

Probate Court Budget Committee

Meeting Minutes
Wednesday, March 16, 2016
5:00 p.m.

Library at the Office of the Probate Court Administrator
186 Newington Road, West Hartford, CT

The meeting was convened at 5:03 p.m.

In attendance: Judge Paul Knierim, Probate Court Administrator and Chair, Judge Joseph Marino and Judge Fred Anthony

Remarks by Judge Knierim

Judge Knierim gave an update on the state budget process. Last month, Governor Malloy proposed a \$40,000 cap on probate fees but did not include any appropriation for the Probate Courts to make up for the lost revenue. Since then, the state's budget situation has worsened because revenue has fallen below expectations. The FY16 budget is \$220 million in deficit and the FY17 budget is \$900 million in deficit. The projected deficits have led to the cancellation of raises and discussion of layoffs and furlough days for state employees.

The Appropriations Committee will report out the legislature's proposed budget in the next two weeks. Judges, staff and PCA have been making a very strong effort to persuade the legislature to restore funding for the Probate Courts. With only two weeks until the Appropriations Committee deadline, it is crucial that judges and staff continue making contacting legislators, even if they already have made contact, to advocate for an appropriation in the amount of \$14 million.

PCA has begun contingency planning for the possibility that we do not receive needed funding for next fiscal year. We are brainstorming ideas to reduce costs with more efficient procedures. We are also seeking to identify discretionary services that can be eliminated and statutory changes needed to cut expenses in other areas.

Because payroll accounts for two-thirds of the budget of the Probate Court system, contingency plans must also address personnel costs. Depending on the outcome of the budget process, the Budget Committee may need to consider the following actions:

- Transition to full-time positions by mandating that available benchmark hours be allocated to 37.5 or 40 hour schedules
- Eliminate temporary employee authorizations
- Freeze new hires
- Layoffs or furlough days

The committee is not acting on any of these approaches presently. Judge Knierim stressed that layoffs would be the absolutely last resort and that all other actions currently being considered are intended to avoid layoffs.

Judge Knierim explained his view that that canceling the 2016 COLA is a necessity due to our need for ongoing general fund support. Proceeding with raises at a time when equivalent raises are being canceled in state government would greatly diminish our prospects for the \$14 million appropriation that we are seeking.

Public Comment and Correspondence

Martha Gothers, Clerk, Hartford Probate Court

Mary MacGregor, Chief Clerk, Glastonbury Probate Court

Pat Saviano, Chief Clerk, Danbury Probate Court and President of CAPC

Linda Riiska, Chief Clerk, Litchfield Hills Probate Court

Kelley Clairmont, Chief Clerk, Windham-Mansfield Probate Court

Judge Sydney Elkin, West Hartford Probate Court, President-Judge of the Probate Assembly

Vera Mason, Lead PCO, Hartford Regional Children's Probate Court

Evan Brunetti, Chief Clerk, Farmington-Burlington Probate Court and Vice President of CAPC

2016 COLA

Judge Knierim made a motion to cancel the 2016 COLA, noting that the action would have no impact on the ability of the committee to authorize increases in the coming fiscal year. Judge Marino seconded the motion. Judge Knierim called for a vote. The motion passed unanimously.

Fiscal Year 2016-2017 Office Budgets

Andrea King presented the proposed court office budgets for fiscal year 2016-2017 as detailed in schedules provided to the committee. There are no proposed increases to any of the guideline amounts. Children's courts will need to consult with PCA before incurring expenses related to equipment, furnishings and repairs.

Judge Anthony made a motion to approve the office budgets for fiscal year 2016-2017. Judge Marino seconded the motion. Judge Knierim called for a vote. The motion passed unanimously.

Staffing Level Adjustments

Judge Knierim explained proposed changes to benchmark staffing at two courts, both of which involve reallocation of benchmark hours with no net increase in authorized hours.

Plainfield-Killingly Probate Court

The proposed change adds 0.1 FTE at the chief clerk level to establish a 40 hour work week for the position, offset by a reduction at the assistant clerk to 0.4 FTE.

Norwalk-Wilton Probate Court

The proposed change adds 0.4 at the assistant clerk level to permit four full-time assistant clerk positions, offset by the elimination of all authorized hours at the court assistant level.

Judge Anthony made a motion to approve the proposed staffing level adjustments. Judge Marino seconded the motion. Judge Knierim called for a vote. The motion passed unanimously.

Long Term and Short Term Disability Insurance

The committee previously asked PCA to explore options to provide voluntary employee paid short- and long-term disability insurance. PCA made contact with the carriers that provide insurance for state employees. Both are willing to make their disability insurance products available to judges and court employees at the same pricing as state employees.

Judge Anthony made a motion to authorize PCA to enter into a contract with the carriers on the same terms as their agreements with the state. Judge Marino seconded the motion. Judge Knierim called for a vote. The motion passed unanimously.

Other Business

None

Schedule Next Meeting

May 11, 2016 at 5:00 p.m.

Adjournment

The meeting adjourned at 6:12 p.m.

PROPOSED SUPPLEMENTAL BENEFITS

Budget Committee Meeting

June 10, 2015

SHORT-TERM DISABILITY INSURANCE

Voluntary short-term disability insurance replaces a portion of income when an individual is unable to work due to a covered injury or illness. Short-term disability coverage provides a percentage of income for a relatively short period depending on the injury or illness. Benefits from this plan are tax free.

Court staff members, other than temporary employees, are eligible for coverage provided they work 20 hours or more per week and meet the issue-age requirements of 17-69 years of age.

LONG-TERM DISABILITY INSURANCE

Long-term disability insurance replaces a portion of income when an employee is unable to work due to a covered injury or illness. Long-term disability coverage delivers a percentage of income each month for as long as a person remains disabled, or until they reach Social Security Normal Retirement Age, whichever is sooner. Benefits from this plan are tax free.

Court staff members, other than temporary employees, who work at least 20 hours or more per week are eligible for coverage on their first day of employment.

Premium payments for Short-Term and Long-Term Disability Insurance can be made via bi-weekly payroll deduction (post-tax).