



Ohio Judicial Conference

The Voice of Ohio Judges

Senate Committee on Higher Education

Paul E. Pfeifer

Testimony on Biennial Budget Bill – Ohio Judicial Conference

FY 2020 – 2021 Budget

Chair Kunze and Members of the Senate Committee on Higher Education, on behalf of the judges of Ohio, I thank you for the opportunity to present you with testimony regarding the Ohio Judicial Conference's 2020 – 2021 budget proposal. I am Paul Pfeifer the Executive Director of the Ohio Judicial Conference.

The Ohio Judicial Conference has served as an integral part of the judicial branch of government in Ohio for more than 50 years. It is a non-partisan state agency that serves all 722 Ohio judges and strives to be a resource to the Legislative and Executive branches as well. Our statutory purpose is to:

- Study the co-ordination of the work of the several courts of Ohio;
- Encourage uniformity in the application of the law, rules, and practice throughout the state and within each division of the courts;
- Promote an exchange of experience and suggestions respecting the operation of the judicial system; and
- Consider the business and problems pertaining to the administration of justice and to make recommendations for its improvement;

I'd like to focus my testimony today on how our modest budget allows us to meet our statutory charge and in doing so improve the quality of Ohio's judicial branch and the administration of justice in Ohio.

Our Work

The Ohio Judicial Conference is where Ohio judges come together to exchange ideas, discuss issues affecting their courts and the judicial profession, and make recommendations for the improvement of the administration of justice. The Conference works to preserve an effective and efficient judiciary and to promote judicial responsibility. The work of the Conference is accomplished by our small staff of 6 and more than 200 judges from all jurisdictions and all areas of the state who volunteer their time and expertise by serving on one or more of our 21 standing committees.

Much of the Judicial Conference's work involves reviewing, analyzing, and commenting on legislation that our staff identifies as having an impact on the courts. Our legislative staff will review every bill introduced during the 133rd General

Assembly to determine whether there is an impact on the courts. Bills that do have an impact will be sent to one or more of our committees for judicial input on the practical implications of the proposal and, when appropriate, advice on statutory construction. Impact information and recommendations for improvement are then shared with bill sponsors and, when appropriate, members of the committee to which the bill has been assigned and caucus leadership. Our staff also prepares and distributes information about enacted legislation and assists judges, when needed, with implementation to enable them to comply with new laws. Because each Ohio court reflects, to some extent, the local legal and cultural environment, the Judicial Conference is uniquely positioned to bring judges together to exchange ideas, discuss diverse perspectives, and enable them to speak with one voice. Acting responsibly to improve the administration of justice through sensible and practical legislation and rule making at the state level serves to ensure uniformity in the application of the law, rules, and practice throughout the state.

Another important aspect of our work is promoting cooperation and understanding between the branches of government. The statutory charge to the Judicial Conference recognizes the great value of sharing this expertise and experience among the three branches of government. Beyond sharing judicial impact information with legislators, the Judicial Conference provides staff support to judges who serve on special task forces and work groups that make recommendations for changes in the law, assists judges who testify at legislative committee hearings, coordinates a Judicial-Legislative Exchange Program and legislative reception, and in conjunction with the Judicial Conference Annual Meeting, arranges a legislative panel to educate judges about the important work of the General Assembly.

Our staff works closely with the six judicial associations to provide them with professional support. We advise them of pending legislation, changes in the law, and changes to the Ohio Rules of Court, support bench book committees, and provide them with regular updates about the work of the Judicial Conference. In addition, we work with retired judges and judges interested in specialized dockets such as drug courts, mental health courts, and re-entry courts, provide materials and education to newly-elected and appointed judges, provide pattern jury instructions, and support a Judicial Advisory Group to provide assistance to judges suffering from everything from job-related stress to mental health to substance abuse. We publish an Ohio Judges Directory, nine citizens guide brochures, and several different newsletters with a variety of information for use by judges. Finally, we host a Court Technology Conference for court staff from across the state and an Annual Meeting for the judiciary that is typically attended by more than 300 judges from across the state.

Our Budget

The Judicial Conference is funded through two sources – the state general revenue fund, and a dedicated purpose fund. General revenue fund dollars are used primarily to pay the personnel costs of our 6 employees. A much smaller portion covers the costs

of supplies and maintenance for our office. Finally, the GRF portion of our budget includes funding and an earmark for the State of Ohio's membership dues to the National Conference of Commissioners on Uniform State Laws (NCCUSL). These dues are \$93,500 in FY 2020 and \$96,305 in FY 2021. The Judicial Conference is merely a pass-through entity to pay these dues. Despite representing a large percentage of our overall budget, the NCCUSL funds have no bearing on the operations of the Conference.

Additionally, the Conference has a dedicated purpose fund that receives the revenue that the Conference generates through dues, conference fees, and royalties from the publication of the Ohio Jury Instructions. Dedicated purpose fund dollars are used to fund many of the activities of the Conference, primarily the expenses associated with our committees, meetings, conferences, publications, and website. In an effort to reduce our reliance on state general revenue funds, we also intend to use a portion of our dedicated purpose fund to pay some personnel expenses during FY 2020 - 2021.

The 131st biennium was a period of significant change for the Judicial Conference. Budget cuts resulted in a reduction in the size of our staff from 10 to, eventually, 6 and the transfer of some judicial support services from the Judicial Conference to the Supreme Court of Ohio. Although we received some additional funding before the end of the year, we operated throughout most of calendar year 2016 without an Executive Director because of a remaining shortfall in General Revenue Funds.

The increase in our FY 2020 - 2021 budget request reflects our desire to fund a modest pay increase for our staff, to recover the funding for my position as Executive Director, and recover the Conference's ability to provide support services to judicial associations. We utilize the market pay ranges maintained by the Supreme Court of Ohio for their employees and our salary adjustments are typically reflective of theirs. Importantly, I want to note that it has been our desire, since the cutbacks of the financial crisis 2007-2008, to move all of our personnel costs back to general revenue dollars due to the fact that reliance on our dedicated purpose fund for personnel costs is simply unsustainable over the long term.

I hope I have outlined for you today a picture of a small, sensibly-managed, professional agency that produces a tremendous amount of work for a relatively modest contribution from the state general fund. Thank you very much for your time. I will be glad to answer any questions you might have.