



Supreme Court of Appeals State of West Virginia

News

Administrative Office
1900 Kanawha Blvd., East
Bldg. 1, Room E-316
Charleston, West Virginia 25305
(304) 340-2305 Jennifer Bundy
(304) 340-2306 April Harless
(304) 558-1212 / FAX
Web Site: www.courtswv.gov
Twitter: [WVCourts](https://twitter.com/WVCourts)
Flickr: www.flickr.com/photos/courtswv/
Email: Jennifer.Bundy@courtswv.gov
Email: April.Harless@courtswv.gov

Judge Johnson leads the Court Improvement Program for the 15th year

For immediate release

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ELKVIEW, W.Va. – Judge Gary L. Johnson celebrated his 15th year with the West Virginia Court Improvement Program and Catherine Munster, one of the founding members, retired at the group’s meeting Friday in Elkview.

Judge Johnson, of the Twenty-Eighth Judicial Circuit (Nicholas County), has been chairman of the West Virginia Court Improvement Program (CIP) Oversight Board for the last 15 years of the group’s 22 years in service. During his tenure, the group has accomplished extensive projects and training. “I think the collaboration we have had with other agencies has allowed us to advance the safety of children and families in West Virginia,” Judge Johnson said.

Seventh Judicial Circuit (Logan County) Judge Eric H. O’Briant, who is also the West Virginia Judicial Association President, said, “The children and families of this state, and in particular the children and families in Nicholas County, owe a tremendous debt of gratitude to Judge Johnson for his defense of children’s rights and his dedication to improving the court system and how it deals with young people and their families.”

Supreme Court Chief Justice Menis Ketchum said, “Judge Johnson is the leading judicial advocate for children’s welfare in West Virginia. He really cares about children.”

This month the CIP released an online *Juvenile Law Guide* intended to help families and community members understand the juvenile justice process, including the difference between delinquency and status offense cases. The guide is viewable and printable at <http://www.courtswv.gov/public-resources/CAN/juvenile-law-procedure/index.html>.

With an oversight board and several subgroups, the CIP has perennial projects, including the annually updated *Judicial Benchbook for Child Abuse and Neglect Proceedings*; annual, free cross-training conferences on child abuse and neglect and juvenile law topics in July; an annual West Virginia Court Appointed Special Advocate (CASA) conference; and a child abuse and neglect (CAN) database, which shows that circuit courts have continued to improve timeliness in CAN cases since its inception. More information on these and other projects is available at www.wvcip.com.

The CIP also makes proposals for systemic improvement, such as statutory, procedural rule, and policy changes. In 2015, the CIP led proposed legislation to streamline Chapter 49 of the state code on child abuse and juvenile law. In 2010, it produced *The Time is Now*, a video explaining the child abuse and neglect process to parents, viewable at www.wvcip.com. This year, the CIP is supporting House Bill 4489, which would strengthen criminal penalties for human trafficking, including sex or labor trafficking of minors; the bill is currently in the Senate Judiciary Committee.

2016 is the twenty-second year of the CIP. On February 26, one of the original CIP members, attorney and children's advocate Catherine Munster, retired from the group. She helped draft the original Rules of Procedure for Child Abuse and Neglect Proceedings and taught the first "Child Protection and the Law" course at the West Virginia University College of Law, which is sponsored each spring semester by the CIP.

"The lives of children have been immensely improved as a result of CIP and its contributions to child welfare reform in West Virginia," said Mrs. Munster. "It's been a great privilege for me personally to work with this board since its inception, and I am confident it will continue to improve the child welfare system in the future."

The CIP is funded through grants from the federal Administration for Children and Families and the Supreme Court of Appeals of West Virginia.

"We want to continue the process and make the court system as friendly for children and families as possible," said Judge Johnson. "One of the happiest things a judge does is putting families together after the problems have been resolved. We want to make sure children have a bright future, and we want to continue to make the court system amenable. I hope CIP can make as much of an impact in the next decade as it has in its first twenty years. Funding is tight, but we are rich in committed members who go the extra mile to make the state safer for our children."