

AUDREY J. S. CARRIÓN
CIRCUIT ADMINISTRATIVE JUDGE
EIGHTH JUDICIAL CIRCUIT
CHAIR
(410) 396-5130



FRED S. HECKER
CIRCUIT ADMINISTRATIVE JUDGE
FIFTH JUDICIAL CIRCUIT
VICE-CHAIR
(410) 386-2837

Conference of Circuit Judges

MARYLAND JUDICIAL CENTER
187 HARRY S. TRUMAN PARKWAY
ANNAPOLIS, MD 21401

Meeting of the Conference of Circuit Judges

A meeting of the Conference of Circuit Judges was held Monday, November 13, 2023, via Zoom for Government, beginning at 9:30 a.m.

Members Present

~~Hon. Audrey J. S. Carrión, Chair~~

Hon. Fred S. Hecker, Vice Chair

Hon. James A. Bonifant

Hon. Donine M. Carrington-Martin

Hon. DaNeeka V. Cotton

~~Hon. Yolanda L. Curtin~~

Hon. Kathleen M. Duvall

Hon. Jeffrey S. Getty

Kristin Grossnickle

Hon. Stephen H. Kehoe

~~Hon. Stacy A. Mayer~~

~~Hon. Dana M. Middleton~~

Hon. Vicki M. Pauler

~~Hon. Richard J. Sandy~~

Hon. S. James Sarbanes

Hon. Brenda A. Sexton

Hon. Brian D. Shockley

Hon. Richard R. Trunnell

Also Present:

Melissa Canada

Nancy Faulkner

Kelley O'Connor

Sean Wolcuff

1. Welcome and Approval of Minutes

Judge Fred Hecker welcomed attendees and reminded everyone the meeting was being livestreamed for the public to view, as the Conference is subject to the Open Meetings Act. Judge Hecker moved for approval of the meeting minutes for September 18, 2023, and, after hearing no objection, the minutes were unanimously approved.

2. Security

Sean Wolcuff, Chief of Security, reminded judges of their eligibility to sign up for the LEO Web Protect program. The goal is to minimize the amount of information available online for the public to find, particularly personally identifiable information. The system is not perfect and cannot catch everything, such as articles and information provided by the media. The service is available to judges and their spouses, including senior judges. Once you are enrolled you do not have to enroll again, as long as you are serving on the bench.

Mr. Wolcuff continued with recommendations for home security he developed during his time with the Secret Service. He refers to them as the three rings of security: the outer layer, the middle layer, and the inner layer.

The outer layer is the recommendation to install a home security system, specifically one that can interface with a smart phone. Many vendors include that ability to communicate via a doorbell camera without opening your front door. Other valuable features include reminders when the front door is unlocked or the garage door is left open, and the ability to close the garage door remotely.

The middle layer of security recommendations is to have a dog, preferably a large dog. A dog can alert you when someone is walking in front of the house or in the corner of your backyard, out of view from a security camera. An alarm system also cannot physically defend your family. Statistically, burglars tend to avoid homes with dogs.

The final, inner layer of security is to have a nosy neighbor. Neighbors are valuable in that they know when something is out of place and can call 9-1-1, unlike a dog or some alarm systems. Neighbors can watch each other's homes and communicate as often as needed, such as notifying each other if a package left on the porch for a long period. Mr. Wolcuff shared a personal situation where a concerned neighbor reached out when a strange van was parked outside of his residence. The individual turned out to be a scheduled contractor, but Mr. Wolcuff stated the added security is comforting. Having all three rings of security provides the highest level of protection you can have outside of security staff at your home.

Judge Hecker asked whether there is a recommendation regarding security systems that include automatic lighting features. Mr. Wolcuff confirmed the recommendation is to have motion-activated lighting whenever possible. He added that Special Police Officers (SPOs) are available to visit each residence and provide a home security assessment. If interested in an assessment, please email Mr. Wolcuff at Sean.Wolcuff@mdcourts.gov.

Following a request for funding options for courthouse security, Mr. Wolcuff explained the annual funding period has closed, but announcements are typically sent to administrative judges, clerks of the circuit courts, and court administrators in August. He encouraged for those individuals to discuss and prioritize security concerns with local law enforcement, such as the need for more x-ray machines, alarms, access control systems, camera upgrades, etc. A courthouse vulnerability assessment is also available where an SPO will look at court operations, the flow of staff versus the public, physical layout, and parking to make recommendations for improved security.

Judge Richard Trunnell stated the best practice for courthouse security is to have two sheriffs in each courtroom, however, Anne Arundel County continues to have issues with the local sheriff not complying with this practice. The sheriff has enough staff to assist in warrant service and in District Court, but circuit court courtrooms are not a priority to the sheriff. Judge Trunnell added that when funding becomes available to the local sheriff, the money historically goes to the purchase of new vehicles or other items, despite persistent requests for a deputy in each courtroom. Several judges noted similar issues in their jurisdictions, with varying levels of concern shared by the local sheriff's department. Judge Hecker suggested the level of cooperation varies depending on the court's relationship with the county.

Mr. Wolcuff acknowledged that courthouse security staffing is the most common concern across the state and that Chief Justice Fader is aware of its impact. The sheriff is obligated to provide maximum protection, but jurisdictions are understaffed with limited resources. In addition, old courthouses were not built with security as a top priority, and many buildings have corridors where judges intersect with the public and even with prisoners. Discussions of a legislative solution have been explored, such as supplemental sheriff staffing. The concerns and challenges of each courthouse will be addressed through the new security task force.

3. Judicial Conference Topic Discussion

Judge Donine Carrington-Martin spoke on behalf of Judge Dana Middleton, who was unable to attend the meeting and is on the planning committee for the Judicial Conference in April 2024. Judge Middleton would like ideas for topics during the Judicial Conference to be emailed to her directly.

4. For the Good of the Order

Judge Hecker began a discussion regarding whether the Conference wants to do something to honor Judge Andrew Wilkinson. A foundation was created in Washington County for financial assistance, but Judge Hecker suggested a tribute that is more permanent such as a memorial. Judge Trunnell agreed and added that a symbol of justice and sacrifice at the Maryland Judicial Center would be appropriate. Judge Hecker asked that any ideas be emailed to the group and added the topic to the next meeting agenda. In the meantime, Nancy Faulkner indicated she would look into the procedures.

Having no further items to discuss, the meeting ended at 10:15 am. The next meeting is scheduled for Monday, January 22, 2024, via Zoom for Government, beginning 9:30 a.m.