



JUDICIAL INVESTIGATION COMMISSION

WV Judicial Tower - Suite 700 A
4700 MacCorkle Ave., SE
Charleston, West Virginia 25304
(304) 558-0169

January 14, 2025

Re: JIC Advisory Opinion 2025-02

Dear :

Your request for an advisory opinion was recently reviewed by the Commission. You were elected to a seat on the bench in May 2024, and took office on January 1, 2025. You have hired a new law clerk who starts work in a few days. The law clerk served as foreman of the September Grand Jury in the Circuit. You now have approximately 27 criminal cases remaining from that grand jury. Of the 27, approximately 10 have yet to go to trial. The remaining cases are either ready for entry of a plea or sentencing. You want to know whether you are disqualified from presiding over the cases where your new clerk served as grand jury foreman.

To address your questions, the Commission has reviewed Rule 2.11 of the Code of Judicial Conduct which states in pertinent part:

- (A) A judge shall disqualify himself or herself in any proceeding in which the judge's impartiality might reasonably be questioned, including but not limited to the following circumstances: . . .
 - (1) The judge has a personal bias or prejudice concerning a party or a party's lawyer, or personal knowledge of facts that are in dispute in the proceeding. . . .
- (C) A judge subject to disqualification under this Rule, other than for bias or prejudice under paragraph (A)(1), may disclose on the record the basis of the judge's disqualification and may ask the parties and their lawyers to consider, outside the presence of the judge and court personnel, whether to waive disqualification. If, following the disclosure, the parties and lawyers agree, without participation by the judge or court personnel, that

the judge should not be disqualified, the judge may participate in the proceeding. The agreement shall be incorporated into the record of the proceeding.

Comment 2 to the Rule notes that “[a] judge's obligation not to hear or decide matters in which disqualification is required applies regardless of whether a motion to disqualify is filed.” Comment 5 states that “[a] judge should disclose on the record information that the judge believes the parties or their lawyers might reasonably consider relevant to a possible motion for disqualification, even if the judge believes there is no basis for disqualification.”

Rule 2.12(A) states that “[a] judge shall require court staff, court officials and others subject to the judge’s direction and control to act in a manner consistent with the judge’s obligations under this Code.” Comment 1 to the Rule notes:

A judge is responsible for his or her own conduct and for the conduct of others, such as staff, when those persons are acting at the judge’s direction or control. A judge may not direct court personnel to engage in conduct on the judge’s behalf or as the judge’s representative when such conduct would violate the Code of Judicial Conduct if undertaken by the judge.

When a question of disqualification arises an analysis must be made of when a current or former relationship causes a reasonable questioning of a judge’s impartiality. In *State ex rel. Brown v. Dietrick*, 191 W. Va. 169, 444 S.E.2d 47 (1994), the Court considered whether the circuit court was correct in holding that a search warrant issued by a magistrate was void because the magistrate was married to the Chief of Police and one of his officers had obtained the warrant. The Court held that in any criminal matter where the magistrate’s spouse was involved the magistrate would be disqualified from hearing that matter. The Court declined to extend a *per se* rule to other members of the police force. The fact that the magistrate’s spouse was the chief of police of a small agency did not automatically disqualify the magistrate who could be otherwise neutral and detached from issuing a warrant sought by another member of the police force.

In *Tennant v. Marion Health Care Foundation*, 194 W. Va. 97, 459 S.E.2d 374 (1995), the Court held that a judge should disqualify himself or herself from any proceeding in which his impartiality might reasonably be questioned. The Court noted that the avoidance of the appearance of impropriety is as important in developing public confidence in the judicial system as avoiding actual impropriety and that the judge should take appropriate action to withdraw from a case in which the judge deems himself or herself biased or prejudiced. *Tennant* cited the commentary to former Canon 3E(1) which states that a judge should timely disclose on the record information which he/she believes the parties or their lawyers might consider relevant to the question of disqualification. Litigants and counsel should be able to rely on judges complying with the Code of Judicial Conduct. There is no obligation imposed on counsel to investigate the facts known by the judge which could possibly disqualify the judge. The judge has a duty to disclose any facts even if the judge does not feel that they are grounds for disqualification *sua sponte*.

Tennant also addressed the rule that a judge has an equally strong duty to sit where there is no valid reason for recusal. In so doing, the Court set forth a balancing test between the two

concepts. While giving consideration to the administration of justice and the avoidance of the appearance of unfairness, a judge must also consider whether cases may be unfairly prejudiced or delayed or discontent may be created through unfounded charges of prejudice or unfairness made against the judge. The Court noted that the standard for recusal is an objective one. Facts should be viewed as they appear to the well-informed, thoughtful and objective observer rather than the hypersensitive, cynical and suspicious person.

Based upon the foregoing the Commission is of the opinion that you should screen your law clerk off all cases in which he/she served as the grand jury foreman. This is the only appropriate mechanism to overcome Rule 2.12(A) You should disclose in each and every case that your law clerk was the grand jury foreman and that he/she has been screened off the case. If anyone objects you should follow Trial Court Rule 17.

The Commission hopes that this opinion fully addresses the issues which you have raised. Please do not hesitate to contact the Commission should you have any questions, comments or concerns.

Sincerely,



Alan D. Moats, Chairperson
Judicial Investigation Commission

ADM/tat