

## **MEMBER SPOTLIGHT: JUDGE GEORGE J. ADBALLAH, JR.**

[Judge George J. Abdallah, Jr.](#) is currently assigned to hear unlimited civil cases for the San Joaquin County Superior Court and has been a member of CJEO since 2009. Below, he answers questions from Sanna Singer, CJEO Staff Attorney and Editor of *The Source*, about hot topics in judicial ethics.

**Q:** You were appointed as one of the initial members of CJEO in 2009. How did you first become interested in judicial ethics?

**A:** *I became interested in judicial ethics for three reasons. First, I was appointed fairly early in my judicial career as a special master for the Commission on Judicial Performance, which required an analysis of the canons and their application to specific facts. Second, as a teacher for New Judge Orientation, I observed that a significant proportion of new judges' questions had to do with ethics. The transition from attorney advocate to judge is an incredible change, and newer judges often need support learning how to apply the canons to their lives and their families' lives. Third, when I served as chair for CJER's [Center for Judicial Education and Research] governing committee, we made a conscious decision to incorporate the canons and notions of judicial ethics into the substantive curricula as much as we could.*

*Through CJER, I was asked to participate in a video about the top 10 most frequently asked judicial ethics questions along with Judge [David M.] Rothman. Working closely with Judge Rothman, who had been the dean of my judicial college years prior and whom I had always greatly admired, was quite an inspiration and really sparked my interest in judicial ethics.*

**Q:** Throughout your judicial career, you have been in several leadership positions, including presiding judge of the San Joaquin County Municipal and Superior Courts, presiding judge of the appellate division of your court, and supervisor of civil and criminal grand juries. What are some of the most common or pressing ethical issues facing judicial supervisors?

**A:** *I think the most pressing and difficult ethical questions for presiding judges arise out of their relationships with judicial colleagues, court executives, and court staff. For example, presiding judges are required to address complaints about their judicial colleagues and take corrective action. Too often, I have found these types of complaints are based on rumors and anecdotes. When serving in a presiding or supervisory role, I think it is critically important to make decisions that are evidenced-based and not to be influenced by others, even those you trust and depend on, who may be well-meaning but not have complete information.*

*With respect to court executives, other ethical questions can come up, such as fairness in procuring services for the court or staff-related issues. Sometimes there is also tension between providing programs and services for greater access to justice and the court's budgetary constraints. When I have taught orientations for new presiding judges, I explain that being respectful and understanding of the respective roles of the presiding judge and court executive in the court's overall management can help navigate these challenges.*

**Q:** Has acting as a judicial supervisor been a rewarding experience? What have you learned from it?

**A:** *It's very rewarding and an honor to be asked by your peers to take on a leadership position within the court. As a presiding or supervising judge, you have the sense that you are shaping policy and doing work that is meaningful to all of your colleagues, court staff, and also the public as a spokesperson for the court. You also have an opportunity to learn the business aspects of court management. Prior to the bench, I had my own private law practice, and in that sense was running a small business. I was able to draw on that earlier practical experience, which I believe helped prepare me for my responsibilities as a judicial supervisor.*

**Q:** In your mind, what makes a great leader?

**A:** *Having seen CJEO develop since its inception, I think our chair and vice chair [Justice Ronald B. Robie and Justice Douglas P. Miller] are excellent examples. They listen to everyone's views and are very respectful of each of our members. When it's time to be decisive, they are very decisive, but take everyone's input into account.*

*What I've learned from my time at CJER and at the judicial college is that it can be especially challenging to lead a room full of judges. Some audience members are very enthusiastic, which is well-intentioned and sincere, but can drown out or dampen the energy of others who are less vocal. I think the key is to make sure everyone who wants to be heard gets the chance to be heard. Sometimes people make that desire known in different ways. Because someone might be more introverted in nature does not mean their input is any less valuable or important. An effective leader must be sensitive to that and inclusive of people with different personalities.*

**Q:** How would you encourage newer judges to seek out leadership positions?

**A:** *When we have new judges coming in, I like to remind them that not only is this their courtroom, but this is also their court. Some of the new judges I know from when they were attorneys and appeared before me, and I can see that they have great leadership potential. Not everyone wants to be in a supervisory role and that's fine too. But for those who are inclined, I encourage them to seek out leadership opportunities as a way to have a greater impact and be involved in those operational issues that affect every courtroom. And I advise all new judges to think about judges they admire and try to emulate their qualities, which is something I have done and has helped me advance in my own career.*

**Q:** Over your 13 years as a CJEO member, which CJEO opinions have stood out for you as the most interesting or beneficial to the judiciary?

**A:** *Looking back at our opinions, I find the ones most interesting that have the broadest application to the judiciary. For example, CJEO's opinion on attending protests and rallies [[CJEO Formal Opinion 2020-014, Judicial Participation in Public Demonstrations and Rallies](#)] went to the heart of what many judges were feeling and concerned about at that time in our*

history. Some judges felt constrained by the canons in terms of being able to express what they felt personally or morally. For that reason, the guidance in that opinion was extremely important and impactful.

*A more prosaic example might be the opinions I have worked on regarding accepting gifts, which is something that impacts judges' everyday lives, their relationships with staff, social relationships, and so on. Working at New Judge Orientation and as a seminar leader at the judicial college, I've learned that this is the type of issue that affects judges keenly when they make the transition to the bench. I enjoyed working on two gift-related opinions that provided practical guidance in this area, our expedited opinion regarding gift exchanges with staff during the holidays [[CJEO Expedited Opinion 2021-039, Gift Exchanges Between Judges and Their Staff](#)] and our formal opinion on nominal gifts [[CJEO Formal Opinion 2014-005, Accepting Gifts of Little or Nominal Value Under the Ordinary Social Hospitality Exception](#)], although the latter has since been superseded to some extent by code amendments.*

**Q:** Since becoming a CJEO member, you've also been appointed by the Supreme Court to serve as a member of the court's Advisory Committee on the Code of Judicial Ethics. How has serving on both committees informed your work on each?

*A: First off, I have to say that serving on both committees has been such a tremendous honor. What I have really enjoyed in both settings is the process of collaborating with others, testing out ideas, and reaching a consensus.*

*It can be challenging at times to be part of these two worlds, which have different roles but intersect. For example, the Advisory Committee's work is done in a confidential manner, directly for the Supreme Court, with the court's involvement and approval. While CJEO also treats requests and deliberates confidentially, it operates independently of the court and its final work product is public facing; it has a much broader client, if you will, which is the entire judiciary. It can be a struggle to toggle between the two roles sometimes, but I think my awareness of the process for developing code amendments through the Advisory Committee has enriched my understanding and perspective for my work on CJEO.*

**Q:** Just for fun, what is your favorite travel destination and why?

*A: Where my family lives, we are in a reasonable driving distance of Napa Valley, Monterey, Carmel, Yosemite Valley, the Sierras, and San Francisco. So, we are really in a wonderful location and take advantage of it. We are foodies, enjoy California wine, and have several favorite wineries nearby. The pandemic affected our travel plans in recent years, of course, but we are fortunately situated and excited to get back to it.*

Judge George A. Abdallah, Jr., was appointed as a commissioner in 1987, appointed as a judge of the San Joaquin Municipal Court in 1995, and joined the San Joaquin Superior Court in 1998. He has served as presiding judge of both the San Joaquin Municipal and Superior Courts, presiding judge of the appellate division, and supervisor of civil and criminal grand juries. In addition to his work on CJEO, Judge Abdallah serves on the Supreme Court Advisory

Committee on the Code of Judicial Ethics and has served on multiple occasions as a special master for the Commission on Judicial Performance. He has also acted as a Judicial Council member, chair of the CJER governing committee, and chair of the California Judges Association [former] Education and Planning Committee. Judge Abdallah has taught a variety of judicial education courses over the years, including judicial ethics, at CJER's judicial college, New Judge Orientation, and various CJER institutes.