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HOUSE BILL NO. 443
AMENDMENT IN THE NATURE OF A SUBSTITUTE
 (Proposed by the Joint Conference Committee
 on March 14, 2026)

(Patrons Prior to Substitute—Delegates Hope, McQuinn [HB 194], and Reid [HB 46])

A BILL to amend and reenact §§ 16.1-69.6:1, 17.1-400, 17.1-402, and 17.1-507 of the Code of Virginia, relating to maximum number of judges in each judicial district and circuit; maximum number of judges on the Court of Appeals of Virginia; hearing en banc; study to examine organization and boundaries of certain judicial circuits; report.

Be it enacted by the General Assembly of Virginia:

1. That §§ 16.1-69.6:1, 17.1-400, 17.1-402, and 17.1-507 of the Code of Virginia are amended and reenacted as follows:

§ 16.1-69.6:1. Number of judges.

For the several judicial districts there shall be full-time general district court judges and juvenile and domestic relations district court judges, the maximum number as hereinafter set forth, who shall during their service reside within their respective districts, except as provided in § 16.1-69.16, and whose compensation and powers shall be the same as now and hereafter prescribed for general district court judges and juvenile and domestic relations district court judges.

The maximum number of judges of the districts shall be as follows:

	General District Court Judges	Juvenile and Domestic Relations District Court Judges
First	4	4
Second	7	7
Two-A	2	1
Third	2	3
Fourth	6	5
Fifth	3	2
Sixth	5	3
Seventh	4	4
Eighth	3	3
Ninth	4	4
Tenth	3	3
Eleventh	3	3
Twelfth	5-6	6-7
Thirteenth	6	5
Fourteenth	5	5
Fifteenth	8	9-10
Sixteenth	4	6
Seventeenth	3	2
Eighteenth	2	2
Nineteenth	12	8
Twentieth	4	4
Twenty-first	2	2
Twenty-second	3	4
Twenty-third	4	5
Twenty-fourth	3	6
Twenty-fifth	4	5
Twenty-sixth	5-6	7
Twenty-seventh	5	5
Twenty-eighth	3	3
Twenty-ninth	2	3
Thirtieth	2	3
Thirty-first	6	6

The election or appointment of any district judge shall be subject to the provisions of § 16.1-69.9:3.

§ 17.1-400. Creation and organization; election and terms of judges; oath; vacancies; qualifications; incompatible activities prohibited; chief judge.

A. The Court of Appeals of Virginia is hereby established effective January 1, 1985. It shall consist of 17 judges who shall be elected for terms of eight years by the majority of the members elected to each house of the General Assembly. The General Assembly shall consider regional diversity in making its elections. Before entering upon the duties of the office, a judge of the Court of Appeals shall take the oath of office required by law. The oath shall be taken before a justice of the Supreme Court of Virginia or before any

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62 officer authorized by law to administer an oath. When any vacancy exists while the General Assembly is not
63 in session, the Governor may appoint a successor to serve until 30 days after the commencement of the next
64 regular session of the General Assembly. Whenever a vacancy occurs or exists in the office of a judge of the
65 Court of Appeals while the General Assembly is in session, or when the term of office of a judge of the Court
66 of Appeals will expire or the office will be vacant or vacated at a date certain between the adjournment of the
67 General Assembly and the commencement of the next session of the General Assembly, a successor may be
68 elected at any time during a session preceding the date of such vacancy by the vote of a majority of the
69 members elected to each house of the General Assembly for a full term and, upon qualification, the successor
70 shall enter at once upon the discharge of the duties of the office; however, such successor shall not qualify
71 prior to the predecessor leaving office. No person shall be elected or reelected to a subsequent term under this
72 section until he has submitted to a criminal history record search and submitted to a search of the central
73 registry maintained pursuant to § 63.2-1515 for any founded complaint of child abuse or neglect and reports
74 of such searches have been received by the ~~Chairmen~~ Chairs of the House and Senate Committees for Courts
75 of Justice. If the person has not met the requirement of filing in the preceding calendar year a disclosure form
76 prescribed in § 2.2-3117 or 30-111, he shall also provide a written statement of economic interests on the
77 disclosure form prescribed in § 2.2-3117 to the ~~Chairmen~~ Chairs of the House and Senate Committees for
78 Courts of Justice.

79 All judges of the Court of Appeals shall be residents of the Commonwealth and shall, at least five years
80 prior to the appointment or election, have been licensed to practice law in the Commonwealth. No judge of
81 the Court of Appeals, during his continuance in office, shall engage in the practice of law within or ~~without~~
82 *outside of* the Commonwealth or seek or accept any nonjudicial elective office, or hold any other office of
83 public trust, or engage in any other incompatible activity.

84 B. The chief judge shall be elected by majority vote of the judges of the Court of Appeals to serve a term
85 of four years.

86 C. If a judge of the Court of Appeals is absent or unable through sickness, disability, or any other reason
87 to perform or discharge any official duty or function authorized or required by law, a (i) retired chief justice
88 or retired justice of the Supreme Court of Virginia, (ii) retired chief judge or retired judge of the Court of
89 Appeals of Virginia, or (iii) retired judge of a circuit court of Virginia, with his ~~or her~~ prior consent, may be
90 appointed by the chief judge of the Court of Appeals, acting upon his own initiative or upon a personal
91 request from the absent or disabled judge, to perform or discharge the official duties or functions of the
92 absent or disabled judge until that judge shall again be able to attend his duties. The chief judge of the Court
93 of Appeals shall be notified forthwith at the time any absent or disabled judge is able to return to his duties.

94 D. The chief judge of the Court of Appeals may, upon his own initiative, designate a (i) retired chief
95 justice or retired justice of the Supreme Court of Virginia, (ii) retired chief judge or retired judge of the Court
96 of Appeals of Virginia, or (iii) retired or active judge of a circuit court of Virginia, with the prior consent of
97 such justice or judge, to perform or discharge the official duties or functions of a judge of the Court of
98 Appeals if there is a need to do so due to congestion in the work of the court. Nothing in this subsection shall
99 be construed to increase the number of judges of the Court of Appeals provided for in subsection A ~~of this~~
100 ~~section~~.

101 E. Any retired chief justice, retired justice, retired chief judge, or active or retired judge sitting on the
102 Court of Appeals pursuant to subsection C or D shall receive from the state treasury actual expenses for the
103 time he or she is actually engaged in holding court.

104 F. The powers and duties herein conferred or empowered upon the chief judge of the Court of Appeals
105 may be exercised and performed by any judge or any committee of judges of the court designated by the chief
106 judge for such purpose.

107 **§ 17.1-402. Sessions; panels; quorum; presiding judges; hearings en banc.**

108 A. The Court of Appeals shall sit at such locations within the Commonwealth as the chief judge, upon
109 consultation with the other judges of the court, shall designate so as to provide, insofar as feasible, convenient
110 access to the various geographic areas of the Commonwealth. The chief judge shall schedule sessions of the
111 court as required to discharge expeditiously the business of the court.

112 B. The Court of Appeals shall sit in panels of at least three judges each. The presence of all judges in the
113 panel shall be necessary to constitute a quorum. The chief judge shall assign the members to panels and,
114 insofar as practicable, rotate the membership of the panels. The chief judge shall preside over any panel of
115 which he is a member and shall designate the presiding judges of the other panels.

116 C. Each panel shall hear and determine, independently of the others, the petitions for appeal pursuant to
117 § 17.1-406 or 19.2-398 and appeals in criminal and civil cases assigned to that panel.

118 D. The Court of Appeals shall sit ~~en banc~~ ~~(i) when there is a dissent in the panel to which the case was~~
119 ~~originally assigned and an aggrieved party requests an en banc hearing and at least six judges of the court~~
120 ~~vote in favor of such a hearing or (ii) when any judge of any panel shall certify that in his opinion a decision~~
121 ~~of such panel of the court is in conflict with a prior decision of the court or of any panel thereof and five other~~
122 ~~judges of the court concur in that view. The court may sit en banc upon its own motion at any time or upon~~
123 the petition of any party, in any case in which a majority of the court determines it is appropriate to do so.

124 The court sitting en banc shall consider and decide the case and may overrule any previous decision by any
125 panel or of the full court.

126 E. The court ~~may~~ shall sit en banc with no fewer than 13 judges. *Three of such judges shall be the three*
127 *judges to whom the case was originally assigned, and 10 of such judges shall be assigned pursuant to a*
128 *randomized rotational schedule in accordance with the Rules of the Supreme Court of Virginia.* In all cases
129 decided by the court en banc, the concurrence of at least a majority of the judges sitting shall be required to
130 reverse a judgment, in whole or in part.

131 **§ 17.1-507. Maximum number of judges; residence requirement; compensation; powers; etc.**

132 A. For the several judicial circuits there shall be judges, the maximum number as hereinafter set forth,
133 who shall during their service reside within their respective circuits and whose compensation and powers
134 shall be the same as now and hereafter prescribed for circuit judges.

135 The maximum number of judges of the circuits shall be as follows:

- 136 First — 6
- 137 Second — 8
- 138 Third — 4
- 139 Fourth — 8
- 140 Fifth — 4
- 141 Sixth — 3
- 142 Seventh — 5
- 143 Eighth — 3
- 144 Ninth — 5
- 145 Tenth — 4
- 146 Eleventh — 3
- 147 Twelfth — 6
- 148 Thirteenth — 7
- 149 Fourteenth — 5
- 150 Fifteenth — 12
- 151 Sixteenth — 6
- 152 Seventeenth — 4
- 153 Eighteenth — 3
- 154 Nineteenth — 15
- 155 Twentieth — ~~5~~ 6
- 156 Twenty-first — 3
- 157 Twenty-second — 4
- 158 Twenty-third — 5
- 159 Twenty-fourth — 6
- 160 Twenty-fifth — 7
- 161 Twenty-sixth — 8
- 162 Twenty-seventh — ~~6~~ 7
- 163 Twenty-eighth — 4
- 164 Twenty-ninth — 5
- 165 Thirtieth — 4
- 166 Thirty-first — 7

167 B. No additional circuit court judge shall be authorized or provided for any judicial circuit until the
168 Judicial Council has made a study of the need for such additional circuit court judge and has reported its
169 findings and recommendations to the House and Senate Committees for Courts of Justice. The boundary of
170 any judicial circuit shall not be changed until a study has been made by the Judicial Council and a report of
171 its findings and recommendations made to said Committees.

172 C. If the Judicial Council finds the need for an additional circuit court judge after a study is made pursuant
173 to subsection B, the study shall be made available to the Compensation Board and the House and Senate
174 Committees for Courts of Justice and the Judicial Council shall publish notice of such finding in a publication
175 of general circulation among attorneys licensed to practice in the Commonwealth. The Compensation Board
176 shall make a study of the need to provide additional courtroom security and deputy court clerk staffing. This
177 study shall be reported to the House and Senate Committees for Courts of Justice, and to the Department of
178 Planning and Budget.

179 **2. That the provisions of §§ 17.1-400 and 17.1-402 of the Code of Virginia, as amended by this act, shall**
180 **become effective on September 1, 2026.**

181 **3. That the provisions of §§ 16.1-69.6:1 and 17.1-507 of the Code of Virginia, as amended by this act,**
182 **relating to the Fifteenth and Twentieth Judicial Circuits shall become effective on July 1, 2027.**

183 **4. That the Judicial Council of Virginia (the Council) shall conduct a study examining the organization**
184 **and boundaries of the Fifteenth and Twentieth Judicial Circuits. In conducting its study, the Council**
185 **shall (i) review current caseload data, population data, other relevant data, and all calculations and**

186 recommendations provided in the three judicial workload studies conducted by the National Center for
187 State Courts and submitted to the General Assembly to assess caseloads for the localities within the
188 Fifteenth and Twentieth Judicial Circuits; (ii) evaluate current court management practices and
189 judicial court assignments and provide an analysis of the impact of such practices and assignments on
190 the overall efficiency of the courts and judges; (iii) consider the geography of the Fifteenth and
191 Twentieth Judicial Circuits and time spent traveling between courthouses; (iv) analyze the composition
192 of localities currently included in the Fifteenth and Twentieth Judicial Circuits as compared to other
193 judicial circuits to determine whether they have a disproportionate number of localities with
194 significant population and caseload growth; and (v) determine if the citizens of the Fifteenth and
195 Twentieth Judicial Circuits would be better served by adjusting the boundary lines of such judicial
196 circuits in order to create additional judicial circuits. If boundary lines are not recommended to be
197 redrawn, the Council shall provide suggestions to ease burdens on judges and specify any additional
198 resources or support that the Office of the Executive Secretary of the Supreme Court of Virginia may
199 be able to provide. The Council shall complete its meetings by November 30, 2026, and shall submit to
200 the Governor and the General Assembly an executive summary and a report of its findings and
201 recommendations for publication as a House or Senate document.

202 5. That the Supreme Court of Virginia shall enact a rule implementing a randomized rotational en
203 banc panel selection system in accordance with the provisions of subsection E of § 17.1-402 of the Code
204 of Virginia, as amended by this act.