



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

YOLANDA L. CURTIN  
CIRCUIT ADMINISTRATIVE JUDGE  
THIRD JUDICIAL CIRCUIT  
VICE-CHAIR  
(410) 638-4655

## Conference of Circuit Judges

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

A meeting of the Conference of Circuit Judges was held via Zoom on Monday, November 17, 2025, beginning at 9:30 a.m.

### **Members Present:**

Hon. Fred S. Hecker, Chair

Hon. Yolanda L. Curtin, Vice Chair

Matthew Barrett

~~Hon. James A. Bonifant~~

Hon. Audrey J.S. Carrión

~~Hon. DaNeeka V. Cotton~~

Hon. William W. Davis, Jr.

Hon. Heather S. DeWees

Hon. Wendy S. Epstein

Hon. Jeffrey S. Getty

~~Hon. ShaRon M. Grayson Kelsey~~

Hon. Julia A. Martzfisher

Hon. Vicki M. Pauker

Hon. S. James Sarbanes

~~Hon. Brian D. Shockley~~

Hon. Brenda A. Sexton

Hon. Anthony F. Vittoria

Hon. Lara C. Weathersbee

### **Guests:**

Richard Abbott (Juvenile & Family Services)

Hon. Angela M. Eaves (Supreme Court)

Nancy Faulkner (Deputy State Court Administrator)

Kelly Franks (Juvenile & Family Services)

Jovonne Lewis (Juvenile & Family Services)

Lisa Mannisi (Staff, Complex Litigation Committee)

Andrea Murphy (Staff)

Kelley O'Connor (Government Relations & Public Affairs)

Hon. Stenise L. Rolle (On behalf of Judge Cotton)

Hon. Robert J. Thompson (Chair, Complex Litigation Committee)

### **Welcome – Hon. Fred S. Hecker**

Judge Fred S. Hecker welcomed conference members and reminded them that the meeting was being livestreamed for the public to view.

### **Approval of the Minutes of the September 15, 2025, Meeting**

The Conference approved the September 15, 2025, meeting minutes.

### **Innovations in Tiered Legal Services Task Force – Hon. Angela M. Eaves**

Justice Angela M. Eaves provided background on the Innovations in Tiered Legal Services Task Force. She explained that the Task Force is a collaboration between the Judiciary, the Maryland State Bar Association, and the Maryland Access to Justice Commission to develop formal recommendations for addressing the civil legal needs of individuals who need legal assistance but cannot afford an attorney. The Task Force is currently exploring legal service tiers to expand the range of available civil legal help.

The Task Force, in conjunction with the Administrative Office of the Courts' Research and Analysis Department, is holding focus groups to solicit input from stakeholders, including attorneys, paralegals, community justice workers, and judges. Justice Eaves informed members that a virtual Judges Focus Group is scheduled. The goal of the focus group is to discuss the pros and cons of having non-lawyers assist self-represented litigants in civil matters. It was asked whether the Task Force is seeking judges with a particular background. Justice Eaves responded that no specific background is required.

Justice Eaves requested that conference members seek volunteers within their jurisdictions who may be interested in participating. From the list of volunteers, six circuit court judges and six District Court judges will be randomly selected to participate in the focus group. Justice Eaves will reach out to conference members within the next several days with additional details about how tiered legal access works and instructions on where to send volunteer lists.

### **FY25 Family Division and Support Services Report – Richard Abbott**

Richard Abbott, joined by Kelly Franks, and Jovonne Lewis, provided an overview of the *Fiscal Year 2025 Family Division and Support Services Report*. He explained that the data in the report is currently collected through quarterly reports submitted by family services coordinators. The Department of Juvenile and Family Services (DJFS) is working with the courts and JIS to pull the data directly from MDEC, rather than only through the quarterly reports, with the goal of beginning this process next fiscal year. Judge Yolanda L. Curtin asked whether the reported data on settlement

conferences includes only those related to grant-funded matters or all family law settlement conferences. Mr. Abbott confirmed that all settlement conference data is collected.

Judge Hecker remarked that the report indicates that, in general, larger jurisdictions order more child access assessments than smaller jurisdictions. Mr. Abbott explained that larger jurisdictions typically have staff child custody evaluators available to complete assessments, while smaller jurisdictions may not have staff evaluators, making assessments more costly for the parties and resulting in fewer orders. He added that the DJFS is exploring the feasibility of establishing a staff position within the department that would be available to all jurisdictions to conduct assessments.

Judge Hecker noted the low number of parent coordinator appointments statewide. Mr. Abbott responded that this is likely because the attorneys and parties come to an agreement to arrange and pay for parent coordination appointments themselves rather than through family services. As a result, those instances are not reported. He recommended that judges send parent coordinator orders to family services before signing them so that the data can be tracked.

Conference members may reach out to Mr. Abbott, Ms. Franks, or Ms. Lewis with any further questions regarding the report.

#### **Complex Litigation Committee Update – Hon. Robert J. Thompson**

Judge Robert J. Thompson presented the Complex Litigation Committee's annual report. He began by acknowledging his predecessor, Judge Fletcher-Hill, who chaired the Committee in 2025 until Judge Thompson assumed the role in September. He also recognized Lisa Mannisi, who staffs the Committee, for her work in preparing the report and supporting the Committee.

Judge Thompson reported that, over the last year, the Committee held eight meetings, four of which were joint meetings with the Business and Technology Workgroup. He informed members that the workgroup, chaired by Judge Ronald B. Rubin, was formed to advise on Business and Technology Case Management Program matters and to provide practitioner input on procedural and related matters before the Committee. On November 4, the Workgroup held its annual Business and Technology Case Management Boot Camp, which provided judges and court personnel an in-depth exploration of business and technology case management.

The Committee also oversees the Medical Malpractice Workgroup, chaired by Judge Ensor. The Workgroup is focused on developing a *Best Practices in Medical Malpractice Case Management Report*, which, upon completion, will be considered by the Committee and submitted to the Conference.

Judge Hecker inquired about the process for publishing opinions on the Committee's webpage on [mdcourts.gov](http://mdcourts.gov). Judge Audrey A.S. Carrión noted that there was previously a subcommittee under the Complex Litigation Committee whose purpose was to review opinions and determine which ones

should be published. Judge Thompson explained that all business and technology-related opinions are now submitted to Ms. Mannisi, who arranges for them to be published. Judge Curtin asked whether the Committee is considering the creation of any additional workgroups. Judge Thompson responded that the Committee would discuss reinstating the Business and Technology Opinions Subcommittee, as well as any potential new workgroups, at its upcoming meeting on December 8.

The Committee's written report will be distributed to Conference members.

### **For the Good of the Order**

Judge Vicki M. Pauker informed members about an issue raised by public defenders in Washington County regarding defense attorneys being denied access to the Department of Corrections (DOC) to consult with their clients. After being made aware of the issue, she held a meeting with several public defenders, as well as a private criminal defense attorney, who confirmed that this is an ongoing problem. They discussed alternative options, including phone calls and video conferences, for attorneys to consult with their clients. However, phone calls are conducted on recorded lines, and public defenders have also experienced difficulties arranging video conferences. Judge Pauker was further informed that each facility has different visitation procedures that attorneys are expected to follow, but the written guidelines are not made available to them.

Judge Pauker inquired whether Conference members were also experiencing this issue in their jurisdictions or had any potential solutions. Some members reported encountering the issue, while others had not. Judge Pauker noted that the attorneys in her meeting requested that the court schedule status conferences solely to provide an opportunity to consult with their clients. Conference members agreed that this is not a feasible solution, as increased transportation raises security risks and scheduling such conferences could delay dockets and limit courtroom resources.

A suggestion was made to seek input from the Maryland State Bar Association (MSBA), and the District Court regarding their experiences with the issue. It was also proposed that a statewide survey of judges be conducted to better understand the impact of the issue. Judge Hecker will reach out to the MSBA, the Public Defender's Office, and Chief Judge John P. Morrissey for additional feedback and to invite them to discuss the matter with the Conference at its January 26, 2026, meeting.

No additional matters were raised, and the meeting was adjourned at 10:53 a.m.