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Superior Court Expands Mediation Program to Western Pennsylvania

HARRISBURG, September 30, 2008 - The Superior Court of Pennsylvania has expanded its successful appellate mediation program, operating for two years in the Eastern District of Pennsylvania, to the court's Western District.

The court has hired Ann L. Begler, a Pittsburgh lawyer with more than 25 years' of wide-ranging mediation experience, to run the program in Western Pennsylvania. The program will focus on mediation of civil, family-related and Orphans' Court appeals.

"Mediation is a non-confrontational process for the resolution of disputes," said Superior Court President Judge Kate Ford Elliott. "It helps litigants to resolve their problems and saves them time and money. At the same time, this program enables the Superior Court to use its resources to better manage its extremely busy caseload."

The Superior Court is one of the busiest appellate courts in the nation. It receives about 8,000 appeals a year stemming from judicial rulings or trial outcomes in the Courts of Common Pleas throughout the Commonwealth.

Ford Elliott said the mediation program in Western Pennsylvania will concentrate most heavily on appeals that involve family conflicts and disputes. These generally are appeals from the Family Courts, where divorces and other domestic relations cases are heard, and the Orphans' Courts, where cases involving trusts, estates and guardianships are heard. These courts are divisions of the Common Pleas Courts.

Begler, a former litigator who shifted her practice solely to mediation, said mediation can often be preferable to litigation, particularly in family disputes, business conflicts and medical malpractice cases, because it can help to reduce hostility and enable people to participate in solving their own problems.

"Mediation can actually resolve the true conflict that underlies the legal dispute resulting in an ending that truly lets people move forward," she said.

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Ford Elliott said Begler will choose cases for mediation from appeals pending on the Superior Court docket. Participation in the program will be mandatory. If a case is not resolved in mediation, it will be returned to the docket to be reviewed and resolved by the court in the normal appeals process.

The Superior Court's mediation program began on a pilot basis in the Eastern District in 2006 and has now been made permanent. Ford Elliott said the program, operated by P. Douglas Sisk, a private attorney and mediator, has shown solid results with one in three cases chosen for mediation ending in settlement.

Begler will work part-time for the Superior Court while maintaining a private practice that includes both mediation and consultation services at her firm, the Begler Group, of Pittsburgh.

Ford Elliott said her goal eventually is to include mediation in the Superior Court's Middle District and thus to extend the court's mediation program statewide.

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