

**STATE OF MAINE
SUPREME JUDICIAL COURT**

2019

ANNUAL REPORT

of the

**COMMITTEE ON JUDICIAL RESPONSIBILITY
AND DISABILITY**

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I Establishment and Authority of the Committee

The Committee on Judicial Responsibility and Disability was created by an order of the Maine Supreme Judicial Court, effective July 5, 1978. Like similar organizations that exist in each of the fifty states and the District of Columbia, the Committee's mission is to receive and investigate complaints of misconduct against Maine judges and family law magistrates, with the objective of enforcing high standards of conduct, as set forth in the Maine Code of Judicial Conduct, promulgated by the Supreme Judicial Court, effective April 1, 1974, and repealed and replaced by the court, effective September 1, 2015.

The Code is designed to insure the integrity and independence of Maine judges so that they can enforce the law fairly and impartially. Thus, for example, the Code provides that judges shall:

- Be competent and uphold and apply the law in making judicial decisions.
- Comply with and respect the law themselves.
- Avoid improper influence or the use of the judicial office for private interests.
- Avoid conflicts of interest in financial, political, and other matters.
- Disqualify themselves when their impartiality may reasonably be questioned.
- Avoid improper private communications intended to influence judicial action.
- Be courteous and maintain court order and decorum.
- Be prompt in properly performing their duties and require lawyers and other court officials to do the same.
- Give people the right to be heard.
- Abstain from commenting publicly on pending cases.

The Committee is not, however, an appellate court; it has no power to alter the decisions in the cases about which complaints are made. Similarly, simple disagreement with the merits of a judge's decision is not a basis for violation of the Code.

The Committee's authority extends to the eighty-seven members of the Maine judiciary: the seven members of the Supreme Judicial Court, the seventeen members of the Superior Court, the thirty-nine members of the District Court, the sixteen Probate Judges, and the eight Family Law Magistrates, plus any members of those courts who are serving as active retired judges.

II Composition of the Committee

The Committee is composed of eight members, all of whom serve for nonrenewable six year terms. Three of the members are judges (one each from the Superior, District and Probate Courts), two are lawyers, and three, including the chairperson, are members of the public. The Committee also has four alternate members (one Superior Court Justice, one District Court Judge, one lawyer and one public member), who regularly attend Committee meetings and vote when a regular member in that member's category is absent or is disqualified from participating in a particular complaint. The judicial members of the Committee are appointed by the Supreme Judicial Court, and the lawyer and public members are appointed by the Court upon the recommendation of the Governor. The Committee also employs a part-time Executive Director, who is a lawyer, and an Administrative Assistant.

III Committee Procedures

Pursuant to its procedures, contained in rules adopted by the Supreme Judicial Court effective August 11, 1978, the Committee receives complaints from anyone who believes that a judge may have violated the Code. The Committee holds a regular meeting every two months, at which it reviews all new and pending complaints. For a new complaint, the Committee must first determine whether the allegations, if true, would constitute a violation of the Code. Sometimes more information is needed from the complainant or from court records. If that information establishes that no violation of the Code occurred, the Committee will dismiss the complaint, and notify the complainant and the judge of that action. If the Committee does not dismiss the complaint, it will then refer the matter to the judge for written response. Once the judge has responded, the Committee must then decide whether further investigation is required, in which case it may direct the Executive Secretary to conduct the investigation, or whether to hold an investigative hearing of its own, or both.

At the conclusion of the investigation stage, the Committee has three options. It can dismiss the complaint; it can report the judge to the Supreme Judicial Court for public disciplinary proceedings; or it can dismiss the complaint with a caution to the judge, advising that his or her actions may have constituted a violation of the Code but that the violation was not serious enough to warrant reporting the judge to the Court. In such circumstances, however, the judge is advised that if future similar actions were to occur, the complaint may be revived for consideration of whether a pattern of conduct amounting to a violation had developed. The

Committee's rules further provide that a dismissal with a caution does not constitute formal discipline, and the judge is therefore not required to report the matter if asked if s/he has ever been disciplined.

IV Procedures Before the Supreme Judicial Court

If a judge has been reported to the Supreme Judicial Court, the Court will either assign the matter to one of its justices if a hearing as to the truth of the Committee's allegations is required, or it will set the matter down for the submission of written briefs and public oral argument before the full Court. If the Court determines that the Committee has established a violation, it may, for example, publicly reprimand or censure the judge, impose a monetary forfeiture on the judge, and/or suspend the judge for a period of time, with or without pay. Under the Maine Constitution, the Court has no authority to remove a judge. That authority is reserved to the Legislature, through the impeachment process.

V. Committee Role in Judicial Reappointment Process

The Committee has one other important function. In Maine, all judges (other than Probate Judges, who are elected) are appointed by the Governor and confirmed by the Legislature for seven year terms. Consequently, the Committee's rules provide that the Committee shall advise the Governor of the nature and disposition of all complaints against a particular judge when that judge comes up for reappointment (or appointment to the position of Active Retired Judge) at the conclusion of his or her seven year term. This information may then be used by the Governor or the Legislature in determining whether the judge should serve an additional term.

VI Confidentiality

In order to protect the judge's reputation against unfounded complaints, as well as to protect the privacy of complainants and witnesses, all Committee proceedings are confidential until such time as the Committee determines to report a judge to the Supreme Judicial Court. At that point, all proceedings before the Court are public. The Committee's rules do provide, however, that a judge may, at any time, waive confidentiality.

VII Summary of Action Taken on Complaints

A. Summary of Dispositions

The Committee on Judicial Responsibility and Disability received 34 new complaints in 2019. It took dispositive action on 37 complaints during that time, including 28 of the new complaints and all of the 9 complaints that were pending at the end of 2018.

Thirty-four of these complaints were dismissed without referral to the judge, either because the facts described in the complaint were not of a kind that could constitute judicial misconduct, or because an examination of the court records or relevant transcripts established

that no misconduct occurred. Three complaints were dismissed after referral to the judge, and no complaints were referred to the Supreme Judicial Court.

Six complaints were thus pending at year's end. Five of these had been received too late for consideration at the Committee's last meeting of the year, leaving no opportunity for Committee consideration and action on them before the end of 2019. Of the six complaints pending at year's end, five were disposed of at the Committee's first meeting in 2020.

B. Context and Sources of the Complaints

A total of thirteen of the complaints disposed of in 2019 arose out of court proceedings involving domestic or family relations, including divorce cases (9), protection from abuse or harassment proceedings (2), and determination of parental rights proceedings (2). Five complaints arose out of criminal proceedings, four from small claims cases, six from probate and guardianship proceedings, three from judicial review of administrative action cases, one from a landlord/tenant case, two from traffic cases, and three from miscellaneous civil proceedings.

With regard to the courts out of which these complaints arose, twenty-seven (57%) of the matters disposed of by the Committee concerned judges and family law magistrates of the District Court, where the overwhelming majority of individual proceedings occur; thirteen (28%) involved the Superior Court, six (13%) involved the Probate Court, and one (2%) involved the Supreme Judicial Court.

C. Timing of Complaint Dispositions

Of the thirty-four complaints that the Committee dismissed in 2019 without referral to the judge, thirty-three (97%) were dismissed at the first meeting after the Committee's receipt of the complaints, and one (3%) was dismissed at the second meeting.

Of the three complaints that were dismissed in 2019 after referral to the judge, one was dismissed at the first meeting following receipt of the judge's response, one was dismissed at the second meeting following the response, and one was dismissed after the fourth meeting following the response.

Overall, 89% of all of the Committee's dispositions in 2019 were dismissed at the first meeting, 95% by the second, 98% by the third and 100% by the fourth. These statistics for 2019 are consistent with the pattern of dispositions for each year since 1988, the earliest year for which such calculations have been made. The Committee's goal, which it believes is reflected in these statistics, has been to consider each complaint promptly, to investigate and resolve each one as its own particular nature requires, and to do so as efficiently as can be done in a manner consistent with its responsibilities.

D. Dismissals With a Caution

The Committee dismissed two complaints with a caution in 2019. In one case, the judge was cautioned about failing to dispose of efficiently a matter that was exclusively within the judge's control. In the other, the judge was cautioned about holding an improper ex parte conference.

E. Nature of Allegations

The thirty-seven complaints dismissed by the Committee in 2019 contained 155 separate allegations. Ninety-five (61%) of these related to the merits of the judges' decisions, which are not violations of the Code; the complainant's remedy is to appeal. Thirty-one (20%) of the allegations contained allegations of fact which, upon investigation, proved unfounded. Eleven of the allegations (7%) consisted of claims of improper demeanor. Eleven of the allegations (7%) were claims of bias on the part of the judge, either personal (eight) or categorical (three). Four (3%) of the allegations claimed unreasonable delays in resolving matters. Two (1%) of the allegations alleged that the judge had failed to accommodate the complaint's alleged disability. One of the complaints alleged that the judge had engaged in an improper ex parte communication.

F. Referral to the Supreme Judicial Court

No complaints were referred by the Committee to the Supreme Judicial Court in 2019.

VIII Other Committee Activities

A. Review of Committee Rules, Procedures and Policies

The Committee continued its on-going review and assessment of its policies and procedures, as described in earlier Annual Reports, and explored ways to make those policies and procedures, and the availability of the Committee's review process, more accurately and widely known by both the judiciary and the public as a whole. The Committee's website may be found at www.jrd.maine.gov.

B. Reporting Information Re Nominees

Under the provisions of the Order Establishing the Committee for furnishing information upon the written request of specified state or federal officials concerning the nomination of someone who has been a judge, the Committee responded to requests for information from the Governor's Office and/or the Joint Standing Committee on Judiciary with regard to no nominations in 2019.

C. Digitalization of Committee Procedures and Records

As part of the effort of the Maine courts to digitalize its procedures and records, a designated member of the Committee and its staff remained in contact with the court's information technology personnel in 2019 to effect similar reforms for the Committee.

IX Committee Membership

In 2019, the Supreme Judicial Court appointed Cathy A. DeMerchant as a public member, Chuck Kruger as alternate public member, Kenneth I. Marass, Esq. as alternate lawyer member and District Court Judge Maria A. Woodman, to fill existing vacancies.

X Conclusion

The Committee respectfully submits this annual report for 2019 to the Supreme Judicial Court pursuant to Rule 7 of the Rules of the Committee, and requests that the Court cause this report to be published and made available for general distribution in order to better inform the judiciary and the public concerning the nature, function and activity of the Committee.

Date: March 31, 2020

Anne E. Pooler, Ed.D.
Chairperson

Committee Members and Staff

Members

Anne E. Pooler, Ed.D., Chairperson
Christine S. Gianopoulos
Cathy A. DeMerchant
Charles W. Smith, Esq
Jon A. Haddow, Esq
Hon. Nancy D. Mills
Hon. Gregory A. Campbell
Hon. Carol R. Emery

Alternate Members

Kenneth I. Marass, Esq.
Hon. Maria A. Woodman
Chuck Kruger

Executive Secretary and Counsel
Cabanne Howard, Esq.

Administrative Assistant and Secretary
Arthur O. Brown III

Appendix**Disposition of Complaints**

by the

Committee on Judicial Responsibility and Disability**2010 – 2019**

<u>Year</u>	'10	'11	'12	'13	'14	'15	'16	'17	'18	'19
<u>New Complaints</u>	39	45	49	35	47	55	45	47	31	34
<u>Dispositive Action Taken By The Committee</u>	42	36	49	45	37	57	40	56	28	37
<u>Dismissed Without Referral</u>	30	32	42	42	35	56	33	53	26	34
<u>Dismissed After Initial Referral</u>	12	3	7	3	1	0	4	1	1	3
<u>Referred to the Supreme Judicial Court</u>	0	1 ¹	0	0	2 ²	0	1 ^{3/4}	2 ^{4/5}	0	0
<u>Pending at the End of the Year</u>	6	15	15	5	15	13	18	9	9	6

¹In the Matter of Holmes, 2011 ME 119²In the Matter of Nadeau, 2016 ME 116³In the Matter of Nadeau, 2017 ME 121; 2017 ME 191⁴In the Matter of Nadeau, 2017 ME 121; 2017 ME 191⁵In the Matter of Nadeau, 2018 ME 18