

Member Spotlight: Judge Samantha P. Jessner

[Judge Samantha P. Jessner](#) is a member of CJEO and was recently elected Assistant Presiding Judge of the Superior Court of Los Angeles County. Below, she answers questions from Sanna Singer, CJEO Staff Attorney and Editor of *The Source*, about hot topics in judicial ethics.

Q: Congratulations on your new position as Assistant Presiding Judge of the Los Angeles Superior Court. What was it like to transition into this position during a pandemic?

A: It was a challenge because I transitioned into this position not only during a pandemic, but also during a record surge in infection rates in Los Angeles County. There is a very high level of anxiety among my judicial colleagues and our thousands of court employees. I've learned that it is critically important to listen so that people feel heard and reassured that leadership understands how challenging it is to work under these circumstances. I'm also more involved in the operations side of the court, which has been handling pandemic-related issues since March 2020. Staff has been undertaking things like installing plexiglass, rethinking how to summon jurors, transitioning certain jobs to a remote environment, and changing how our clerk's office does business with the public. I'm continually impressed with how the operational team has met these challenges with full recognition of the need to create a safe environment in which employees can work, judges can work, and court users can find the services they need and access our courthouses and court proceedings.

Q: You have been involved in ethics education for a significant portion of your career. What drew you to the topic of judicial ethics?

A: I can probably trace my interest in judicial ethics back to when I attended New Judge Orientation (NJO). I remember being so impressed with the knowledge base of the judicial ethics instructors and the collective energy of the group of new judges grappling with these interesting, challenging questions. I became acutely aware of the importance of the canons of judicial ethics, with which I was previously not very familiar, given the nature of what a judge does and how a judge is perceived in society, really 24/7. Over the years, I have had additional experiences and opportunities that cultivated that interest. For example, I was asked to teach at NJO and was lucky enough to be trained by Judge [David M.] Rothman, the preeminent voice on judicial ethics in California. Learning how to teach judicial ethics at the knee of a true ethics guru was a "pinch me" moment. I remember leaving that experience with a sense of enthusiasm, renewed energy, and confidence in my ability to share my interest in the subject matter with others.

Q: In addition to CJEO, you also serve on the Judicial Council's Information Technology Advisory Committee, and you have served as cochair of your own court's technology committee. How do you see judicial ethics and technology intersecting?

A: There is no question that technology and judicial ethics intersect. The evolution of technology has resulted in information becoming so much more widely and easily accessible, not only to judges, but also to members of the public. With just a few clicks, anyone can access information that previously would have been difficult and time-consuming to find. As a result, ethical issues abound. For example, not only judicial officers, but also court staff, must understand what kind

of information is permissible to access and distribute and what is not. It is also more important than ever for judges to be aware of how technology and social media function to minimize the risk of running afoul of ethical rules resulting from a lack of knowledge of social media platforms.

Q: Ethical use of social media is a hot topic these days. Do you think the benefits of using social media outweigh the ethical risks for judicial officers?

A: The answer may depend on the judge. I think the allure of social media has to do with the first word, social. Social media is a huge part of how we communicate with each other, especially during a pandemic. For some judges, social media is critically important to maintaining their social connections. For other judges, less so. That said, social media has become such a part of the fabric of our society that it cannot be ignored. I do think it is incumbent on judges to educate themselves about how social media platforms work, who can view information, and how it is disseminated, so judges can make an informed decision about whether to participate in social media and in what way. Particularly, if you end up being in a contested election, you will need to gain an understanding of social media because that is how people get their information about politics and what is happening in the world these days. With adequate knowledge, I believe a judge can ethically use social media and avoid the pitfalls.

Q: What do you think are other hot topics in judicial ethics that are likely to garner attention in the next year and beyond?

A: One of the most rewarding aspects about being involved with CJEO is that, as soon as we have issued an opinion on one topic, a new and interesting question comes up that we have never thought about before. It's hard to predict what topics will become relevant, but a great barometer is what is happening in the world around us. For example, 15 years ago, who would have predicted that we would be writing opinions about requiring witnesses to wear face masks or judges participating in social protests? So much of our work has to do with what is going on in society. In the coming year, I suspect we will be dealing with more issues around COVID-19 protocols, working remotely, social media, politics, and elections, among other issues.

Q: Just for fun, do you have a favorite comfort food or beverage that has sustained you during the pandemic?

A: We have certainly done a lot of baking in our household. Our new "go to" ingredient is dark chocolate chips. We used to be a semi-sweet family but have discovered that dark chocolate chips make all the difference in the classic chocolate chip cookie, oatmeal cookie, and even banana bread. It's also a great addition to pumpkin bread, which is a little more seasonal but really fantastic.

Judge Samantha P. Jessner was appointed to the bench in 2007 and has previously served as the Supervising Judge of the Civil Division, the Assistant Supervising Judge of the Civil Division, and the Supervising Judge of the Mental Health Courthouse in Los Angeles County. In addition to CJEO, Judge Jessner is a member of the Judicial Council Information Technology Advisory Committee, is a New Judge Orientation and Qualifying Ethics instructor for CJER, and has

served on numerous committees within her court. Judge Jessner was honored as one of 12 of the American Bar Association Legal Technology Resource Center's 2021 Women of Legal Tech.