

Probate Court Budget Committee

Meeting Minutes

Wednesday, March 3, 2010
4:00 P.M.

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

The meeting was convened at 4:07 P.M.

In attendance: Judge Paul J. Knierim, Probate Court Administrator and Chair, Judge Joseph Marino, and Judge Dianne Yamin.

PCA staff in attendance: Andrea King, Director of Financial Services, Attorney Bonnie Bennet, and Vincent Russo.

Public Comment

Judge Knierim announced that the committee had received several pieces of correspondence.

Those submitting letters were:

The Hon. Sydney Elkin, Judge of the West Hartford Probate Court; The Hon. Evelyn Daly, Judge of the Farmington Probate Court; Francesca Lefante, Asst. Clerk and Staff Attorney of the Farmington Probate Court; Anne Holihan, Clerk of the Court and Senior Staff Attorney of the Bristol Probate Court; Lori Errico, Marlene Karp, and James Felice of the West Hartford Probate Court; and The Hon. Joseph Secola, Judge of the Brookfield Probate Court.

Judge Knierim asked for comments from those in attendance.

Those making comments were:

Mary MacGregor, Clerk of the Glastonbury Probate Court and the President of the CT Association of Probate Clerks; Marianne Arancio Stilson, Clerk of the New Milford Probate Court and the Vice President of the CT Association of Probate Clerks; Cynthia Zdzanukis, Asst. Clerk of the Hartford Probate Court; The Hon. Sydney Elkin, Judge of the West Hartford Probate Court; Carol Madugno, Asst. Clerk of the Manchester Probate Court; Pat Chase, Clerk of the Woodbridge Probate Court; The Hon. Domenick Calabrese, Judge of the Woodbury Probate Court; The Hon. Patrick Wall, Judge of the Harwinton Probate Court; and Maureen O'Connor, Clerk of the West Haven Probate Court.

Remarks of Secretary Robert Genuario, Office of Policy and Management

Secretary Robert Genuario made a presentation to the committee concerning the financial condition of the state. He discussed the projected deficit in the current fiscal year and projections for fiscal years 2010-11, 2011-12, and 2012-13. Based upon the projections of his office, the legislative Office of Fiscal Analysis, and the Office of the State Comptroller, it is his expectation that the annual deficit will be larger in each of the three coming fiscal years. He discussed the possibility that appropriations for the probate courts will be cut by 4-5% for each of the next three years.

Secretary Genuario recommended that the budget committee factor in the possibility of cuts for probate funding as it decides on court office budgets, the compensation and benefits plan, and staffing levels. He recommended that the committee adopt policies that the system can afford even if the cuts occur, noting that the policies can be adjusted in future years as economic conditions improve.

Review Updated Compensation Study

Attorneys Linda Dow and Bonnie Bennet reviewed the updates to the court staff job descriptions and the work of the Management Advisory Group (“MAG”) in updating the compensation ranges in light of the revised job descriptions. MAG has completed an updated study that translates former job classifications into the revised position descriptions and assigns new compensation levels for the positions. The compensation study recommends increasing the compensation ranges for several positions and maintaining the existing ranges for other positions. No positions would be reduced.

The committee discussed the differences in compensation between Chief Clerk I, II, and III. Linda Dow explained that the differences in compensation are based upon differences in supervisory responsibility associated with courts of varying sizes. She noted that a Chief Clerk III serving in a larger court would be paid at a higher rate than a Chief Clerk I or II because the Chief Clerk III is accountable for the work of a larger staff.

The committee discussed how the minimum, market, and maximum compensation levels indicated in the study would be applied. Bonnie Bennet indicated that the ranges are based upon an average 20-year progression in a position, but that the ranges are flexible and would allow a judge to make adjustments based on factors such as skills, education, experience, and exemplary service.

The committee discussed how annual increases would be handled each year. Discussion revolved around the possibilities of using cost of living increases (COLA) that would be applicable to all employees (except those above the range for their position) and merit increases for which judges would have discretion to increase pay based upon individual factors.

The committee plans to take up the compensation plan at its meeting on March 24.

Establish Preliminary Staffing Levels

The committee reviewed data analysis concerning staffing levels. The committee discussed using this information to establish initial staffing guidelines for each court based upon a formula that factors in population, weighted workload, and current staffing levels. The initial staffing guidelines would then be sent to each court with a request that the judge or judges reply with a specific proposal for the court. Committee members agreed that any formula approach would be imperfect, but that the committee would consider information about the needs of specific courts before finalizing staffing levels.

The committee discussed the goal of avoiding mandatory layoffs. The committee will establish a benchmark staffing level for each court, which would represent the committee's final determination of appropriate staffing for the court. The committee will also determine a transitional authorization for each court in the event that current staffing is higher than the benchmark. Under the transitional authorization, courts would be permitted to retain all incumbent staff. Reduction in staff to meet the benchmark would be accomplished through voluntary attrition. Courts would not be required to lay off staff, but would not be authorized to hire new employees in excess of the benchmark.

Judge Yamin moved to approve the initial staffing guidelines and to send a communication to each court requesting that the judge or judges indicate a specific proposal for staffing the court. Judge Marino seconded the motion.

Judge Knierim called for a vote. The motion passed unanimously. (It is posted on the Web site under "FTE Proposal 3-3-10.")

Establish Preliminary Office Budgets

The committee will take up the court office budgets at its meeting on March 10.

Other Business

The committee decided to add an additional meeting to its schedule on March 31 at 4:00 PM.

Adjournment

The meeting was adjourned at 6:02 P.M.

The next meeting will be March 10, 2010 at 4 P.M.