area.

This bulletin is made possible by the RBA Pro Bono Committee & the following Pro Bono Partners:

[Central Virginia Legal Aid Society](#)

[Legal Aid Justice Center](#)

[Greater Richmond Bar Foundation](#)

[University of Richmond School of Law](#)

Virginia Free Legal Answers - American Bar Association

Who: Attorneys **When:** Any time **Where:** Virtual

ABA Free Legal Answers is a project of the American Bar Association's Standing Committee on Pro Bono and Public Service. The purpose of the website is to increase access to advice and information about non-criminal legal matters for those who cannot afford it. Attorneys eligible under certain criteria will be authorized to use the system and to respond to user's requests. You will only answer questions you choose to answer.

The Triage Project - Central VA Legal Aid Society & Greater Richmond Bar Foundation

Who: Attorneys **When:** Varies **Where:** Case dependent

This innovative Private Bar led pro bono project identifies "Triage Champions" in critical substantive law areas where CVLAS lacked the resources to provide full representation. These Triage Champions recruit and train like-minded pro bono volunteers to join their virtual law firms in their respective practice areas. Cases are managed on JusticeServer – a volunteer portal.

If you would like to volunteer for one of our Triage practice areas, please contact Lisa Bennett, CVLAS Triage Coordinator, at lisa@cvlas.org or Vera Thoms at admin@grbf.org.

Community Tax Law Project

Who: Attorneys, Accountants, Enrolled Agents **When:** Ongoing **Where:** Virtual

CTLP handles approximately 800 represented and brief advice cases each year. We have a critical need for volunteers to assist with our very large caseload. If you are interested in becoming a member of CTLP's Pro Bono Panel, please take a moment to complete the attached Pro Bono Survey for [attorneys](#) or [accountants and enrolled agents](#). For more information, please call (804) 358-5855 or email info@ctlp.org.

CancerLINC

Who: Attorneys **When:** Varies **Where:** Varies

CancerLINC is a local non-profit that LINC's cancer patients and their families to legal resources to solve the non-medical obstacles that arise with a cancer diagnosis. Common legal issues include: wills, trusts, uncontested guardianship & custody, public benefits denials, employment, housing & landlord/tenant issues, and bankruptcy.

Pro Bono Housing Unit - Legal Aid Justice Center

Who: Attorneys **When:** Varies **Where:** Virtual

As a volunteer for the LAJC Pro Bono Housing Unit, you will provide remote legal advice to low-income Richmond tenants at risk of eviction. LAJC provides trainings, sample pleadings, and manuals for volunteers. For more information, email Lauren King, Esq. at laurenking@justice4all.org.

Looking for more Pro Bono opportunities? Check out JusticeServer.org.

JusticeServer is a tool that enables attorneys to easily volunteer their time for pro bono cases from one or more legal services providers. And more importantly, it allows them to connect with clients in need of their legal expertise where they can have the greatest impact.

HIRING WITHOUT THE GUESSWORK

A Practical, Tactical Law Firm Management Tool

By: James Tsikerdanos

You didn't go to law school to become a full-time HR manager. Yet, as a firm owner, you likely spend more time trying to manage your "crew" than charting the course for your practice. Hoping that the right talent walks through your door isn't a business strategy—it's a gamble. To scale sustainably, your firm needs an objective, repeatable filter that weeds out the wrong fits automatically, saving your energy for the candidates who can actually do the work.

I can't count how many people I have interviewed and hired. And I've trained just as many people how to interview and hire. And, I've found that a writing quiz for candidates has brought better and better new hires. The written interview/quiz is a fact-checker — a truth-teller — that stands between a resume and an in-person interview. It's a screener that takes all the wonderful things you fell in love with in someone's resume (a marketing piece) and asks that applicant, "Show me, don't tell me."

You don't need to be a master interviewer to discover if the person who looks good on paper has the real experience you need. I started asking candidates to complete the written quiz before we ever sat down face-to-face.

Some questions have clear right and wrong answers. Some show how a person thinks and how well they fit with your firm. "What book did you last read?" That will tell you a lot about what matters to this person.

Where I've seen clients get stuck is that they hire someone to fill a position, but they have no idea what that person should do. I'm not talking about a full, formal, beautifully worded job description. Candidates need a clear list of what they will be expected to accomplish. How will the position make your law firm more profitable, and how much money is it actually worth?

Remember, a resume is not the real person. It's the best version of themselves. If you choose someone based on a resume alone, you have no idea who's going to show up at your business.

I've had clients modify their positions to fit the on-paper person they have fallen for. (But, that's like falling in love with a Tinder profile).

The written interview keeps that from happening. It weeds out candidates who aren't willing to do things your way, the person who thinks they're too good for your firm, and the person who won't dare to be different.

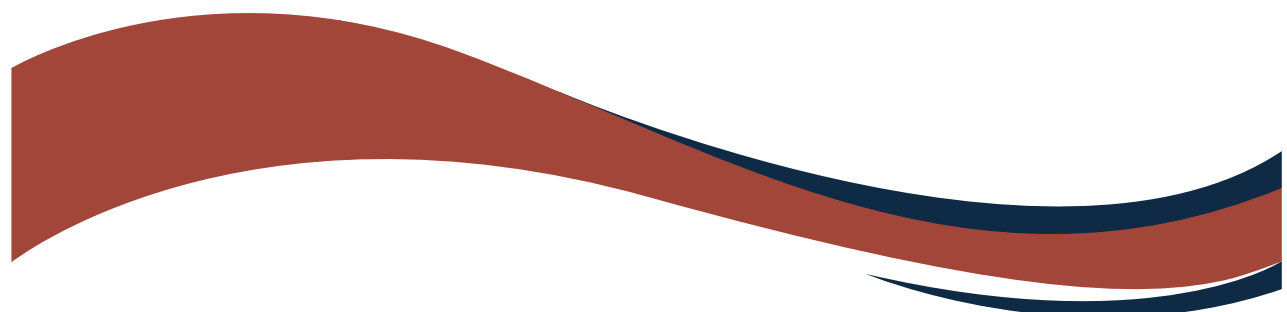
If you're hiring without a written interview, you're just guessing.

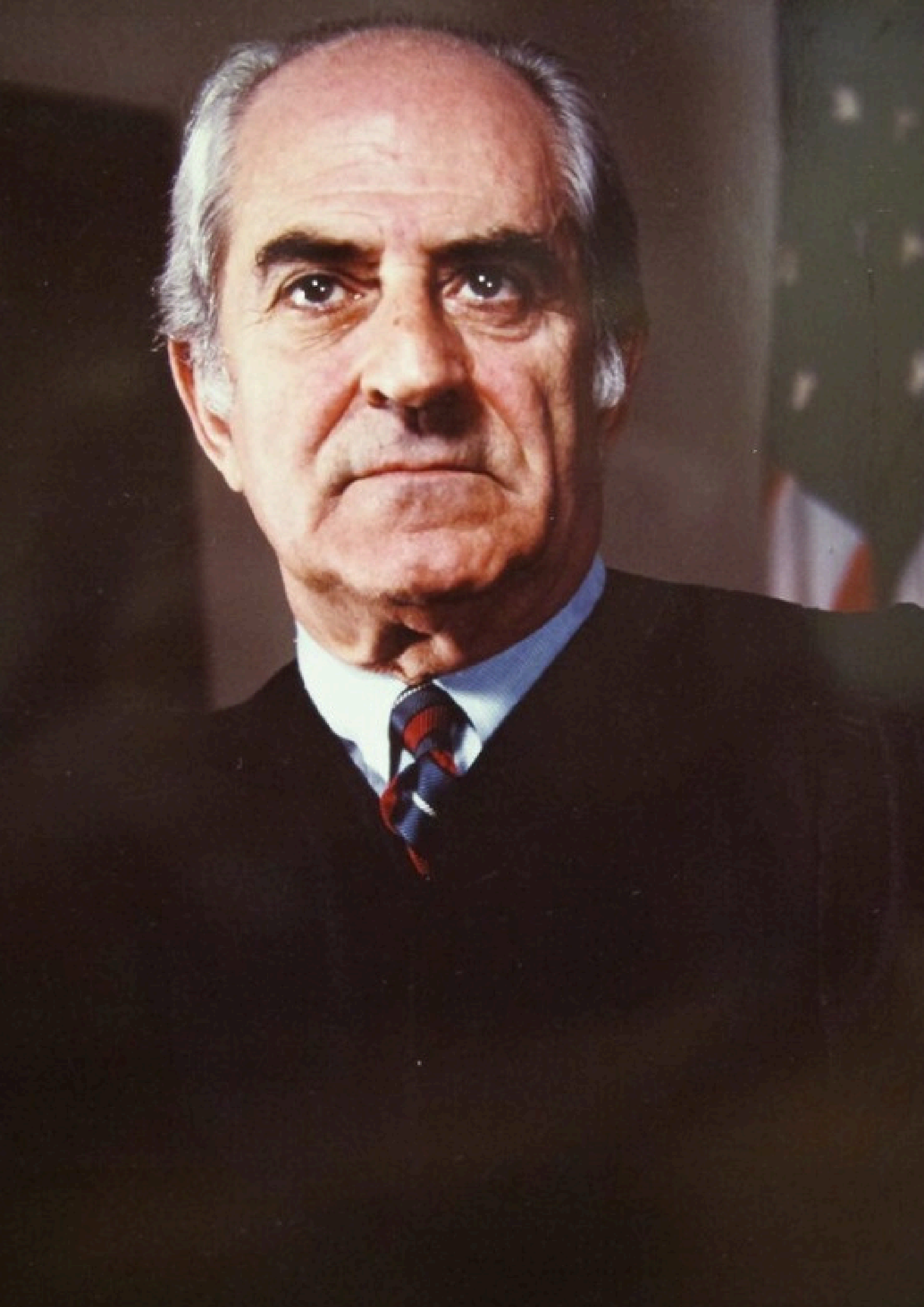
Want to see exactly how this works? Let's run a quick test.

If you want a copy of our sample written interview packet—including the exact prompts we use to screen out bad hires—send an email to:

JamesT@HowToManage.com.

But there's a catch: to prove you read this far and can follow instructions, the subject line must read exactly: "Navigate the James." If you get it right, the blueprints to a better hiring system will be in your inbox. If you miss a detail... well, at least you aren't applying for a job on your own crew!

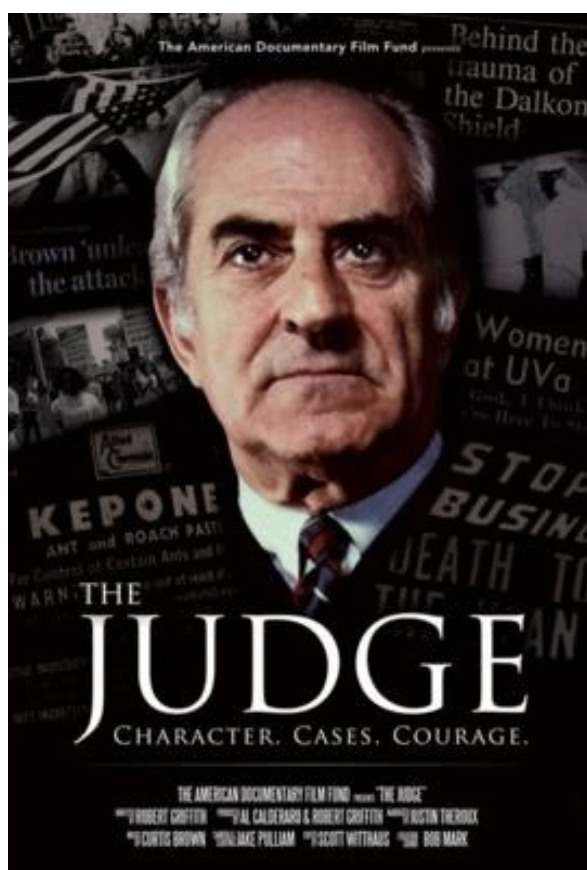




AWARD-WINNING DOCUMENTARY ABOUT JUDGE ROBERT R. MERHIGE, JR., LONGTIME RICHMOND BAR MEMBER & “THE NATION’S GO TO JUDGE” NOW AVAILABLE ON STREAMING

The following information was received by the Richmond Bar Association office from The American Documentary Film Fund.

The Judge - Character. Cases. Courage, a feature length documentary on the life of late U.D. District Court Judge Robert R. Merhige, Jr., is now available for streaming on Amazon Prime, Apple TV, Roku, Tubi, Video on Demand, Fandango, and others.



At a time when lawyers and judges are steadfastly defending the U.S. Constitution, this film provides an inspirational boost to those members of the legal profession engaged in this noble fight.

Throughout the course of U.S. history, extraordinary times have seen the rise of extraordinary people, and at a time of great social change in the U.S. Judge Merhige emerged as one of those people. As a result of the number of historically significant cases over which Judge Merhige presided during his nearly 31 years of service on the federal bench, Judge Merhige attracted attention as “The Nation’s Go to Judge.” As a result of his courageous stands and landmark rulings he was revered by many and rivaled by some. However, Judge Merhige’s absolute love for the law, great personal courage and unfailing fair mindedness saw him through some very trying times and allowed him to do what he simply referred to as “his job.”

Judge Merhige’s story is narrated by Emmy Award winning actor Justin Theroux and told by those who knew him best. These include people who clerked for the judge, such as Michael W. Smith, former President of the American College of Trial Lawyers, and Anne Holton, who served as Virginia Secretary of Education and interim President of George Mason University. Also, others who knew the judge well like Senators Tim Kaine and Mark Warner, former Chief Judges of the U.S. Court of Appeals for the Fourth Circuit, Roger L. Gregory, and J. Harvie Wilkinson III, and Rodney A. Smolla, who served as Dean of the University of Richmond School of Law, Dean of Washington and Lee School of Law, president of Furman University, Dean of Delaware Law School, and President of Vermont Law.

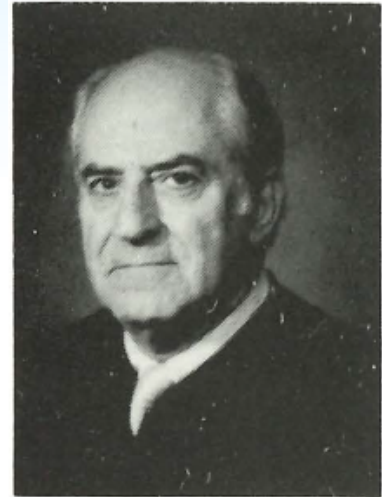
JUDGE ROBERT R. MERHIGE, JR.'S HISTORY AT THE RICHMOND BAR ASSOCIATION

Before he became one of the most consequential federal judges in Richmond's history, Robert R. Merhige, Jr. was one of RBA's own. A 1942 graduate of the University of Richmond, Merhige joined the Bar Association in 1942, and served as President of the Richmond Bar Association from 1963 to 1964.

At the Association's annual business meeting on February 12, 1964, Merhige reported four main accomplishments from his Presidential term.

1. Pay had increased for judges of courts of record.
2. Judges of courts not of record had been provided with robes by the city council.
3. A supplemental increase in retirement benefits for judges of courts not of record had been voted by the city council.
4. The Association had held a successful convention in Bermuda (\$125 per person).

In a Richmond Times-Dispatch article dated November 19, 2000, Judge Merhige had the following to say about membership in the Richmond Bar Association "Joining the Bar gives young lawyers a sense of belonging. It also makes it easier for them to find someone to confer with or answer questions...The Bar Association of the City of Richmond is very special. I have tried cases all over this country. The Bar in Richmond can stand up with pride to any other Bar in the nation."



JUDGE ROBERT R. MERHIGE, JR.

U.S. District Court
10th & Main Streets
Richmond, VA 23219
643-7171
U of Richmond 1942
President 1963-64

[Photo: Judge Robert R. Merhige, Jr., from the RBA's 1985 Centennial Membership Directory]



When Merhige faced public accusations of anti-government bias in *United States v. Smith Bagley, et al.*, then-RBA President Wilbur C. Allen appointed a committee, John S. Battle, Jr., Lewis T. Booker, and James C. Roberts, to review the case. Their December 1979 report found Merhige had handled the trial fairly and without bias throughout.

[Excerpt from *The Tale of the Century, a History of The Bar Association of the City of Richmond 1885-1985*, By John O. Peters]

In November 1979, the President of the Association, Wilbur C. Allen, appointed a committee "to look into the allegations contained in a letter published in the Congressional Record for November 2, 1979, critical of the performance of judicial duties by the Honorable Robert R. Merhige, Jr., . . . in the case of *United States v. Smith Bagley, et al.*"⁶ The letter in question had been authored by two federal prosecutors, who accused Judge Merhige of an anti-government bias. The members of the Association's committee were: John S. Battle, Jr., Lewis T. Booker and James C. Roberts. President Allen appointed the committee because Judge Merhige "cannot properly respond and, therefore, stands defenseless (against) such unwarranted attacks."⁷

On December 12, 1979, the committee filed a comprehensive report in which it concluded that

Judge Merhige handled the case in a fair and even-handed manner throughout. He showed no bias against the Government . . . Indeed, our review of the entire record persuades us that this trial was as fair and as error-free as it is humanly possible to make a trial. The short of the matter is that Judge Merhige, in our view, tried this case with exceptional fairness and correctness.⁸

NEED TO MAKE A REFERRAL? WE'VE GOT A DIRECTORY FOR THAT



The RBA's online Member Directory is your go-to tool for trusted referrals.

Easily search by name, firm, or area of practice and connect your clients with colleagues you know and trust.

Available anytime at **www.richmondbar.org** — just log in to your member portal and click “Member Directory.”



LEGAL A.I. & THE EQUITY OPPORTUNITY

By: Andrew T. Landrum

My job title draws a head-scratch at networking events. I am a Legal Engineer at Block (fka Square), Jack Dorsey's company, building AI-native systems that let a lawyer's expertise reach further than their calendar ever could. It is a strange, wonderful job that means I read AI-related law firm news closely. Two items deserve your attention. In June, Cooley launched Cooley GO Lab, an AI workspace on Legora giving Y Combinator startups on-demand answers on formation, equity, and governance — shaped by Cooley lawyers, delivered without an attorney-client relationship.[i] This month, Troutman Pepper Locke expanded its "Attorney-Directed AI" toolkit at eMerge, offering counsel AI fact-development tools free on hosted matters.[ii] Together: institutional judgment encoded into software, delivered continually at a fraction of the cost.

Which raises a question pro bono and legal aid lawyers should ask: if this works for Silicon Valley and BigLaw, why isn't AI a natural co-pilot for landlord-tenant disputes, domestic matters, and smaller criminal cases?



We know artificial intelligence education matters, which is why the Richmond Bar will bring you articles from our members on the topic. Something specific you'd like to read about? Email us at aholland@richmondbar.org.

Concern one: That sounds expensive?

Fair. Enterprise legal AI is priced for firms that bill by the hour; legal aid budgets have never been flush.

But that assumption is dated. Open-weight models — free to download and run — have closed much of the gap with frontier systems on narrow tasks. Palantir and NVIDIA built a June initiative around that premise, pairing open models with domain-optimized tooling within highly classified Government environments to deliver "frontier capabilities for specialized workloads" inside classified government environments.[iii] It builds similar quality models that remove, per Palantir CEO Alex Karp, the risk of "proprietary insights migrating into the weights of closed models." [iv]

Pro bono matters are narrow and repeatable; a model tuned on Virginia unlawful detainer practice need not also write poetry. With model costs collapsed, hosting and oversight are the real expense — and both exist already, since our firms and legal aid societies routinely host privileged client data securely.

That oversight is no nicety. Even purpose-built legal research tools hallucinate on one in six to one in three queries.[v] Which is why design matters more than technology: build the system to ascertain the facts then brief the lawyer, not advise the client, so the failure mode falls on supervision and attorney-management; requirements that exist today.

Concern two: What about privilege?

The sharpest objection — and where this model finds its power. In *United States v. Heppner*, Judge Rakoff held that a defendant's exchanges with a consumer AI chatbot are protected by neither privilege nor work product.[vi] That holding rests on two things within our control.

First, confidentiality. Rakoff found none because the defendant handed his information to a third-party platform whose terms reserved the right to retain, train on, and disclose that data.[vii] That is a problem about vendor terms, not AI. A model inside your own perimeter carries no such terms.[viii] Second, direction. Counsel conceded they "did not direct [Heppner] to run Claude searches"; had they, Rakoff suggested, the tool might have functioned as a lawyer's agent under Kovel.[ix] Build the program attorney-directed and that reasoning cuts in our favor.

I will not oversell this. The law is months old and cuts both ways: commentators argue Heppner reads too categorically,[x] while the opinion itself rejected any analogy between generative AI and ordinary software.[xi] But the more the doctrine tightens around third-party exposure and counsel supervision, the better a locally hosted, attorney-directed system looks.

And even at worst, recall what Cooley's design concedes: no privilege, no attorney-client relationship, real help anyway. For a Richmonder facing eviction with no lawyer, supervised help is the difference between showing up prepared and not showing up. They will turn to AI regardless. Why not offer help that counsel we trust can train and oversee?

Richmond won't be first, but we can catch up

Legal Aid of North Carolina's Legal Information Assistant handled more than 50,000 conversations in its first year, most often about housing and domestic violence.[xii] And 74% of legal aid professionals surveyed report daily AI use, nearly double the wider profession.[xiii]

Richmond has the hard part already. The Triage Project routes urgent needs to volunteers at scale; JusticeServer manages the cases.[xiv] What we lack is the thing that lets each volunteer carry three matters instead of one.

The models are good enough. The costs have collapsed. The RBA has been building things that endure for 141 years.[xv]

Why not build this one?

--

Andrew T. Landrum is a Product Counsel & Legal Engineer at Block, Chair of the RBA's Corporate Counsel Section, and Chair-Elect of the Young Lawyers Section. Views expressed are entirely his and do not necessarily reflect the views or positions of Block, Inc. If anyone is interested in chatting more about Legal Engineering or AI Legal tools, reach out to him at alandrum@squareup.com.

[i] Cooley Launches Cooley GO Lab, Powered by Legora, for Y Combinator Startups, COOLEY LLP, June 23, 2026, <https://www.cooley.com/news/coverage/2026/2026-06-23-cooley-launches-cooley-go-lab-powered-by-legora-for-y-combinator-startups>. Cooley lawyers "continue to directly shape and refine the underlying content," and the platform "does not provide legal advice or create an attorney-client relationship between its users and Cooley."

[ii] eMerge Expands Its Attorney-Directed AI Offerings With Several Advanced Tools Included at No Charge, TROUTMAN PEPPER LOCKE, July 20, 2026, <https://www.troutman.com/insights/emerge-expands-its-attorney-directed-ai-offerings-with-several-advanced-tools-included-at-no-charge/>.

[iii] Palantir Launches Engine for Deploying NVIDIA Nemotron Open Models in Sovereign Environments, BUSINESS WIRE, June 29, 2026, <https://www.businesswire.com/news/home/20260629390275/en/Palantir-Launches-Engine-for-Deploying-NVIDIA-Nemotron-Open-Models-in-Sovereign-Environments> (describing deployment in "classified, air-gapped, and other sensitive environments").

[iv] Id. ("Combining Palantir infrastructure with NVIDIA's AI and Nemotron models will allow the U.S. government to unleash the full power of LLMs while removing the underlying security risks and rational concerns around proprietary insights migrating into the weights of closed models.").

[v] Varun Magesh et al., Hallucination-Free? Assessing the Reliability of Leading AI Legal Research Tools, J. EMPIRICAL LEGAL STUD. (2025), <https://arxiv.org/pdf/2405.20362> (measuring hallucination rates of 17% for Lexis+ AI and 33% for Westlaw AI-Assisted Research).

[vi] United States v. Heppner, No. 25 Cr. 503 (JSR), slip op. at 4 (S.D.N.Y. Feb. 17, 2026), <https://storage.courtlistener.com/recap/gov.uscourts.nysd.652138/gov.uscourts.nysd.652138.27.0.pdf>.

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THE RICHMOND BAR WELLNESS DOCKET

Featuring insights from:



Taylor Steffan, JD, LCSW
Navigator Counseling



Parke Sterling, LPC
Therapy for Men RVA



YOU DON'T HAVE TO LAWYER ALONE

He was a 35-year-old attorney in his first therapy session ever.

I could see the fear in his eyes.

When we first started talking, he leaned in like we were about to trade government secrets.

Then he started telling me things he had never told anyone. That sometimes his family felt like a burden. That sometimes his heart started beating rapidly at night. That he fantasized about moving away or telling everyone to go to hell. That sometimes he snuck drinks in the garage. That he struggled with blind jealousy at work. That he felt like a fraud most of the time, in most areas of his life.

And I could tell what he was thinking. That these thoughts and feelings somehow made him uniquely defective. That having them meant something was deeply wrong with him.

And why wouldn't he feel that way? After all, we almost never sit down with other people and ask, "Are you thinking all of this crazy stuff too?"

One of the many gifts I receive through my work is perspective. It normalizes my own human nuttiness. I usually walk away from a session with some sense of compassion, satisfaction for the work the client and I have done, and relief that I'm not the only one.

Because painful personal struggles aren't proof that something is wrong with us. They're just proof that we're human. And the more we are asked to endure, the more intense our inner weather will be.

Every time I work with someone from the legal profession, I have the same thought: These people are asked to carry an inordinate amount of stress and anxiety. More so than anyone else I work with, including physicians, executives, and business owners.

Maybe my view is skewed. Maybe I'm just working with the most stressed-out attorneys around.

But I don't think that's the case. From what I can tell, in the legal profession, everything is an emergency. Boundaries between work and life often become completely blurred. There are always deadlines, the stakes can be very high, and details matter very much.

Those circumstances naturally create boatloads of anxiety and stress. Those stress levels, though never comfortable, start to feel normal. As do chaotic work environments. As do chaotic inner lives.

But just because something becomes normalized inside a profession doesn't mean it's normal or healthy for a human being.

Like many of us, most attorneys learned somewhere along the way that showing vulnerability meant showing weakness. And weakness could mean failure. And failure is a huge setback.

Thus, the move is to soldier on.

Then the thinking becomes: I just need to get to the end of the year, or at least vacation, or at least the weekend. And then maybe one day, I'll make partner. And everything will be better.

But will it? And what kind of shape will I be in when I get there?

As humans, we aren't built to carry that kind of load forever. At least not completely by ourselves.

When there isn't a healthy outlet for chronic stress, it usually finds an unhealthy one. Sometimes it's drinking too much. Sometimes it's becoming short and irritable with the people you love most. Sometimes it's panic attacks or simply moving through life without enjoying much of it.

This isn't an infomercial for therapy. I think therapy is great, but I'm biased. It's one option, not the only one.

At its best, therapy isn't just talking through this week's problems so you feel better for a couple of days. It's about lightening the overall load. That can mean finding healthier ways to cope with the pressure and stress that naturally come with the job, becoming more aware of tendencies that add unnecessary stress, like perfectionism, excessive striving, and people-pleasing, and recognizing the stories our minds tell us that quietly keep those patterns firmly in place.

If there's one thing I hope you take away from this article, it's this:

What you're feeling is not weakness.

It's a normal human response to carrying an extraordinary amount for a long time.

And you don't have to carry it all alone.



Parke Sterling, LPC, is the founder of Therapy for Men RVA, a Richmond-based group practice specializing in stress, anxiety, burnout, and life transitions for men. The practice offers walk-and-talk therapy along the James River as well as virtual therapy throughout Virginia.

Learn more at www.richmondanxiety.com.

HOW TO VACATION LIKE A LAWYER

By Taylor Steffan, JD, LCSW

Summer is vacation season. For lawyers, PTO can mean anything from “phone off for a week” to “I’ll take calls from the boat.” Neither is inherently wrong. You know your practice and your workplace culture best. Whether you’re completely offline or keeping one eye on your inbox, here are a few tips for vacationing like a lawyer:

- **Prepare.** Before you leave, think through what is most likely to become “urgent.” Delegate where you can and tie up loose ends before they find you on a beach chair.
- **Set expectations.** A clear out-of-office message lets people know when you’ll return and who to contact if something can’t wait.
- **Define “urgent” before you leave.** Not every email requires an immediate response. Decide in advance what rises to the level of interrupting your vacation.
- **Batch your email checks.** If you plan to stay connected, try checking once in the morning and once in the evening instead of grazing on your inbox all day.
- **Give yourself a runway back.** If possible, avoid packing your first day back with meetings. Give yourself time to clear any inbox traffic jams.

However you spend your time away, these habits can make it easier to enjoy your PTO without unnecessary stress. After all, even lawyers deserve a vacation.

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