

Report of the 2009 Annual Educational Conference
Federal Judicial Assistants Association¹
October 8-11, 2009
Portland, Maine

The Board of Directors held its meeting on Thursday afternoon, October 8. Highlights include:

Legislative Committee - The proposed amendments to the Constitution and Bylaws were passed by a majority of the membership (name change) and the revised Constitution and Bylaws were submitted to the President and Board.

Membership - It was decided that the current practice of providing a year's FJAA membership to any new JA would continue. The Board also agreed to hold a drawing for a \$100 prize for all members who renew their membership on or before March 1, 2010.

Ways and Means - Polo shirts soon will be available for sale with the new FJAA logo.

Newsletter - Martha Gore (Retired) has agreed to continue as the Editor for 2010.

Long Range Planning Committee - The committee is working on an exit survey to be posted on the FJAA website which will request all secretaries/judicial assistants to complete when leaving their current position. This will allow the Association to compile statistics on the number of secretarial positions being replaced by law clerks or combined courtroom deputy/secretary personnel.

Opening Reception

The opening reception was enjoyed by all who attended. Table assignments were given out upon arrival which allowed everyone to meet new people. Each table then competed in a fast paced trivia game and had a great evening.

Friday Educational Seminars and Welcome

FJAA President Debra Newman welcomed everyone to the conference and introduced the 2009 Conference Committee members who had worked and were working hard to make the conference a success.

Chief Judge John A. Woodcock, Jr., District of Maine welcomed everyone to Maine, especially the Portland area.

¹ The new name of our association is Federal Judicial Assistants Association (FJAA). We have a lovely new logo and there will soon be a new website.

(1) JA as Gatekeeper– Importance of Judge Reporting Requirements. District Judge D. Brock Hornby, District of Maine, and Chair of the Judicial Conference Committee on the Judicial Branch, stressed the importance of all judges following all reporting requirements. He noted that judges are often annoyed by the requirements, but it is up to the judicial assistants/secretaries to see that the tasks are completed in a timely manner. Everyone was reminded that the Seminar Disclosure Report for Judicial Education must be done within thirty (30) days of attending the seminar.

(2) Documenting a Judge’s Service: The Value of Chambers Papers and How to Preserve Them for Historical Research. Bruce Ragsdale, Chief of the Judicial History Program at the Federal Judicial Center provided information for preserving judicial papers. A new Guide published in 2009 is now available through the FJC. In addition, the topic of “Teaching Judicial History” is also available on the FJC website. Many judges underestimate the importance of their papers. The most valuable is any information not found in the official case file. Of course, there is always a concern for confidentiality. Papers are usually not available until the retirement or death of a judge. However, Justice Blackmun allowed his papers to be opened five years after his death. Justice Suiter has instructed that his papers cannot be opened for fifty years. The question is always what to preserve - and a good rule of thumb is to preserve papers that compliment, not duplicate the official record. It is also important to find a repository that will have interaction with the public - a law school or library are two good sources. A donor agreement is important and also an agreement for making the collection available to researchers.

(3) News from the Administrative Office. James C. Duff, Director of the Administrative Office of the U.S. Courts presented some of the issues now facing the judiciary. Mr. Duff reported that many of the issues and concerns today stem from budget issues. There is also a concern for the longevity (lifetime appointment) of the judiciary, with the stability and memory of the judiciary being a positive influence, but recognizing many judges are now leaving their appointment to the bench.

Mr. Duff indicated that local courts (District) were considered to be self-governing for many problems; that the circuit courts handled regional issues; and that the AO’s office handled the national issues, such as policy matter, legislative issues and administrative matters. He reported that many courts were currently overworked because many judgeships are going unfilled.

Mr. Duff reported that the AO is working on a TSP enhancement, the application of FERS sick leave towards retirement (something that just was signed into law), pandemic planning, a Guide reorganization, and an exchange program for staff.

Mr. Duff indicated that there is still an issue of judges choosing law clerks over a judicial assistant position. In 1995, there were 1,700 judicial assistants and 1,360 law clerks. In 2009, there are 1,530 JAs and 1570 law clerks. Mr. Duff also reported that many judges are favoring

“slashers” - a courtroom deputy/judicial assistant position. New judges are being told at “judge school” of the value of having a judicial assistant in their chambers.

(4) Margaret (Peggy) Irving, Chief, AO Article III Judges Division presented an update of the Judicial Secretaries Advisory Group (JSAG) training and an overview of helpful contacts. If you are interested in attending a Jumpstart program (not just for new JAs) or have any other questions for Ms. Irving, she can be reached at 202-502-1860. Ms. Irving reported that the attendees at the last Jumpstart programs were made up of 90% judicial assistants, 10% “slashers,” 28% had paralegal certificates/degrees, and 56% had a college degree.

Check out the JNET for types of travel reports that are required by judges. Also in the Judges Corner of JNET, is a judicial assistant site for education.

People to contact if you have questions: Joe Phillips - JSAG; Bill Bartow - Jumpstart Program; and LaVonne Ferson - Newsletter.

Remember - The JSAG Jumpstart program is not court funded, so if you wish to attend, you only need to get permission to go - and not for funding. A recent article was printed in the FJAA Newsletter regarding training funds.

Ms. Irving also explained the Judicial Survivor Protection Act and indicated our judges had until March, 2010 to sign up for this annuity. Carol Sefren at the AO’s office is the contact person.

(5) Lou Gil, IT Specialist from the IT Systems Deployment & Support Division in San Antonio, Texas, and one of the perennial favorites as a program presenter, entertained and educated us on Civility in the Workplace.

Lou asked us what happened to “nice.” He reported that extreme rudeness is rarely reported because of fear of retaliation.

He said it’s the little things that make a difference:

- Extend a “please,” “thank you,” or “I’m sorry.”
- Don’t gossip
- Give compliments
- Help those in need; ask for help
- Tell the truth
- Listen with a closed mouth and open mind
- Don’t criticize, insult, etc.
- Work hard - strive for perfection
- Don’t toot your own horn
- Pick your battles
- Think before you speak – Respond, not react

(6) SWiTCH “Success with the Court’s Help” Program, a Drug Court model was presented by Tim Duff, Drug, Alcohol & Mental Health Specialist of the U.S. Probation Office for the District of Maine. Mr. Duff gave an overview of the program and reported where it has been implemented. He indicated that the drug court is a joint effort of the entire court family - judge, prosecutor, defense attorney, probation office, and treatment specialist. The goal is to reduce recitivism, require less jail time, and produce less victims. There has been positive results where the program has been implemented.

(7) District Judge George Z. Singal, District of Maine, and Chair of the Judicial Conference Committee on Judicial Resources reported on the responsibilities and activities of his committee. The Judicial Resources Committee is responsible for all issues of HR needs - compensation, benefits, training, employment development, classifications, and salaries. Their current agenda includes working on an Employee Dispute Resolution Plan, compensation (judiciary), and staffing issues.

The Friday night social activity found us taking a ferry to Peaks Island where we were treated to a true Maine lobster dinner. Many of us learned how to crack up a lobster to get to all the good stuff.

Saturday Educational Seminars

(8) Daniel A. Patton, IT Security Specialist of the AO IT Security Office, presented helpful hints and information for IT security. He reported that one of the first line of defense for security is to be aware of shoulder surfing - both on your computer and on your phone or laptop. Instant messaging through Lotus notes is secure, but not secure through Gmail or Yahoo. A video made primarily for judges regarding IT security is available online on the JNET.

He reminded us we have an illusion of protected space - that even blackberries can be turned on remotely. If you are discussing something sensitive, take the battery out of your phone for the duration of the conversation.

Do not use your government email address (@***.uscourts.gov) as your regular internet address. It helps avoid spam coming into the court system. Browse websites cautiously - don’t click on a website or “click here” unless you know where it goes. Protect your passwords. If you use Facebook, limit your personal information.

(9) Steven M. Tevlowitz, AO Assistant General Counsel, provided many helpful hints for reducing travel costs.

He indicated the most expensive days of travel are Friday and Sunday. The least expensive time of the day to fly is early morning or the last flight of the day. Airlines have seasonal rates - higher rates during peak holiday seasons. It is cheaper to buy your ticket early -

at least three weeks in advance of travel.

You can sometimes find great deals for last minute travel: Monday - Alaska Airlines and Delta; Tuesday - American, Continental and United; Wednesday - USAir.

Beware of fees for checking bags, overweight bags, reserving seats in advance, and onboard meals.

Some of the best websites for travel are: smartertravel.com, kayak.com, mobissimo.com, and sidestep.com. Low cost airlines include: Southwest, Airtran, JetBlue, Frontier, and Spirit.

Have you ever wondered about the codes found on the Omega Travel website? "CA" is the discounted airfare - there are a limited amount of seats available with this code. "YCA" is the standard, or higher, fare. "DG" is a discounted government fare - but be careful when you use this fare, as there could be significant penalties if you need to change to flight.

(10) New Learning Tools from SDSD. Lou Gil of the IT Systems Deployment & Support Division (SDSD) in San Antonio, gave an overview of many helpful tools and programs available to help with word processing and other systems programs. Word processing training is available online for WordPerfect and Word. www.lynda.com, www.corel.com, and www.office.microsoft.com are three websites where tutorials can be found free of charge. Captivate is an Adobe product, which was described as Powerpoint on steroids. There are electronic learning modules (ELM) on the SDSD website. RoboHelp is a program that Can create large chunks of documentation suited for the creation and organization of online documents. RoboHelp does NOT work with WordPerfect, but does work with Word. It must be purchased, or you can download it for a 30-day test.

CM/ECF may be available on handheld/mobile devices, i.e., your judge's blackberry. Iphone support is coming from the AO. Training is being developed for LotusNotes only.

JIT Workshops are being offered for court teams. This will prepare court personnel to train judges and chambers staff using a team approach. I'm a little fuzzy on this topic and my notes aren't helping.

LotusNotes training is available on the OIT website.

If you have questions or concerns, the people at SDSD are more than happy to help. John Leonard, Malcolm Johns, and Lou Gil can be found in the US Courts address book in LotusNotes.

(11) Dawna Kelly, Training Specialist, and Myra Baird, CEO Project Manager of the U.S. District Court (S.D. Texas) gave an overview and demonstration of the Chambers Electronic Organizer. It would be very handy for anyone in District or Magistrate Court, as it

generates orders, eliminates multiple calendars, lets you make private entries which would have limited access users, doesn't time out, and can be viewed on mobile devices. This sounds like a real winner. I'm sure you could email either Dawna or Myra if you had more questions.

(12) Judicial On-Line University. Our last educational session of the conference was presented by Mark Salters, AO Administrative Analyst, and Chris Wilson of Skillsoft. They informed us of the educational opportunities available to us either at our computers at work or at home. The educational programs are free and cover many topics, including learning languages through Rosetta Stone (coming soon). The easiest way to access this website is to log into JNet, click on "Training", and then click on "JOU." You will use your employee ID to register should you decide to take a course, but you can browse the website to see what is offered.

Saturday Night Banquet

Attendees enjoyed an evening banquet, where after dinner, the 2009-10 FJAA Officers and Circuit Representatives took their oath of office. The raffle was also conducted during the banquet event, and three Seventh Circuit JAs won prizes: Eileen Popp, Judicial Secretary to Senior Judge William J. Bauer, CA07, Evelyn Hollins, Judicial Assistant to Judge John Daniel Tinder, CA07, and Melissa Hardin, Judicial Secretary to Senior Judge John C. Shabaz, WIWD. Melissa had two of her tickets pulled and was the lucky recipient of two gifts.

Sunday - FJAA Business Meeting

The 2009 annual business meeting was called to order by outgoing President Debra Newman. The gavel was passed to the new 2009-10 President Cynthia Hubbard.

The location of the 2010 FJAA Annual Conference will be Boise, Idaho.

There will again be a \$100 drawing for all members who join FJAA before March 1, 2010.

The association website will be changed for our new FJAA name.