

VALLEY VOICES SUBMISSION
Fresno County Superior Court
August 12, 2016

The Court's Work

Submitted by the Judges of the Fresno County Superior Court Executive Committee

You may have noticed that the Fresno Superior Court has remained quiet through a number of articles, opinion pieces, online posts, and even public meetings discussing a personnel matter involving the chief probation officer. Some have said too quiet, leading to speculation that the court is unwilling to communicate on important matters. Since every challenge presents an opportunity, this provides a rare chance to share information about the laws, ethical standards, and codes of professional conduct that guide the court's work.

Above all, the court must follow the law. This seems obvious. But it's worth emphasizing because there are times when legal and ethical requirements to maintain confidentiality supersede the court's mission to be accessible and communicative. A number of statutes, regulations, and rules of court govern, very specifically, what, how and with whom the court may share information on juvenile, domestic violence, health, financial and personnel matters, to name only a few. While you may share your information and documents with anyone whom you wish, the court is legally bound to maintain confidentiality. Employees have constitutionally protected due process rights that prevent anyone at the court from releasing employee documents or discussing personnel actions publicly. As much as judges and court staff wish to be open and collaborative, we are legally prohibited from meeting with, or appearing before, independent governing bodies, including the Fresno County Board of Supervisors, about confidential personnel matters.

There are precise procedures directing virtually all of the court's actions. Federal and state laws, California and local rules of court, the Fresno County Charter, and the Code of Judicial Ethics guide everything from courtroom operations to community collaboration on new programs such as the veterans treatment court. Every two years, the judges elect a presiding judge who works hand-in-hand with an executive committee that is also elected by the bench. The bench relies on this structure to provide sound leadership, guide decision-making, and maintain appropriate communication. This year, the executive committee consists of two former presiding judges, the supervising judicial officers for a number of the court's divisions, and a jurist with a broad range of bench experience. These individuals are professionally and personally diverse, allowing for a wide array of perspectives and robust discussions on major issues. Research and information from court staff and other experts in fiscal, human resources, administrative, legal, and technology matters enhance the executive committee's process in thoroughly vetting decisions.

In the past, the court was part of the Fresno County governmental system. Today, superior courts in California are part of a state judicial system. The Judicial Council of California and other state bodies provide oversight, guidance, and training in all aspects of court operations, including judicial ethics and professional conduct. The simple truth, however, is that the court and judges are accountable to you, the people of Fresno County.

The court's work through numerous divisions, programs, and projects is too extensive to describe here. For that reason, we invite you to visit our website, www.fresno.courts.ca.gov, to learn more about court procedures, find helpful services, access forms, and obtain public case information. The website also provides useful contacts, including those for arranging court visits and requesting speakers for civic organizations or schools.

As the court's leadership, we -- Presiding Judge Kimberly A. Gaab, Assistant Presiding Judge Alan M. Simpson, former Presiding Judge Jonathan B. Conklin, General Trials Judge Arlan L. Harrell, former Presiding Judge Gary D. Hoff, Juvenile Delinquency Court Presiding Judge Kimberly J. Nystrom-Geist, Civil Law Court Presiding Judge Mark W. Snauffer, and Family Law Court Presiding Judge D. Tyler Tharpe -- want you to know that the court takes the mission of fostering public trust and confidence in the justice system very seriously. No matter what may bring someone through our doors, judges and staff alike remain committed to treating everyone fairly, making impartial decisions, following the law, and fostering community relationships that promote equal access to the court for all Fresno County residents.