

**Open Work Session**  
**Letter of Support for Orphans Court Judges Salary Increase**  
**October 19, 2021**

Ms. Pam Oland, Director of Finance, and Judge Bright came before Council. Ms. Oland clarified, Judge Bright is the actual requestor. She said Council was given a letter Administration received requesting this increase. She explained, based on State law, this has to go to the State, so Council has to recommend an increase. She said there was not one recommended four years ago, so it has been eight years since they have received an increase, and their workload has increased. She said they are eligible for County benefits, and the cost of their benefits has increased, which has cut down on how much they take home. She said Administration agrees that this is an appropriate request for the judges to receive an increase, so they are asking Council to be willing to send a letter of support to the State to have this increased.

Mr. Hastings thanked Judge Bright for her continued service and said she has been amazing after all these years. He said this all looks good. He said the salary is going from \$9,500 to \$11,600 per year, which is not a terribly large amount of money, so he is happy to support this.

Mr. Dodd said Judge Bright has been doing this for a long time, so he thinks it is appropriate for her to put in a request. He said he thinks it is long overdue, and, to be honest, he does not think it is enough, to which Judge Bright responded, they would be very happy if Council wanted to increase it more. Mr. Dodd said they can discuss that at a later date.

Mr. Holloway asked, on an average, what is their weekly workload, to which Judge Bright responded, that is the pertinent question, and it is very difficult to answer. She explained, according to the Estates and Trust Statute as it currently stands, they meet one day a week, but they sometimes meet a second day if there is more than they can get done in one day. She said today they have three hearings, and they have at least one hearing almost every week, but that is not where the job stops, and this is the part that has become increasingly time consuming. She explained, they have to prepare for every case. She said most of their work is not in-person hearings, it is overseeing accounts, so they basically audit the accounts and approve or disapprove. She said sometimes they have a small stack, and sometimes they have a large stack, so they have done as many as 15 or 17 estates that they comb through document by document, and then they may have a hearing as well. She clarified, they have hearings most weeks, and today they will have three, but she has not checked the rest of the stack yet. She said the point is, they prepare for each hearing, and sometimes for just going over the files, depending on the nature of the estate, they prepare for these much like an attorney would. She clarified, not as in-depth because they are presenting the case, but they have to look up case law, they have to keep up with Legislative changes, and this is work that has to be done at home at night on the computer. She explained, now that they no longer have a law library, they have to do it wherever they can access the State archives.

Judge Bright said, in addition, they are required to attend mandatory continuing education for two full days every year in Annapolis. She said, in addition to that, they have mandatory online continuing education that must be done at home quarterly. She said, in addition to that, and this does not go for all of them at any one time, but she is currently serving for the third time as President of the Maryland Association of the Judges of the Orphans Court, which means they are having board meetings and then once or twice a year they have general meetings. She said she is also on her fifth term on the

Conference of Orphans Court Judges, which was actually instituted since she has been on the bench in line with the Conference of Circuit Court Judges and Conference of District Court Judges. She said these Conferences are made up of judges from across the State, and they bring issues that affect their courts to the Conference, and then the Conference reports to the Chief Judge. She said that is a place where she is very proud to represent not only Wicomico County but also the Lower Shore, but this all takes time. She said she takes time off from her fulltime job, and it just takes time. She said, as people become more litigious, she would like to say one thing for the public record because she wants to get this out there; almost nobody knows what the Orphans Court is or what it does. She said they see it on the ballot every four years, and every four years people say they meant to see what that was. She said it is very obscure because their jurisdiction is very narrow. She said they oversee people's estates when they pass away, and that is a sacred duty. She said they also oversee property guardianships for minors, and that is a small piece of it, but they have a sacred duty to stand for people when they are no longer there to stand for themselves, and also to see that both their creditors and their heirs are treated fairly and correctly under the law, which means that they are the court that most people are going to have dealings with at some point in their lives because somebody is going to die, and when they do, they are going to own something, and that is going to have to be dealt with, and that is when it comes to them. She clarified, they may not need to see them, it may just be the paperwork that they see, but most people in this County are going to have dealings with their court, so she feels the work is really important and she feels that it is a sacred duty. She said she personally is basically working on a volunteer basis because, even with the salary they have, her entire salary is eaten up by health insurance premiums. She said her quarterly check is a portion of the expense money, which is included in the figure that was referenced because it was set up years ago with salary and expense money, and now it is kind of all lumped together. She said she is receiving a portion of the expense money, but the entire actual salary, which she is very grateful to have the health insurance coverage, but for the person who comes next, it is really important to give them something for doing this work.

Mr. Dodd said Judge Bright brings up a good point. He then asked if there are three judges, to which Judge Bright responded, yes. Mr. Dodd asked if they are all elected, to which Judge Bright responded, yes. Mr. Dodd clarified, so this request is not for Judge Bright's increase, it is for the next bench, to which Judge Bright responded, that is correct, and she thanks Mr. Dodd for pointing that out. She clarified, it does not take effect until the next term, which comes after the next election, so she may never see a penny of this, but it is important. She said, in order to get people who are willing to do this work and invest the time to do the research necessary to learn the law, and to do the extraneous stuff that is actually germane and is the meat and potatoes, it is not just about showing up on Tuesdays. She said, in order to get somebody to do that, they have to pay them, to which Mr. Dodd agreed.

Mr. Holloway said they saw how hard it was this morning to try to get volunteers to do the Compensation and Allowance Commission, and they have a lot of Departments in the County that occasionally they will hear complaints on if things do not go right, but he cannot ever recall getting a complaint about this group of people, so he thinks they do a good job. He said they work behind the scenes and they do not hear much about them. He said he thinks the only time they would hear something is if something was wrong, so he does not have a problem with this.

Judge Bright said she just does not get a chance to let this be known very much, but they have a very low appeal rate. She said appeals from the Orphans Court orders are taken to the Circuit Court. She said their appeal rate is very low, and on most of those appeals their decision is upheld, so they feel very

good about the work they are doing. She said they work hard to make sure they are understanding things and following the law and being fair to all the parties.

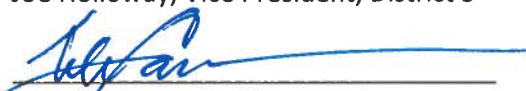
Mr. Mitchell said Judge Bright mentioned how they work on days other than Tuesdays, and it is not unusual to get a call while they are meeting on Tuesday and she will say she is here with the rest of the Orphans Court and they have questions, but he will also get those calls on Thursdays when she is looking over an audit or something, so they spend a lot of time.

Mr. Dodd asked for a consensus for the letter of support, to which there was unanimous consensus.

There was no further discussion.

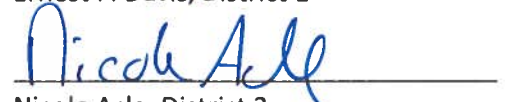
  
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Larry W. Dodd, President, District 3

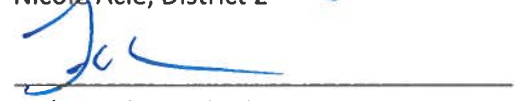
  
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Joe Holloway, Vice President, District 5

  
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John T. Cannon, At-Large

absent  
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William R. McCain, At-Large

  
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Ernest F. Davis, District 1

  
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Nicole Acle, District 2

  
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Josh Hastings, District 4

  
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Laura Hurley, Council Administrator