



*A Committee of the Conference of Chief Justices*

*Website at <http://www.judicialfamilyinstitute.org> hosted by the National Center for State Courts*

## **JFI Wellness History and Objectives**

*Based on questions asked in a 2020 research project on judicial wellness initiatives  
interview of a Judicial Family Institute (JFI) founder, Jan Aikman Dickson*

### **INTRODUCTORY REMARKS**

Judicial Family Institute (JFI) sponsored programs during the Conference of Chief Justices meetings highlight a topic of interest to judicial households and extended family. Many such programs, as well as our website, have addressed wellness; as well as home and travel security, ethics, civics education, emergency preparedness, and other challenges of public family life that can impact health and quality of life. JFI also co-sponsors a Law and Literature session to kick off Conference of Chief Justices & Conference of Chief Justices/Conference of Court Administrators (CCJ/COSCA) meetings. We feature this and other information on our website for trial and appellate judges and their households across America, and some of us help plan programs in our home states.

### **WHAT ARE THE JFI OBJECTIVES?**

The JFI mission statement is posted on our website administered by the National Center for State Courts: "The Judicial Family Institute (JFI) is a national organization dedicated to providing information and education on topics of concern and importance to judicial households and their extended family members. We set aside personal differences in politics, geography, and positions on controversial issues to attend to JFI matters." We offer resources through programs and our national website, which is also used by viewers in other countries. The idea of setting aside differences was key to moving ahead with our objectives. We have worked to have voices on our board from various locations, political parties, and races.

### **HOW DID THE ORGANIZATION GET STARTED?**

The Judicial Family Institute (JFI) started in 1987 at N.Y.U. during a two-week training program for new appellate judges from across America. Spouses, children, and guests were invited to come along to tour the city. Informally, spouses of new state supreme court justices and faculty were discussing questions about conflicts of interests with the new judge in their family, and time management concerns tied to public life. It became clear there should be educational programs and materials on these topics.

Once we formed a not-for-profit 501(c)(3) organization, the JFI Board included people from various states who were spouses of state supreme court justices, both appellate and trial judges, judicial educators, and ethics experts. We saw a need for resources to help trial and appellate judges' households and their extended families understand their own state's unique Code of Judicial Conduct as it intersects family jobs, charitable fundraising, politics, gifts, investments., etc. Though ethical questions were certainly stressors at the start, it was only after doing a later survey of spouses of trial

judges that we discovered health and quality of life were other concerns among many. We realized we could help with that topic as well.

An Ethics Guide for Judges and Their Families was published by the Center for Judicial Ethics, headed by Cynthia Gray, now of the National Center for State Courts (NCSC), through a grant by the State Justice Institute. The guide is now available free on the JFI website thanks to the NCSC. Judicial Family Institute perspective on other issues in judicial family life were included in that publication. For years, states had bought copies of the guide for their new judges and judges taking continuing legal education (CLE) courses. Individuals also bought copies for themselves. Though there have been new ethics cases and policies in the various states and territories since then, and many of them are reported on the JFI website, the concepts in the original guide remain helpful to understanding the need for avoiding conflicts of interests and the appearance of impropriety. Our website viewers are encouraged to see their own state's or territory's Code of Judicial Conduct, and consult with ethics staff and/or commissions there to ask questions about potential conflicts of interest within their household or extended family. Seeking an "Advisory Opinion" before taking action is a great way to avoid potentially embarrassing and stressful situations.

Judicial Family Institute volunteers did programs for the American Bar Association Judicial Division, the National Association of Women Judges, the American Judicature Society, and various states. The National Bar Association and American Bar Association Judicial Division distributed our newsletter. When we asked to do programs for spouses and guests during the Conference of Chief Justices, we were ultimately surprised to be adopted by the Conference of Chief Justices in 2001. JFI was able to dissolve the not-for-profit organization and come under the umbrella of the National Center for State Courts (NCSC), which also makes it possible for us to feature 15 helpful topics on the JFI website.

#### **WHAT BARRIERS DID WE ENCOUNTER AT THE BEGINNING OF THE JUDICIAL FAMILY INSTITUTE?**

Early on, when approached about planning a program for spouses, a court administrator in one of our states could only think of spouses' and guests' programs during a judicial education conference as social rather than educational events, so he said "no." He did not understand the potential for dealing with issues judges face until he started a plan for alcoholism intervention. It became apparent to him that an informed spouse could be helpful in the process of a judge's overcoming alcoholism addiction. That opened the door to inviting spouses & guests to judges' educational programming on wellness, home and travel security, and avoiding family ethical conflicts of interest; as well as to separate programming for them on these and other topics relevant to judicial households and extended families. Similar resistance in some other states has given way to excellent programming as well.

#### **WHAT ARE THE SOURCES OF THE ARTICLES POSTED ON THE JFI WEBSITE?**

Judicial Family Institute website "Topics" on wellness include "Judicial Assistance" and "Health and Quality of Life," where articles like the samples below came from various sources:

1. [Building and Maintaining Supportive Relationships Between Judicial Officers and Their Loved Ones](#) by Hon. Jeremy Fogel (ret.), Executive Director, Berkeley Judicial Institute, followed a program for JFI during a CCJ/COSCA meeting. He was recommended by NCSC President Mary McQueen.
2. [Stress Management and Resiliency Training Program](#) by the Mayo Clinic followed a JFI program when the CCJ met in Arizona. Routine exercises of gratitude were among other innovations helping overall health that were suggested by the Mayo Clinic presenter.
3. [A New Judge in the Family: Challenges for the Spouse and Children](#) by psychologist and trial judge's spouse Mirelsa Modestti-González, Ph.D. This article was posted when Isabel Pico of

Puerto Rico was Chair of JFI, updated the JFI website, and knew Mirelsa and her work. When the CCJ met in Puerto Rico, Mirelsa shared her findings with JFI participants.

4. [Behavioral Disorders in Children and Adolescents](#) and other articles were written by former JFI board member George Durham M.D., F.A.A.P., the spouse of former Utah Chief Justice Christine Durham.
5. [Helping Judges in Distress](#) and [Six-Month Checkup: Early Warning Signs of Judicial Burnout and Personal Burnout Prevention Plan](#) by Dr. Isaiah M. Zimmerman, Washington School of Psychiatry. Isaiah was the early and preeminent national expert on judicial stress, based on his practice in the Washington, D.C. area, and programs given throughout the country. JFI board members likely first encountered him at the National Judicial College in Reno, NV or an American Bar Association meeting. The check-up lists help people identify how they are doing with wellness.
6. [Stress Resilience for the Judicial Family](#) by the Tennessee Judicial Family Institute. Tennessee Court of Appeals Judge Thomas R. "Skip" Frierson was on the JFI Board back when he was a hometown trial judge and became active with others in the formation of the Tennessee Judicial Family Institute, after seeing a JFI moderated panel discussion during a Tennessee judicial education conference.
7. [Two-Week Vacations Energize](#) by the Judicial Family Institute. The idea came from Indiana trial judges and their spouses serving on a panel discussion during a state Orientation for New Judges. Attendees who had never had a two-week vacation at that point have done it since, and repeatedly. It is a great way to re-energize compared to separate one-week vacations.

#### **HOW DOES JFI DEAL WITH PRIVACY PROTECTION?**

We definitely value privacy for judges and their households and extended families. Many judicial families have reported they prefer getting psychological or other personal or family counseling a county or two away from their home.

JFI's home addresses of judges are kept secure. We encourage judges and members of their households to check the Internet routinely to request that their home addresses be removed from personal address search sites, to see the JFI website for home and travel security tips, and to get to know the security officers who protect them. JFI programming and website materials stress the importance of caution with putting personal information on social media. This is a particular problem for households that include teenage children. It is vitally important to give judges' children careful instruction. By law, Illinois judges can opt out of having their home addresses in public records available to the public. They appreciate that option. It would be comforting to see all states pass such laws, perhaps even making such privacy automatic.

Ethics articles we create often exclude or minimize the names of the parties in an effort to focus on the ideas rather than drawing attention to the people. However, articles we post from the Center for Judicial Ethics and other organizations likely include the names, as they reference specific cases and ethics advisory opinions.

#### **WHAT DOES JFI VIEW AS THE TOP WELLNESS INITIATIVES THE ORGANIZATION MIGHT PURSUE?**

1. The main goal would be continuing to make articles available online through the JFI website to help identify, assess, maintain, and/or improve health and quality of life, so that judges and their family members can see and apply ideas privately in their homes. Resources would include what we've learned in programs and informal conversations on best practices with exercise, nutrition, relaxation techniques, mindfulness, balance, connecting with other judges and their spouses and partners, mentoring and being mentored, getting occasional counseling, etc.

2. JFI national programming during Conference of Chief Justices meetings will often include best practices for wellness.
3. JFI emphasizes keeping in mind the bigger picture: the historical reasons behind concepts in our federal and state constitutional provisions, and how essential good judges are to their communities. Sharing best practices helps people cope with challenges.
4. JFI will keep on encouraging continuing judicial and judicial household education on wellness in the various states. It helps to get such people together, to help them understand the unusual stresses and other issues they all share. Realizing they are not alone is helpful. Sharing positive and concrete ideas for coping with the stresses is productive. Quality educational programming requires adequate funding of the courts, and likely will include some future online courses.
5. JFI speakers will be available to speak or moderate panel discussions, or help others prepare to do so.
6. We will continue to encourage state orientation programs for new judges and their guests. For instance, on the last day of a week of Indiana's New Judge Orientation, it has worked well for spouses and partners to be invited to join the judges for programming on ethics and avoiding conflicts of interest, wellness, and home and travel security. A minimum of one state Supreme Court Justice and their spouse meet for lunch and conversation with spouses & guests as part of a day-long program. Attendees typically can get off work or set aside other responsibilities to attend this day of training.
7. State educational program participants are encouraged to stay in touch with each other afterwards, and to link up with mentors. Most prefer having a mentor a few counties away rather than in the same county. Mentoring ideas will continue to be included on the JFI website.

#### **HOW DO WE MEASURE OUR ORGANIZATION'S SUCCESS?**

1. Affirmation from people who have benefitted from JFI programs and/or website articles
2. Continued support and encouragement by the Conference of Chief Justices
3. Website viewing

#### **WHAT MIGHT BE IMAGINED AS SOME NEXT STEPS TIED TO WELLNESS FOR THE JUDICIAL FAMILY INSTITUTE INITIATIVES?**

1. Being alert to new wellness articles to post on the JFI website.
2. Perhaps creating more articles on mentoring.
3. Keeping aware of new articles to post and programs to offer on the impact of the digital age on our own households and court caseloads. Thanks to JFI Chair Susan Page Minton (KY), JFI co-sponsored a Conference of Chief Justices Law and Literature session featuring M.I.T. Professor Sherry Turkle. Prof. Turkle can prove that people have lost empathy through the use of otherwise very useful digital devices. In her book *Reclaiming Conversation: The Power of Talk in the Digital Age*, she encourages families to avoid using digital devices at the dining table, or in the kitchen or bedroom. Her program as well as a Ted Talk link on the JFI website addressed how "a flight from conversation undermines our relationships, creativity, and productivity—and why reclaiming face-to-face conversation can help us regain lost ground."