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March 1, 2011

SUPREME COURT ANNOUNCES MANDATORY EVALUATION FOR ILLINOIS JUDGES

The Illinois Supreme Court has announced the implementation of a mandatory judicial evaluation program for all Circuit and Associate judges in the state as the final part of a series of initiatives to improve public confidence in Illinois courts.

The program is designed “for the purpose of achieving excellence in the performance of individual judges and the improvement of the judiciary as a whole,” states Supreme Court Rule 58 which the Court amended Tuesday to establish the program as mandatory.

“This is an extremely important step in making a good judiciary even better,” said Illinois Supreme Court Chief Justice Thomas L. Kilbride. “There are more than 900 judges in Illinois and under this program every one who serves at the Circuit Court level will be evaluated by those who appear before them and work with them. This evaluation is for the purpose of enhancing the performance of Illinois judges and improving public confidence in the state’s courts.”

The results will be confidential, shared only between the judge and a facilitator, also a judge or retired judge who has been specifically trained in the process.

The program will be administered under a contract with the National Center for State Courts and will be monitored by the Supreme Court Judicial Performance Evaluation Committee.

The Committee is chaired by Illinois Appellate Court Justice Joy V. Cunningham. Justice Cunningham and the Committee worked with Director Cynthia Y. Cobbs of the Administrative Office of the Illinois Courts to formulate the program.

Justice Rita B. Garman served as Supreme Court liaison to the Committee.

“In establishing this program, our focus is on supporting judges in their efforts to become the best they can be,” said Justice Garman. “It is an opportunity for judges to remedy any concerns they or others may have and to improve their performance to help them become even better judges.”

“I think that judges across the state will embrace this as a process for helping to maintain a level of excellence and a high level of judicial competence across the state,” said Appellate Justice Cunningham.

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Mandatory Evaluation for Illinois Judges Add One

“Our judiciary is strong and this is being done to ensure that judges in Illinois are functioning at the highest level possible.”

Director Cobbs and the Administrative Office were instrumental in formulating a series of strategies adopted by the Supreme Court to improve the judiciary and public confidence in the Courts. These strategies were announced in December 2008.

They included a Statement of Expectations for all Illinois judges; improving a mentoring program for new judges; and amending Supreme Court rules to direct and clarify the authority and expectations of Chief Circuit Judges and presiding judges of the Appellate Court in their administrative roles over fellow judges. A mandatory judicial evaluation program also was among those strategies, and with the formal amendment of Supreme Court Rule 58 on March 1, the program becomes effective immediately.

“With the implementation of the other strategies, the performance and accountability of Illinois judges have already been strengthened,” said Director Cobbs. “This is another component of those strategies that will additionally fortify an already strong, capable and engaged judiciary.”

The Administrative Office with its Judicial Management Information Services division developed an electronic database that will randomly select from around the state Circuit and Associate judges who have more than two years and fewer than 25 years on the bench. In the first year, 100 to 125 judges will be evaluated.

The names of the randomly selected judges will be transmitted to the National Center of State Courts, which will initiate e-mail correspondence and evaluation materials to the selected judges. The materials will include asking judges to identify a number of persons who have appeared before them and with whom they work. Those persons, in turn, will receive an electronic questionnaire seeking information on a judge’s legal ability, impartiality, professionalism, communication and management skills along with an overall evaluation.

The results will be shared and discussed between the trained facilitator and the judge.

Judges with fewer than two years experience will not be selected for the program because they would not have enough time on the bench to make a useful evaluation.

The National Center for State Courts was selected as a result of an open bid process, and has conducted similar programs in other jurisdictions.

A Judicial Performance Evaluation program for Circuit and Associate judges has been in effect since 1988, but it has been voluntary until now.