

MEMBER SPOTLIGHT: COMMISSIONER BELINDA A. HANDY

[Commissioner Belinda A. Handy](#) is a commissioner for the Superior Court of Riverside County and has been a member of CJEO since 2017. Below, she answers questions from Sanna Singer, CJEO Staff Attorney and Editor of *The Source*, about hot topics in judicial ethics.

Q: You were appointed to CJEO in 2017. What first drew your interest to judicial ethics?

A: *When I was first approached about joining CJEO, I was quite excited to be a part of it. Growing up, part of what drew me to become a lawyer is that I always valued fairness in everything I did. I believe most bench officers feel that way, but don't always know where to look for guidance on the difficult ethical questions. Sometimes people are reluctant to seek out information, and as a result, don't ask the questions that should be asked until it's too late and discipline has been imposed. I tend to be an approachable person, and I like the idea that CJEO provides forward-looking guidance in a way that's helpful and approachable, not critical.*

Q: In your opinion, what are some of the most interesting or novel questions in the field of judicial ethics these days?

A: *To me, some of the most interesting questions are about balancing a bench officer's right to free speech and the canons. For example, California's Chief Justice has spoken about inequalities in the justice system as a whole and put remedies in place to address them. For bench officers, it's a bit of a balancing act. We have a duty to be nonpolitical and true to our profession; at the same time, we might wonder when and how we can speak out. As a lawyer I was, probably like most lawyers, very vocal about championing certain issues and causes. When you become a bench officer, you may feel quieted by ethical constraints. However, as recent CJEO opinions explain, you don't have to be silent. It's an interesting issue that I would like to explore more.*

Q: Of the CJEO committee members, you are the newest to the bench. Do you think that helps you bring a unique perspective to judicial ethics?

A: *Yes, I think it does. For example, take social media issues. Many bench officers came from the view that it's safer not to have social media accounts or engage on the internet at all. Those more recently on the bench, like myself, tend to believe that social media is here to stay and that we should not shy away from it. We use the internet extensively, and the pandemic has only intensified online meetings and conversations. It has become part of our way of life. So, from that perspective, we need to learn how to incorporate it and give our bench officers tools and tips on how to use it safely and professionally. For instance, bench officers need to be aware of their privacy settings, know their audience, know the difference between political commentary and nonpolitical commentary, and things of that nature.*

In addition to being newer to the bench, I'm also the only commissioner on the committee. Commissioners may be impacted by judicial ethics questions in different ways than other bench officers. I have to admit that, when I was first appointed to the committee, it was a little intimidating to be the only commissioner at the table with these very experienced judges and justices with stellar backgrounds. However, over time, I learned that in my role as the sole commissioner, I had a special perspective to offer and could contribute in that way. Everyone on

the committee was so welcoming, and I feel very fortunate. Through this work, I've been able to meet members of the judiciary throughout the state and at every level. It's just been an incredible opportunity in that respect.

Q: You also have a broad legal background, including criminal defense, civil law, and family law, with a specialization in the overlap between juvenile dependency and delinquency issues. Does that breadth of experience help prepare you for judicial ethics questions that involve a wide variety of fact patterns?

A: *Absolutely, in all aspects. Because I have both a criminal and civil background, I tend to look at things from many perspectives. I try to balance those perspectives by thinking about how people with different backgrounds might view an ethical situation. We are a statewide committee, and there may even be variations in how bench officers and courts approach things from a geographical perspective. When we are interpreting the canons, there is often no one right answer, but rather a dialogue. My exposure to various areas of law allows me to play the devil's advocate, look at more than one angle, and contribute to that dialogue.*

Q: You have been very active in CJEO outreach activities, have introduced CJEO to many judges at New Judge Orientations, and have taught judicial ethics in other court settings. What are some common judicial ethics questions you hear from newer judges?

A: *Definitely, I hear social media questions. Can I have a social media page? What can I post? Do I have to delete certain posts or remove friends when I become a judge? Can I "like" things on social media? That's certainly one of the primary topics.*

I also get quite a lot of questions about CJEO and how it functions. For example, many new judges confuse CJEO with CJA, which offers a hotline for specific, time-sensitive ethics questions. I try to educate judges about CJEO's role as a bank of published opinions that can be used as a guide and a resource. That being said, judges can always contact CJEO directly with their inquiries and we can point them in the right direction. Sometimes, we might refer them to CJA or to one of our prior opinions addressing a similar question.

The other area I get questions about is how judges should handle preexisting friendships with lawyers. Sometimes new judges are concerned that they need to end those friendships, but that's not usually necessary. It really is about setting boundaries, considering whether that person appears before you, whether there is an appearance that person might influence you, and going through those analytical steps. I also hear some new judges say they will remove all lawyers as friends on social media, but that may not be realistic either. These judges may have had personal or professional friendships with these lawyers for 10 or 12 years before becoming a judge. The key is evaluating and managing those friendships in an ethical way going forward.

Q: This issue of *The Source* has a social media focus. Do you use social media and what advice would you give to judges who want to use social media ethically?

A: *Yes, I do use social media, but I'm very conscious of how I use it. The takeaway is, if you are going to use social media, be proactive. I check my privacy settings frequently and I carefully consider what I post. After I became a bench officer, I also took down some older photos that no longer seem appropriate. I'm also cautious about my posts for security purposes. I don't necessarily want to advertise where I am at all times, or where my family is, for safety reasons.*

For instance, I might not post vacation photos while I'm traveling in real time but share them months later.

I'm also constantly monitoring who I am friends with on social media and considering whether those relationships have changed or evolved. I also review who my friends are friends with and what they are posting. For example, has something devolved into a political discussion that I should not be associated with? Things can take a turn quickly. Like CJEO's opinion on attending protests and rallies [[CJEO Formal Opinion 2020-014, Judicial Participation in Public Demonstrations and Rallies](#)], a judge may show up to one type of event, but then it changes. A judge must monitor the situation and leave if it's no longer appropriate to be there. It's very similar with social media. I've had to remove some people as friends, block people, or stop following them on social media because their posts don't reflect my beliefs or values. Social media is a great way to get information, keep in contact with friends and family, and engage with your community. There's a lot of good that comes from it, but if you are not responsible and proactive, there are pitfalls.

Q: In addition to judicial ethics, what are your professional interests?

A: I'm very interested in outreach and partnering with local schools to build an interest in and access to careers in the courts. I serve as the cochair of outreach for our court's Committee to Eliminate Bias and Promote Equal Justice. We recently launched a program that I'm very proud of, "The First Education Forum, Behind the Bench: Learn About Careers in the Courts." It's an all-day Saturday program at the courthouse where we introduce students to career options within the court system. I think it's really important for students of all backgrounds and academic levels to know that you don't have to become a lawyer or a judge to be part of the court. There are plenty of other great career paths, whether it's being a clerk, an IT specialist, or working in facilities. The first program was very successful. We hope to do it again and perhaps even expand to surrounding areas.

Q: Just for fun, what is a hobby or interest of yours that others might be surprised to learn?

A: As many people know, I have a dog named "Gavel." What people might be surprised to learn is that I named him sixteen years ago, long before I became a commissioner. I think perhaps I was always destined to become a bench officer, or it was a secret dream of mine. But as a woman of color, I was often told that becoming a lawyer wasn't the right path for me, let alone a commissioner. Eventually, I stopped listening to those voices and got where I am today. So, Gavel's name is very special to me.

As far as hobbies, people might be surprised that I'm in a ski club, but I don't actually ski! I joined the ski club in hopes of learning to ski but what I really enjoy is the winter-themed activities...the season, the clothing, basically, the apres-ski.

Commissioner Belinda A. Handy was elected as a commissioner by the Superior Court of Riverside County in 2016. Her assignments have included family law, domestic violence, civil harassment, AB 1058/child support, adoptions, traffic, and small claims cases. Prior to joining the bench, she served as a public defender and practiced civil and criminal law in Los Angeles and surrounding counties. Commissioner Handy has taught numerous judicial ethics courses at

New Judge Orientation and is a Qualifying Ethics instructor for CJER. She serves as outreach cochair for her court's Committee to Eliminate Bias and Promote Equal Justice.