

Probate Court Budget Committee

Meeting Minutes
Wednesday, December 6, 2017
5:00 p.m.

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

The meeting was convened at 5:02 p.m.

In attendance: Judge Paul Knierim, Probate Court Administrator and Chair and Judge Joseph Marino. Judge Fred Anthony (by phone)

Public Comment and Correspondence

None

Remarks by the Chair

Judge Knierim briefly addressed the challenges presented by the state budget. He explained that the cuts to the Probate Court system are severe. The funding is minimally adequate only because we are able to draw on the balance in the Probate Court Administration Fund. He expects that the Fund will be depleted over the next year and a half, making it is critical that the legislature restore funding to a sustainable level in fiscal year 2019-20. Judge Knierim explained that the budget does not permit any compensation increases in fiscal years 2017-18 and 2018-19 but reiterated the committee's commitment to implementing the second phase of the compensation study as soon as possible.

Fiscal Year 2017-2018 Office Budgets

The committee discussed the office budget criteria for fiscal year 2018-19. Judge Knierim explained that the guidelines are unchanged from the current fiscal year.

Judge Marino made a motion to approve the office budget criteria as presented. Judge Anthony seconded the motion. Judge Knierim called for a vote and the motion passed.

Staffing Level Adjustments

Judge Marino excused himself from the meeting for discussion of a proposed staffing change for the Middletown Probate Court.

Judge Knierim recommended an increase in the court's staffing level by 0.3 FTE at the assistant clerk level. Acknowledging that the committee has not increased staffing levels at any court in several years, Judge Knierim supports the proposed increase because it

is so clearly warranted in light of the court's workload. The court's weighted workload (WWL) is 7,800. Based on the committee's guideline formula of one staff member per 1,050 WWL, the court's workload would justify an FTE of 7.5. The recommended increase for Middletown, by comparison, would yield a new benchmark of 4.5, fully 3.0 lower than the formula amount.

Judge Anthony noted that Middletown's proposed staffing is still dramatically lower than all other courts that handle commitments, including courts with significantly lower WWL.

Judge Anthony made the motion to approve the staff level adjustment as presented. Judge Knierim seconded the motion. Judge Knierim called for a vote and the motion passed.

Following the discussion and vote, Judge Marino returned to the meeting.

Technical changes to Policies 101, 102, 116, 201 and 303 to substitute Family Specialist for Probate Court Officer

Section 6 of Public Act 17-136 changes the title of the social work staff of the Regional Children's Probate Courts from Probate Court Officer to Family Specialist effective January 1, 2018. References to the position are updated in Policies 101, 102, 116, 201 and 303. There is no impact on compensation or benefits and the agenda item was included for information only.

Request of Southeastern CT Regional Probate Court for compensation adjustment

Judge Kepple submitted letters to the Budget Committee requesting an increase in compensation for two staff members. Judge Kepple attended the meeting to articulate the reasons and advocate for the requested increase. He stated that due to space constraints, the court is unable to employ the full complement of staff authorized by its current benchmark. The consequence is that a disproportionate share of work must be handled by the remaining staff. The employees should, in his view, receive additional compensation.

Judge Knierim recommended against the requested compensation adjustments. He stressed that the Budget Committee establishes uniform policies on compensation and benefits for all courts and that the committee has been rigorous in adhering to those policies. The policies permit increases only when the committee authorizes a COLA or merit increase for all employees or when an individual employee is promoted. The policies do not authorize adjustments to the compensation of employees based on individual circumstances, and making such adjustments would be contrary to the goal of maintaining a uniform compensation plan for all court staff.

Judge Knierim made a motion to not act on the requested compensation adjustments. Judge Marino seconded the motion. The motion passed unanimously.

Establish 2018 Meeting Schedule

The committee established the schedule of regular meetings for 2018 as follows:

March 28, 2018

June 13, 2018

December 5, 2018

All meetings will be held at 5:00 p.m. at Probate Court Administration.

Adjournment

The meeting adjourned at 5:40 p.m.