

Probate Court Budget Committee

Meeting Minutes

Wednesday, March 10, 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 4:05 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:

Maureen O'Connor, Clerk of the West Haven Probate Court, and Margherita Bergstrand, Clerk of the Cheshire Probate Court.

Judge Knierim asked for comments from those in attendance. Those making comments were:

Marianne Arancio Stilson, Clerk of the New Milford Probate Court and the Vice President of the CT Association of Probate Clerks, and Carol Modugno, Asst. Clerk of the Manchester Probate Court

Presentation by Mary MacGregor, President of the CT Association of Probate Clerks (CAPC)

Mary MacGregor, President of the CT Association of Probate Clerks, presented a proposal on behalf of CAPC concerning benefits policies for court staff. Her written submission is available on the Web site under "CAPC Budget Committee Presentation 3-10/10."

Remarks of Judge Barbara Quinn, Chief Court Administrator

Judge Barbara Quinn, Chief Court Administrator, and Tom Siconolfi, Executive Director of Administrative Services for the Judicial Branch, offered remarks on the work of the committee. Judge Quinn detailed the condition of the Judicial Branch's budget, noting that cuts imposed in the current fiscal year require the closure of courthouses, reductions in funding to agencies falling under the branch's budget, a salary freeze, and a hiring freeze. She emphasized that the branch passes through funds appropriated by the General Assembly for the probate court system, but does not have any independent source of funds to supplement probate court funding. Judge Quinn urged that the committee make sure that the probate court system can pay for the policies that it adopts within current available funding. Tom Siconolfi added that the committee should anticipate possible future funding cuts.

Office Budgets

The committee continued its work on court office budgets by discussing guidelines for each expense category. The decisions the committee made are as follows:

Workers Compensation

At the February 17 meeting, the committee determined that workers compensation would be budgeted based upon actual expenditures for 2009 as reported by the courts. The total budget for the second half of FY2011 is \$32,951.

Travel and Mileage

Mileage reimbursements will be managed as part of payroll, thereby eliminating the need for a separate budget in each court. A system-wide budget will be included in the budget for the Office of the Probate Court Administrator. The budget will be reduced by 25% from 2009 actual in light of the reduction in the number of judges. The budget for the second half of FY2011 will be \$27,000, plus a small contingency amount.

Education

Funding for education will be held level to 2009 actual, with the total allocated equally among the courts. The budget for the second half of FY2011 will be \$10,800, which amounts to \$400 per court.

Dues

Funding for dues will be held level to 2009 actual, with the total allocated based upon the authorized FTE (full time equivalent) of each court. Anticipating that the Probate Assembly will collect dues for the entire year during May, the anticipated amount of \$90,000 will be budgeted for the second half of fiscal year 2011, with the remaining \$8,130 divided equally between FY2011 and FY2012, yielding an actual budget for the second half of FY2011 of \$94,083.

Subscriptions

Funding will be allocated to each court based upon proposals submitted by judges, subject to a cap of \$2,500 annually per court. A 25% reduction in this expense is anticipated for merging courts as duplicate subscriptions are eliminated, for a total budget for the second half of FY2011 of \$22,345.

Accounting/Other Professionals

Major savings are anticipated in this category as against 2009 actual expenses of \$283,000, since outside accountants and payroll services will no longer be necessary. Transitional funding is needed for the preparation of court income reports for 2010, which will be the final year for this requirement. Budgets are approved as proposed by each judge, subject to a cap of \$5,000 per court, for a total for the second half of FY2011 of \$78,696. The administrator's office will budget a contingency fund for attorneys' fees in connection with proceedings of the Council on Probate Judicial Conduct.

Temporary Help

Court requests for temporary help will be budgeted as proposed, yielding a total for the second half of FY2011 of 18,660.

Bank Fees

Court requests for bank fees will be budgeted as proposed, yielding a total for the second half of FY2011 of \$4,737. The committee recommends that the administrator's office assist courts in identifying banks that can handle court accounts without service fees.

Coffee/Tea and Holidays/Special Occasions

Funding for both of these items will be held level to 2009 actual, allocated among the courts based on the number of employees. The coffee/tea budget will be \$35 per employee annually, for a total budget for the second half of FY2011 of \$7,500. The holiday/special occasion budget for will be \$45 per employee annually, for a total budget for the second half of FY2011 of \$10,000.

Interpreters

Court requests will be budgeted as proposed, yielding a total for the second half of FY2011 of \$3,847.

Contingency

Each court will be budgeted \$500 annually for unexpected contingencies, for a total budget of \$13,500 for the second half of FY2011.

Gifts

The committee members all agreed that no public funds should be used for the purchase of any gifts.

Software

Since the IT department at the administrator's office provides all software and maintains court computers, additional expenses for the purchase of software will not be permitted.

Other Business

The committee discussed the agenda for the next meeting. It will be posted by Wednesday, March 17.

Adjournment

The meeting was adjourned at 6:10 P.M.

The next meeting will be March 24, 2010 at 4 P.M.