

uate the effect of cameras in the courtroom. Attendance at the Judicial Conference sessions also includes social events, such as lunch at the Supreme Court with the Chief Justice and all Judicial Conference members and invited guests and a reception at the Supreme Court. As Bankruptcy Judge Representative, I was invited to the meeting of the Conference of District Judge Representatives to the Judicial Conference. This invitation allowed us the opportunity to discuss concerns that crossed court units.

I also was a guest of the AO's Bankruptcy Judges Advisory Group (BJAG). Together with the Judicial Conference Bankruptcy Committee, the BJAG's work is vital to the administration of our bankruptcy courts and gives our judges input regarding the important policy issues affecting our courts.

Today, as all federal court units face the challenge of budget constraints and cost-containment initiatives, the Judicial Conference Committees will be making decisions that directly impact the work we do each

day. The most important lesson I learned in service to the Committee is a simple one – it is critically important to participate in the work of the Judicial Conference Committees. I urge any judge with an interest in having an impact on court policy to serve on these Committees. The rewards are great – both in terms of meeting other court colleagues across the country and across court units and indirectly affecting the Judicial Conference's policy-making. Our judicial system works best when all voices are heard – lend yours to the process at this time when creative ideas are needed to assist in the mission to provide service to our citizens.

My term on the Judicial Conference as your Representative will remain a highlight of my judicial career. I appreciate the many notes of thanks I received from my judicial colleagues who took the time to read my reports. I also wish to thank the NCBJ for the beautiful plaque of appreciation I received at the close of the last NCBJ Conference in Tampa. I wish Mike Romero all the best as he begins his term as your Representative.

BANKRUPTCY JUDICIAL ASSISTANTS: A CONTINUING EVOLUTION OF GROWTH

By Patsy Burkhalter, JA, Southern District of Georgia, Martie Kantor, JA, Northern District of Florida
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A judicial assistant can be an invaluable member of a judge's team. JAs routinely perform tasks requiring both familiarity with the Bankruptcy Code and a thorough understanding of the court's and clerk's office's policies and procedures. A judicial assistant must be a confidential aide and skilled communicator; JAs are called upon daily to interact with a full cast of characters: judges, lawyers, *pro se* debtors, the press and members of the public. Today's judicial assistant must wear countless hats – file manager, computer wizard, human resource specialist, legal researcher, writer, travel agent, bookkeeper, scheduler, courtroom deputy, and event planner. Even though each judicial assistant's duties are as unique as each judge, JAs share a common desire to offer creative and effective solutions to the challenges of managing a bankruptcy judge's chambers.

Back in 1989, when they were still known as "secretaries," a small group formed the Association of Bankruptcy Judicial Assistants ("ABJA."). They hoped to network with other assistants around the country and establish job-specific training for themselves. They placed an ad in the NCBJ *Conference News* soliciting

the participation of all judicial assistants interested in forming an organization. The organization held its first meeting in Atlanta in 1989, and sponsored its first conference in Las Vegas in 1990. Thus began an incredible journey for the ABJA.

Because no government or court-sponsored training was available for chambers staff, the ABJA's first order of business was to offer educational programs to members who attended the Association's annual conference. The officers and committees worked closely with the Administrative Office, the Federal Judicial Center, and private seminar groups and instructors to stay abreast of beneficial training opportunities.

Bankruptcy law has evolved into a unique, sophisticated and technical legal specialty, and the demands placed on those who practice in this field have expanded dramatically. Understanding that certification in the field would promote and maintain high professional standards, the ABJA developed a certification program for non-lawyers. The program was designed in conjunction with the American Bankruptcy Institute and is the only certification program of its kind for non-

lawyers who work in the bankruptcy field. The ABA first offered the examination leading to certification at the ABA annual conference in 1999, and has administered the exam at least annually ever since. The ABA offers the certification program at each ABA annual conference and makes the program available to judicial assistants and paralegals/legal assistants who are employed in offices specializing in bankruptcy practice. Deputy clerks employed in the bankruptcy clerks' offices also may seek ABA certification. The program covers grammar usage and writing, ethics, legal research, and the Bankruptcy Code and Rules. The educational programs offered as part of the annual ABA conference consist of current topics that are relevant to the administrative and/or operational aspects of the position of a judicial assistant. For those who have been certified, the educational programs also fulfill the continuing education credits required to maintain the certification. To date, more than 300 assistants have been certified.

Just as the use of technology has exploded within chambers, so too have the "secretaries" who use it become exponentially more sophisticated technology users. Most JAs do much less typing and transcribing than in the past. Judicial assistants have developed new skills to better assist their judges in a rapidly changing chambers environment. As it became apparent that the automation of the court would require a computer-savvy assistant with the ability to fill in any gaps in the smooth operation of chambers, it also became clear that "secretary" was no longer a good job descriptor. The ABA supported a title change from the more antiquated term of "secretary" to "judicial assistant" (or whatever title a judge may choose) to emphasize this changing role.

The ABA also established a newsletter, *Behind*

the Bench, which is distributed to all judicial assistants, judges and certified bankruptcy assistants. The Association designed and maintains its own website, www.abja.org. Both the newsletter and the website are excellent tools for soliciting suggestions and ideas for improvement and for sharing stories of interest and job-related information.

ABA members serve the association through various committees formed to do the Association's work and support its mission to help both member and non-member judicial assistants. These committees are: By-laws, Certified Bankruptcy Assistant Program, Continuing Education, Finance, History, Liaison/Legislation, Long Range Planning, Membership/Mentor Program, Nominations, Public Relations/Conference and Newsletter, Support and Assistance, and Website Development. Additionally, one representative is elected annually from each circuit. These representatives, together with the President, President-Elect, Treasurer, Secretary and Parliamentarian, make up the ABA Board of Directors. Through the efforts of many dedicated judicial assistants, the Association continues to prosper.

There is still much to do. Many judicial assistants are not members of the ABA. Of the approximately 221 judicial assistants/secretaries who hold appointments to bankruptcy judges, slightly more than half (118) are ABA members. An additional 91 associate members are non-judicial assistant, certified bankruptcy assistants. For the ABA to continue to prosper and succeed, our membership needs to grow. Reaching non-members is crucial to our success, and the support and encouragement of the judges we serve is crucial to accomplishing the goals of the Association.



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