

**COMMONWEALTH OF PENNSYLVANIA
COURT OF JUDICIAL DISCIPLINE**

COURT OF JUDICIAL DISCIPLINE
OF PENNSYLVANIA

SEP 6 - 2023

RECEIVED AND FILED

IN RE:

Judge Sonya M. McKnight :
Magisterial District Judge :
Magisterial District 12-2-04 : 2 JD 2023
12th Judicial District :
Dauphin County :

TO: SONYA M. MCKNIGHT

You are hereby notified that the Pennsylvania Judicial Conduct Board has determined that there is probable cause to file formal charges against you for conduct proscribed by Article V, § 17(b) and § 18(d)(1) of the Constitution of the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania, and the Rules Governing Standards of Conduct of Magisterial District Judges. The Board's counsel will present the case in support of the charges before the Pennsylvania Court of Judicial Discipline.

You have an absolute right to be represented by a lawyer in all proceedings before the Court of Judicial Discipline. Your attorney should file an entry of appearance with the Court of Judicial Discipline within fifteen (15) days of service of this Board Complaint in accordance with C.J.D.R.P. No. 110.

You are hereby notified, pursuant to C.J.D.R.P. No. 302(B), that should you elect to file an omnibus motion, that motion should be filed no later than thirty (30) days after the service of this Complaint in accordance with C.J.D.R.P. No. 411.

You are further hereby notified that within thirty (30) days after the service of this Complaint, if no omnibus motion is filed, or within twenty (20) days after the dismissal of all or part of the omnibus motion, you may file an Answer admitting or denying the allegations contained in this Complaint in accordance with C.J.D.R.P. No. 413. Failure to file an Answer shall be deemed a denial of all factual allegations in the Complaint.

**COMMONWEALTH OF PENNSYLVANIA
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IN RE:

Judge Sonya M. McKnight	:	
Magisterial District Judge	:	
Magisterial District 12-2-04	:	2 JD 2023
12 th Judicial District	:	
Dauphin County	:	

COMPLAINT

AND NOW, this 6th day of September, 2023, comes the Judicial Conduct Board of the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania (Board) and files this Board Complaint against the Honorable Judge Sonya M. McKnight, Magisterial District Judge for Magisterial District 12-2-04, Dauphin County, Pennsylvania, alleging that Judge McKnight has violated the Rules Governing Standards of Conduct of Magisterial District Judges and the Constitution of the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania, as more specifically delineated herein.

FACTUAL ALLEGATIONS

1. Article V, § 18 of the Constitution of the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania grants to the Board the authority to determine whether there is probable cause to file formal charges against a judicial officer in this Court, and thereafter, to prosecute the case in support of such charges in this Court.
2. From January 4, 2016, to February 9, 2021, Judge McKnight served as Magisterial District Judge for Magisterial District 12-2-04, Dauphin County Pennsylvania.

3. From February 9, 2021 through August 18, 2021, Judge McKnight was suspended from her duties as Magisterial District Judge. *In re McKnight*, 1 JD 2021.
4. On August 19, 2021, Judge McKnight returned to the bench and continues to serve as Magisterial District Judge for Magisterial District 12-2-04.

Theft of Time:

5. Sometime in November of 2021, Judge McKnight informed four (4) members of her staff that they could have two (2) vacation days in November and two (2) vacation days in December without utilizing their earned leave.
6. The staff was advised to schedule the days off with then Office Manager, Kimberly Ross-Seals.
7. These vacation days were in addition to the employees' earned leave.
8. The record of the days taken was informally recorded in writing on Ms. Ross-Seals' desk calendar.
9. These vacation days were gifted by Judge McKnight as a reward to her employees for their hard work.
10. Judge McKnight's granting of unearned vacation leave constitutes a theft.

Cooperation with Disciplinary Authorities:

11. On October 13, 2022, Board counsel sent Judge McKnight a Notice of Full Investigation and inquired as to whether she had given her employees extra vacation leave in November 2021.
12. Judge McKnight submitted two (2) responses to the Notice of Full Investigation on November 7, 2022, and January 24, 2023 in which she denied she granted her employees vacation leave in 2021.

13. On June 22, 2023, Judge McKnight appeared for a deposition at the Judicial Conduct Board office and admitted to providing four (4) vacation days to each of her employees, except for her office manager, in 2021.
14. Judge McKnight failed to cooperate with disciplinary authorities when she failed to provide honest answers to the Notice of Full Investigation.

Kimberly Ross-Seals Civil Complaint:

15. At all times relevant to this complaint, J'Naia Stinson was employed by Dauphin County as a clerk in Judge McKnight's Magisterial District Court Office.
16. On March 23, 2022, Ms. Stinson was opening the court office's daily mail and received a civil complaint from Kimberly Ross-Seals against Judge McKnight along with a check for the filing fee.
17. Ms. Ross-Seals claimed in her complaint that Judge McKnight owed her \$2073.49 for an unpaid loan.
18. Judge McKnight advised her then Office Manager, Georgette Potts, to act like the complaint was never received.
19. The civil complaint was never docketed, the check was never cashed, and Ms. Pott's placed the complaint and check in her desk.
20. Judge McKnight's intervention in the filing of a civil complaint against her constitutes the misdemeanor offense of obstructing the administration of law.

Karen Johnson Favor:

21. Karen Johnson has been employed by Dauphin County in various capacities since 1999.

22. Based on her extensive employment history with Dauphin County she has developed contacts within the Harrisburg Police Department Records Department.
23. On December 16, 2020, the Pennsylvania Office of Attorney General charged Judge McKnight with the criminal charges of tampering with evidence, obstructing the administration of law and official oppression.
24. Judge McKnight's criminal trial on the criminal charges was scheduled to begin July 26, 2021, in the Dauphin County Courthouse.
25. On the evening of July 25, 2021, Judge McKnight called Ms. Johnson and requested she contact the Harrisburg Police Department Records Department and obtain a copy of a police report related to her criminal case.
26. Ms. Johnson felt pressured to comply with Judge McKnight's request based on her position as a Magisterial District Court Judge.
27. Judge McKnight abused the prestige of her office when she requested Ms. Johnson utilize her position to obtain information on her behalf and for her benefit.

Attorney Brian Perry:

28. Attorney Brian Perry represented Judge McKnight from 2019 until December 2020.
29. On June 23, 2022, Dauphin County Court Administrator, Deborah Freeman, sent Judge McKnight an email advising her that per President Judge John Cherry's directive, she should not preside over matters involving attorney Brian Perry.

30. Attorney Perry appeared before Judge McKnight on July 18, 2022, in the matter of *Commonwealth v. William Ingram, III*.
31. Attorney Perry represented the defendant, Mr. Ingram on a charge of driving under suspension, DUI-related.
32. The parties negotiated the charge be reduced to driving without a license.
33. Judge McKnight accepted the agreement, heard the defendant's guilty plea and imposed a fine.
34. Judge McKnight failed to cooperate with the administration of justice when she disregarded President Judge John Cherry's directive to recuse from matters involving attorney Perry.

Officer Cummings:

35. On July 23, 2021, Judge McKnight filed a Citizen's Complaint with the City of Harrisburg against Harrisburg City Police Officer Anthony Cummings and three (3) other officers who were involved in her arrest and criminal charges.
36. Judge McKnight alleged in her Citizen's Complaint that Officer Cummings and the three (3) other Harrisburg City Police Department Officers, conspired together to destroy her character and credibility in the community.
37. The Citizen's Complaint was pending and unresolved during all times relevant to this Board Complaint.
38. On July 26, 2021, Officer Cummings testified for the Commonwealth during Judge McKnight's criminal trial.
39. On April 1, 2022, Officer Cummings filed a criminal complaint in the matter of *Commonwealth v. Dominic Aaron Reynolds*, wherein Mr. Reynolds was charged with possession of firearm prohibited and possession of drug paraphernalia.

40. Judge McKnight presided over Mr. Reynolds' preliminary hearing on April 25, 2022, and found the Commonwealth failed to establish a *prima facie* case for the possession of firearm charge.
41. Officer Anthony Cummings testified during Ms. Turner's April 25, 2022, preliminary hearing.
42. The Commonwealth refiled the charge on April 30, 2022, and Judge McKnight presided over the preliminary arraignment on May 4, 2022 and set bail in the amount of \$50,000 secured.
43. During the June 6, 2022, preliminary hearing, Judge McKnight stopped the proceeding and requested the case be transferred to another Magisterial District Judge based on her prior involvement in the matter.
44. On July 13, 2022, Officer Cummings filed a criminal complaint in the matter of *Commonwealth v. Cindy Louise Turner*, wherein, Ms. Turner was charged with the felony offense of robbery.
45. Judge McKnight presided over Ms. Turner's arraignment on July 13, 2022, and set bail in the amount of release on own recognizance.
46. Judge McKnight violated her duty to recuse from presiding over matters where her impartiality could reasonably be questioned.

X-It Red:

47. Judge McKnight maintained a Facebook page entitled 'Sonya Marie.'
48. This Facebook page identified Sonya Marie as a judge and contained pictures of Judge McKnight in her judicial robe.
49. On May 5, 2023, Judge McKnight posted on her Facebook page a picture of a product called 'X-it Red.'

50. Underneath the product, Judge McKnight posted, 'You do not want to miss out on this great business opportunity!!! All I can say is...it works, it's worth it, So let's get it. Reach out to me through messenger, phone or text.'
51. Judge McKnight abused the prestige of her office by soliciting sales of a product for financial gain on a social media account that clearly identified her as a Magisterial District Judge.

Failure to Give Precedence to Duties of Judicial Office:

52. The Dauphin County Magisterial District Judge night court calendar for 2023, was provided to the magisterial district judges on June 18, 2022.
53. According to the night court calendar, Judge McKnight was scheduled to work night court starting the morning of January 14, 2023 until Thursday, January 20, 2023.
54. Judge McKnight failed to appear for her assigned duty on Saturday, January 14, 2023, and the staff had to contact then District Court Administrator, Troy Petery.
55. District Court Administrator Petery was unable to make contact with Judge McKnight on her cell phone. Magisterial District Judges Barbara Pianka and Rebecca Jo Margerum provided coverage during Judge McKnight's absence on Saturday, January 14th, Sunday, January 15th and Monday, January 16th.
56. Due to Judge McKnight's unexcused/unexplained absence, President Judge Cherry issued an Administrative Order directing that Judge McKnight cover Judge Margerum's February on-call duty and Judge Pianka's June on-call duty.

CHARGES

Counts 1 – 2– Violation of Canon 1, Rule 1.1

57. By virtue of some or all of the conduct alleged in paragraphs 5 through 10 and 15 through 20, Judge McKnight violated Canon 1, Rule 1.1 of the Rules Governing Standards of Conduct of Magisterial District Judges (RGSCMDJ).

58. Canon 1, Rule 1.1 states the following:

Canon 1, Rule 1.1 Compliance with the Law.

A magisterial district judge shall comply with the law, including the Rules Governing Standards of Conduct of Magisterial District Judges.

59. Judge McKnight failed to comply with the law when she gave her staff four (4) additional unearned vacation days. These vacation hours were at the expense of the Commonwealth and constitute the crime of theft of time.

60. Judge McKnight failed to comply with the law when she prevented a civil complaint from being processed and thus committed the crime of obstructing the administration of law.

Counts 3 - 4 – Violation of Canon 1, Rule 1.2

61. By virtue of some or all of the conduct alleged in paragraphs 15 through 20 and 21 through 27, Judge McKnight violated Canon 1, Rule 1.2 of the RGSCMDJ.

62. Canon 1, Rule 1.2 states the following:

Canon 1, Rule 1.2 Promoting Confidence in the Judiciary.

A magisterial district judge shall act at all times in a manner that promotes public confidence in the independence, integrity, and impartiality of the judiciary, and shall avoid impropriety and the appearance of impropriety.

63. By preventing the civil complaint received by her office from being filed, Judge McKnight failed to promote confidence in the judiciary and avoid impropriety and the appearance of impropriety within the meaning of Canon 1, Rule 1.2 of the RGCSMDJ.
64. Judge McKnight's phone call to Ms. Johnson requesting she use her connections within the Harrisburg Police Department Records Department to obtain information related to her criminal case failed to promote confidence in the judiciary and avoid impropriety and the appearance of impropriety in violation of Canon 1, Rule 1.2 of the RGSCMDJ.

Counts 5 - 7 – Violation of Canon 1, Rule 1.3

65. By virtue of some or all of the conduct alleged in paragraphs 15 through 20, 21 through 27, and 47 through 51, Judge McKnight violated Canon 1, Rule 1.3 of the RGSCMDJ.
66. Canon 1, Rule 1.3 states the following:

Canon 1, Rule 1.3 Avoiding Abuse of the Prestige of Judicial Office.

A magisterial district judge shall not abuse the prestige of judicial office to advance the personal or economic interests of the magisterial district judge or others, or allow others to do so.

67. Judge McKnight abused the prestige of her judicial officer to obtain an economic benefit when she prevented Ms. Ross-Seals' civil complaint against her from being filed. Clearly, Judge McKnight received an economic benefit when the civil complaint was never processed as she did not have to defend against the complaint seeking monetary compensation.
68. Judge McKnight abused the prestige of her office when she called Ms. Johnson and requested she surreptitiously obtain documents on her behalf.

The police report Judge McKnight sought to obtain was related to her criminal case and would have advanced the personal interest of Judge McKnight.

Due to her position as a magisterial district judge, Ms. Johnson felt pressured to comply with her request.

69. Judge McKnight abused the prestige of her office when she solicited sales of the product, 'X-it Red,' on her Facebook page for economic gain. Clearly, the sale of items on a Facebook page that identified Judge McKnight as a member of the judiciary is a violation of Rule 1.3 of the RGSCMDJ.

Count 8 – Violation of Canon 2, Rule 2.1

70. By virtue of some or all of the conduct alleged in paragraphs 52 through 56, Judge McKnight violated Canon 2, Rule 2.1 of the RGSCMDJ.

71. Canon 2, Rule 2.1 states the following:

Canon 2, Rule 2.1 Giving Precedence to the Duties of Judicial Office

The duties of judicial office, as proscribed by law, shall ordinarily take precedence over a magisterial district judge's personal and extrajudicial activities.

72. Judge McKnight failed to give precedence to the duties of her judicial office when she failed to appear for on-call duty and was unable to be reached on January 14th, January 15th and January 16th, without explanation.

Counts 9 - 10 – Violation of Canon 2, Rule 2.5

73. By virtue of some or all of the conduct alleged in paragraphs 28 through 34 and 52 through 56, Judge McKnight violated Canon 2, Rule 2.5 of the RGSCMDJ.

74. Canon 2, Rule 2.5 states the following:

Canon 2, Rule 2.5 Competence, Diligence and Cooperation

(B) A magisterial district judge shall cooperate with other magisterial district judges and court officials in the administration of court business.

75. Judge McKnight violated this rule when she failed to comply with the directive not to preside over matters involving attorney Brian Perry issued by President Judge John Cherry through District Court Administrator, Deborah Freeman on June 23, 2022.
76. Judge McKnight failed to cooperate both with her fellow Dauphin County Magisterial District Judges and Court Administration when she failed to appear for her scheduled on-call duty and could not be contacted on her phone number. Judge McKnight had both a duty to report for her court assignment and to ensure that Court Administration had a valid phone number where she could be reached.

Count 11 – Violation of Canon 2, Rule 2.11

77. By virtue of some or all of the conduct alleged in paragraphs 35 through 46, Judge McKnight violated Canon 2, Rule 2.11 of the RGSCMDJ.
78. Canon 2, Rule 2.11 states the following:

Canon 2, Rule 2.11 Disqualification

(A) A magisterial district judge shall disqualify himself or herself in any proceeding in which the magisterial district judge's impartiality might reasonably be questioned, including but not limited to the following circumstances:

(1) The magisterial district judge has a personal bias or prejudice concerning a party or a party's lawyer [.]

79. Judge McKnight violated this rule when she failed to recuse from two (2) criminal cases wherein the affiant was Officer Anthony Cummings, an individual she had previously filed a Citizen's Complaint against. Clearly,

Judge McKnight's ability to impartial regarding cases involving Officer Cummings could reasonably be questioned.

Count 12 – Violation of Canon 2, Rule 2.16

- 80. By virtue of some or all of the conduct alleged in paragraphs 11 through 14, Judge McKnight violated Canon 2, Rule 2.16 of the RGSCMDJ.
- 81. Canon 2, Rule 2.16 states the following:
 - (A) A magisterial district judge shall cooperate and be candid and honest with judicial and lawyer disciplinary agencies.
- 82. Judge McKnight violated this rule when she failed to provide honest and candid answers in two (2) of her responses to the Judicial Conduct Board's Notice of Full Investigation regarding her granting of four (4) additional vacation days to her employees in 2021.

Counts 13 - 19 – Violation of Article V, § 17(b) of the Constitution of the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania

- 83. By virtue of some or all of the conduct set forth above, Judge McKnight violated Article V, § 17(b) of the Constitution of the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania.
- 84. Article V, § 17(b) of the Constitution of the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania states the following:
 - Justices and judges shall not engage in any activity prohibited by law and shall not violate any canon of legal or judicial ethics prescribed by the Supreme Court. Justices of the peace shall be governed by rules or canons which shall be prescribed by the Supreme Court.
- 85. A violation of the RGSCMDJ constitutes an automatic derivative violation of Article V, § 27(b) of the Constitution of the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania.

86. Judge McKnight violated Canon 1, Rule 1.1.
87. Judge McKnight violated Canon 1, Rule 1.2.
88. Judge McKnight violated Canon 1, Rule 1.3.
89. Judge McKnight violated Canon 2, Rule 2.1.
90. Judge McKnight violated Canon 2, Rule 2.5.
91. Judge McKnight violated Canon 2, Rule 2.11.
92. Judge McKnight violated Canon 2, Rule 2.16.
93. By violation of all, or some, of the Rules set forth above, Judge McKnight violated Article V, § 17(b) of the Constitution of the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania.

Count 20 – Violation of Article V, § 18(d)(1) of the Constitution of the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania

94. By virtue of some or all of the conduct set forth above, Judge McKnight violated Article V, § 18(d)(1) of the Constitution of the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania.

95. Article V, § 18(d)(1) of the Constitution of the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania states the following:

A justice, judge or justice of the peace may be suspended, removed from office or otherwise disciplined for . . .conduct which brings the judicial office into disrepute, whether or not the conduct occurred while acting in a judicial capacity [.]

96. By engaging in the conduct set forth above, Judge McKnight engaged in conduct that was so extreme that it brought the judicial office itself into disrepute and thereby constitutes a violation of the Disrepute Clause of Article V, § 18(d)(1) of the Constitution of the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania.

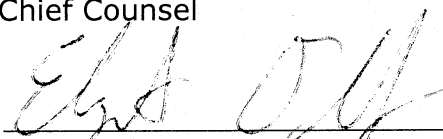
WHEREFORE, Sonya M. McKnight, a Magisterial District Judge of Dauphin County, Pennsylvania, is subject to disciplinary action pursuant to the Constitution of the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania, Article V, § 18(d)(1).

Respectfully submitted,

MELISSA L. NORTON
Chief Counsel

DATE: September 6, 2023

By:



ELIZABETH R. DONNELLY
Deputy Counsel
Pa. Supreme Court ID No. 308085

Judicial Conduct Board
Pennsylvania Judicial Center
601 Commonwealth Avenue, Suite 3500
Harrisburg, PA 17106
(717) 234-7911

VERIFICATION

I, Elizabeth R. Donnelly, Deputy Counsel to the Judicial Conduct Board, verify that the Judicial Conduct Board found probable cause to file formal charges contained in the *BOARD COMPLAINT*. I understand that the statements herein are made subject to the penalties of 18 Pa. Cons. Stat. Ann. § 4904, relating to unsworn falsification to authorities.

Respectfully submitted,

MELISSA L. NORTON
Chief Counsel

DATE: September 6, 2023

By: 

ELIZABETH R. DONNELLY
Deputy Counsel
Pa. Supreme Court ID No. 308085

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**COMMONWEALTH OF PENNSYLVANIA
COURT OF JUDICIAL DISCIPLINE**

IN RE:

Judge Sonya M. McKnight :
Magisterial District Judge :
Magisterial District 12-2-04 : 2 JD 2023
12th Judicial District :
Lancaster County :

CERTIFICATE OF COMPLIANCE

I certify that this filing complies with the provisions of the *Case Records Public Access Policy of the Unified Judicial System of Pennsylvania* that require filing confidential information and documents differently than non-confidential information and documents.

Submitted by: Judicial Conduct Board of Pennsylvania

Signature:



Name:

Elizabeth R. Donnelly
Deputy Counsel

Attorney No.:

308085