

Q&A with Commissioner Belinda A. Handy

Commissioner Handy was elected by the Superior Court of Riverside County in 2016. Her assignments have included family law, domestic violence, civil harassment, child support, adoptions, limited civil, unlawful detainer, traffic, and small claims cases. Here, Commissioner Handy shares a little bit about her time in family court and some of the ethical considerations particular to that assignment.

Please share your experience with family court.

I spent over five years on the family law bench covering all assignments, including child support and domestic violence matters. During the COVID-19 pandemic, I presided over domestic violence court, which remained open for in-person proceedings even as other courts moved online. This created significant stress for everyone involved as we managed evolving emergency rules and health concerns amid rising case volumes. The increase in domestic violence filings added to the pressure. It was a deeply challenging time, but one that strengthened our resilience and commitment to justice.

What is something you wish you had known prior to stepping into a family court assignment?

I underestimated the emotional demands of a family law assignment until I experienced it firsthand. Family court can be deceptively complex—on one level, it involves technical matters like calculating spousal or child support; on another, it involves high-stakes, emotionally fraught decisions about parenting, custody, and finances. These rulings deeply affect families and often linger in a judge's mind well after court adjourns. Litigants arrive stressed, uncertain, and in need of clarity. They rely on the judge to be calm, fair, and decisive. Making those difficult decisions day after day can be exhausting, both mentally and emotionally. That's why it's crucial for judicial officers to take time to recharge. Take breaks, take your vacations, and prioritize your health and well-being.

How can a judge maintain judicial demeanor and professionalism when handling highly contentious matters?

I shared this advice recently with a new bench officer: While the legal issues in family court—custody, child support, spousal support—tend to repeat, each case presents a different set of facts. I've found three practices that help me stay centered and in control:

Prepare in advance. I take time to read the pleadings, especially the requests for orders, and flag any unusual issues. Even on busy calendars, this extra preparation helps me make confident decisions and prevents me from being caught off guard in the courtroom.

Establish routine and expectations. Running my courtroom with consistent rules and procedures helps everyone. When attorneys, litigants, and staff know the process, it helps lower the tension and create a calmer atmosphere.

Maintain clarity and consistency in rulings. While each case is unique, focusing on the rule of law and the issue at hand helps me avoid becoming overly emotional or embroiled. Family law is a court of equity, and we often weigh the best interests of the child. It is important to remain grounded, optimistic, and neutral so that you can feel confident that each ruling is based on the specific evidence before you.

What are some common ethical concerns that family court judges should keep in mind?

Family court judges face several recurring ethical challenges that require ongoing mindfulness and discretion. A few key areas include:

Social media awareness. Bench officers must be cautious about their online presence. Litigants frequently share details about their personal lives—and sometimes even their cases—on public platforms. A bench officer who belongs to a local group online may unintentionally be exposed to information about a specific case or litigant that could lead to disqualification. For the same reasons, bench officers should refrain from commenting in public forums or offering advice online.¹

Community interaction. Similar caution applies in face-to-face interactions. Bench officers must remember that anyone they encounter—whether a neighbor, cashier, teacher, or acquaintance—could be a potential litigant. Bench officers must be aware of their obligations regarding disqualification and disclosure in this regard.²

Ex parte communication. Bench officers must be proactive in preventing ex parte communication.³ I routinely remind my courtroom staff not to share with me the shenanigans that litigants or attorneys may be engaged in while in the courtroom or out in the halls unless there is a specific security or other concern I need to address. If there is an issue, I disclose the facts on the record and allow the parties to respond as appropriate. This ensures transparency and helps prevent a bench officer from learning extrinsic information in violation of the code that has no bearing on the case.

¹ See, e.g., CJEO Expedited Opinion 2021-042 (2021), *Social Media Posts About the Law, the Legal System, or the Administration of Justice*; CJEO Oral Advice Summary 2020-037 (2020), *Judicial Obligations Relating to Social Media Comments by Appellate Court Staff*.

² See, e.g., CJEO Formal Opinion 2022-019 (2022), *Disqualification and Disclosure Obligations When Coaching Youth Sports*.

³ See Cal. Code Jud. Ethics, canon 3B(7).

Professional gatherings. Bench officers must be mindful when attending conferences, bar functions, inns of court gatherings, and the like. They may be approached by attorneys who wish to discuss cases or topics that are inappropriate. Being clear about ethical boundaries—and knowing when to disengage—is essential for maintaining public confidence and compliance with judicial canons.⁴

How should a judge manage potential biases or assumptions when deciding family law cases?

It starts with being honest with yourself: **Check your biases**—constantly. Family law is full of emotionally charged situations, and we all bring personal experiences and assumptions into the courtroom. But it’s our job to set those aside.

One way I’ve done this is by using **gender-neutral language** whenever possible. Saying “parent” instead of “mom” or “dad” and “child” instead of “son” or “daughter” may seem small, but it matters. This sets the tone for yourself and the courtroom, ensuring that everyone is seen and will be treated equally. It is also consistent with Judicial Council verbiage and many local court forms.

Another important reminder: **Don’t assume traditional roles.** The idea that Dad goes to work and Mom stays home doesn’t reflect most modern families. Instead, dig into the facts. When the court has all of the information, it will be easier to issue orders that reflect each family’s situation rather than attempting to rule from a one-size-fits-all model. It is this very uniqueness that I find makes family law so interesting. No two families are the same.

Here’s a little trick that helped me: When reading new cases, I’d skip over the parties’ names at first. That way, I wasn’t bringing any unconscious assumptions—about gender, ethnicity, or anything else—into my initial impression of the case. Families come in many forms now, and we need to meet them where they are.

Is there any other advice you would give to a bench officer stepping into a family court assignment for the first time?

I’d say this: Yes, family court is busy. Yes, it’s emotional. But it’s also incredibly meaningful. You are going to see good people on some of their worst days. They might be losing their home, their family structure, their financial stability. They are trying to find their new normal, and they are looking to the court for guidance and clarity. Treat

⁴ See Cal. Code Jud. Ethics, canon 3B(7) and Advisory Committee Commentary regarding the same; CJEO Formal Opinion 2021-018 (2021), *Providing Feedback on Attorney Courtroom Performance*; CJEO Formal Opinion 2020-015 (2020), *Supervising Judge’s Duties When a Party Complains About a Judge in a Pending Matter*.

everyone with patience and compassion. This role will challenge you, but it will also reward you, and it may be some of the most meaningful work of your career.