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HOUSE BILL NO. 441

Offered January 14, 2026

A BILL to amend and reenact §§ 17.1-100, 17.1-901, 17.1-902, 17.1-903, 17.1-913, 17.1-914, and 17.1-917 of the Code of Virginia and to amend the Code of Virginia by adding a section numbered 17.1-902.1, relating to the Judicial Inquiry and Review Commission; reform.

Patron—Hope

Referred to Committee for Courts of Justice

Be it enacted by the General Assembly of Virginia:

1. That §§ 17.1-100, 17.1-901, 17.1-902, 17.1-903, 17.1-913, 17.1-914, and 17.1-917 of the Code of Virginia are amended and reenacted and that the Code of Virginia is amended by adding a section numbered 17.1-902.1 as follows:

§ 17.1-100. Judicial performance evaluation program.

A. The Supreme Court, by rule, shall establish and maintain a judicial performance evaluation program that will provide a self-improvement mechanism for judges and a source of information for the reelection process. By December 1 of each year, the Supreme Court, or its designee, shall transmit a report of the evaluation in the final year of the term of each justice and judge whose term expires during the next session of the General Assembly to the Chairmen of the House and Senate Committees for Courts of Justice. Such report shall include the number of cases during the judge's term in which a judge imposed a sentence that is either greater or less than that indicated by the sentencing guidelines and did not file a written explanation of such departure required pursuant to subsection B of § 19.2-298.01. The Virginia Criminal Sentencing Commission shall provide such information to the Supreme Court by November 1.

B. The reporting requirement of this section shall become effective when funds are appropriated for this program and shall apply to the evaluation of any justice or judge who has had at least one interim evaluation conducted during his term. For any judge or justice elected or reelected on or after January 1, 2014, an interim evaluation of each individual justice or judge shall be completed during his term. Such interim evaluation shall be commenced by the judicial performance evaluation program no later than the midpoint of his term.

C. All records created or maintained by or on behalf of the judicial performance evaluation program related to an evaluation of any individual justice or judge are confidential and shall not be disclosed, except that (i) any report provided to the General Assembly pursuant to this section shall be a public record that is open to inspection and (ii) any comments alleging judicial misconduct submitted by an individual as part of a judicial performance evaluation program survey response may be transmitted by the Office of the Executive Secretary of the Supreme Court of Virginia to the Judicial Inquiry and Review Commission.

§ 17.1-901. Commission created; membership and terms of office.

There is created a Judicial Inquiry and Review Commission in the judiciary branch of government, composed of ~~seven~~ **nine** persons who shall be citizens and residents of the Commonwealth. The members of the Commission shall be chosen by the vote of a majority of the members elected to each house of the General Assembly. The Commission shall elect a chairman and vice-chairman annually from its membership.

The Commission shall consist of three judicial members, who shall be (i) one active judge of a circuit court, (ii) one active judge of a general district court, and (iii) one active judge of a juvenile and domestic relations district court; ~~two lawyer members, who shall be active members of the Virginia State Bar who are not judges and who have practiced law in the Commonwealth for 15 or more years immediately preceding their appointment; and two public members who shall not be active or retired judges and shall never have been licensed lawyers; and four lawyer members, who shall be active members of the Virginia State Bar who are not judges and who have practiced law in the Commonwealth for eight or more years immediately preceding their appointment. The Council for the Virginia State Bar, the Board of Directors for the Virginia Association of Commonwealth's Attorneys, and the Board of Directors for the Virginia Association of Criminal Defense Lawyers shall submit recommendations for lawyer members for consideration by the General Assembly. Two of such lawyer members shall be selected from the recommendations submitted by the Council for the Virginia State Bar, and one lawyer member each shall be selected from the recommendations submitted by the Board of Directors for the Virginia Association of Commonwealth's Attorneys and the Board of Directors for the Virginia Association of Criminal Defense Lawyers.~~

After the initial appointments, the term of office of each member shall be four years commencing on July 1. No member of the Commission shall be eligible to serve more than two consecutive terms. The remainder of any term to which a member is appointed to fill a vacancy shall not constitute a term in determining the member's eligibility for reappointment.

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Commission membership terminates whenever a member resigns or ceases to possess the qualifications that made him eligible for appointment. During any vacancy, which may exist while the General Assembly is not in session, the Governor may appoint a successor to serve until 30 days after the commencement of the next session of the General Assembly. Upon election of a successor by the General Assembly, the new member of the Commission shall serve for the remainder of the term of office of his predecessor.

Prior to beginning service on the Commission, each member and any newly hired counsel for the Commission shall receive training on judicial ethics, the Canons of Judicial Conduct, and best practices for judicial oversight and accountability. The Office of the Executive Secretary of the Supreme Court of Virginia, in collaboration with counsel for the Commission, shall prepare and oversee such initial training and all subsequent training, and, thereafter, each member of the Commission shall complete annual training on judicial ethics for the duration of his service on the Commission.

The Commission shall adopt and implement a conflict of interest policy governing the participation of Commission members and Commission staff in matters before the Commission. Such policy shall reflect the same principles and scope as set forth in the Virginia Rules of Professional Conduct and the Virginia Canons of Judicial Conduct, and shall set out expectations for the recusal of a Commission member or Commission staff on matters before the Commission that involve a current or former colleague, family member, or other professional or personal relationship that may undermine the real or perceived impartiality of such member or staff. Any member of the Commission who is the subject of an investigation or hearing by it or is otherwise personally involved therein shall be disqualified by the Commission from acting in such proceedings. In such a case where a member of the Commission is disqualified or voluntarily recuses himself from acting in such proceedings, the Governor shall appoint a person possessing the original qualifications of such member as prescribed by this section to serve temporarily as a substitute member of the Commission in such proceedings. In any case where a staff member for the Commission is disqualified or voluntarily recuses himself from acting in such proceedings, the Governor shall appoint a designee to serve temporarily as staff in such proceedings.

The Commission shall adopt and make publicly available for review a Code of Conduct that shall provide expectations for Commission members and Commission staff concerning attendance of meetings and proceedings, appropriate behavior during formal hearings or informal conferences, engagement with electronic public-facing platforms, participation in political campaigns, including any endorsements or campaign donations, and any other actions that Commission staff and Commission members may take while serving on the Commission that may impact the integrity of the Commission and its work.

§ 17.1-902. Powers and duties of Commission generally.

The Commission is vested with the power, and it shall be its duty, to investigate charges arising out of the present or any prior term of office ~~which~~ that would be the basis for retirement, censure, or removal of a judge under Article VI, Section 10 of the Constitution of Virginia and the provisions of this chapter, ~~or the basis for sanction or supervision as deemed appropriate and necessary and as imposed by the Commission based on the charges investigated~~, even though the subject judge may have been reelected to a new term of office.

The Commission, after such investigation as it deems necessary, may order and conduct hearings at such times and places in the Commonwealth as it shall determine. *For any complaint that alleges a violation of the Judicial Canons of Conduct, the Commission shall make all reasonable efforts to contact any witness to the alleged conduct specified in such complaint.*

For any formal or informal hearing conducted, and where the subject judge has presented a defense to any charges that would be the basis for sanction, supervision, censure, retirement, or removal of a judge, the Commission shall allow the complainant an opportunity to respond to the defense presented by the subject judge.

If the Commission finds the charges to be well-founded, and sufficient to constitute the basis for retirement, censure, or removal of a judge, it may file a formal complaint before the Supreme Court.

The Commission shall have the authority to make rules, not in conflict with the provisions of this chapter or of general law, to govern investigations and hearings conducted by it.

The Commission shall have the authority to investigate any complaint that the Commission deems within its purview as provided in the rules adopted by the Commission, to include any complaint of judicial misconduct arising from a matter that may be pending or on appeal. The Commission shall not dismiss any such complaint arising from a matter that may be pending or on appeal solely on the basis that it is pending or on appeal.

No act of the Commission shall be valid unless concurred with by a majority of its members.

§ 17.1-902.1. Rules of investigation; disciplinary actions.

The Commission shall make publicly available for inspection a publication enumerating all adopted rules that govern the investigation and adjudication of complaints alleging judicial misconduct, including any rules governing informal processes that the Commission may engage in during the course of or as a result of such investigation. The Commission shall include in its rules a thorough description of all possible sanctions or other informal disciplinary actions that the Commission may impose on a judge who is the subject of a

complaint and the standards for the application of such sanction or informal disciplinary action. In addition to any other sanction, informal disciplinary action, or formal disciplinary action imposed by the Commission or the Supreme Court of Virginia, as provided for under Article VI, Section 10 of the Constitution of Virginia and the provisions of this chapter, the Commission may require any judge who is the subject of a complaint to recuse himself from any pending case before him, or any future matter that comes before him that involves the complainant or a witness who has testified before the Commission concerning the conduct of the subject judge.

§ 17.1-903. Officers and employees; experts and reporters; witnesses; legal counsel.

The Commission may (i) employ such officers, assistants, and other employees it deems necessary for the performance of its duties; (ii) arrange for and compensate medical and other experts and reporters; (iii) arrange for attendance of witnesses, including witnesses not subject to subpoena; and (iv) pay from funds available to it all expenses reasonably necessary for effectuating the purposes of Article VI, Section 10 of the Constitution of Virginia and the provisions of this chapter, whether or not specifically enumerated herein. The Attorney General shall, if requested by the Commission, act as its counsel generally or in any particular investigation or proceeding *except in any proceeding where the Attorney General was involved in a case from which the complaint of judicial misconduct arose, either at trial or on appeal.*

The Commission may employ counsel, notwithstanding the provisions of § 2.2-510.

§ 17.1-913. Confidentiality of papers and proceedings; exception.

A. Except as provided in subsection C, all papers filed with and proceedings before the Commission, and under §§ 17.1-909 and 17.1-910, including the identification of the subject judge as well as all testimony and other evidence and any transcript thereof made by a reporter, shall be confidential and shall not be divulged, other than to the Commission, by any person *other than the complainant* who (i) ~~either files a complaint with the Commission, or receives such a complaint in an official capacity as a member of the Commission;~~ (ii) investigates such complaint; (iii) is interviewed concerning such complaint by a member, employee, or agent of the Commission; or (iv) participates in any proceeding of the Commission or in the official recording or transcription thereof, except that the record of any proceeding filed with the Supreme Court shall lose its confidential character. *Any individual who files a complaint alleging judicial misconduct or a serious mental or physical disability of a judge that interferes with the performance of duties of such judge shall not be prohibited from publicly discussing the filing of such complaint or any events that caused the individual to file such complaint.* However, if the Commission finds cause to believe that any witness under oath has willfully and intentionally testified falsely, the Commission may direct the chairman or one of its members to report such finding and the details leading thereto, including any transcript thereof, to the attorney for the Commonwealth of the city or county where such act occurred for such disposition as to a charge of perjury as the Commonwealth may be advised. In any subsequent prosecution for perjury based thereon, the proceedings before the Commission relevant thereto shall lose their confidential character.

All records of proceedings before the Commission ~~which~~ *that* are not filed with the Supreme Court in connection with a formal complaint filed with that tribunal; shall be kept in the confidential files of the Commission.

However, a judge who is under investigation by the Commission, or any person authorized by him, may divulge information pertaining to a complaint filed against such judge as may be necessary for the judge to investigate the allegations in the complaint in preparation for the proceedings before the Commission.

B. Advice on judicial ethics given by an attorney employed by the Commission to a judge and the records of such advice shall be confidential and not be divulged except as permitted in subsection A. However, the Commission may share such advice, but not the identity of the judge to whom the advice was given, with a committee established by the Supreme Court for the development of formal judicial ethics advisory opinions. Any such shared information shall remain confidential within such committee.

C. The Commission shall notify a complainant of the final decision made or action taken in regards to his filed complaint within 30 days of such decision or action. Such notice shall include the decision made or action taken by the Commission, *including any suspension ordered, sanction imposed, or supervisory agreement entered into by the subject judge.* The confidentiality provisions of subsection A shall not apply to notifications made by the Commission under this subsection.

§ 17.1-914. Privilege.

The filing of papers with and the giving of testimony before the Commission shall be privileged, except where *the complainant is permitted to discuss the filing of such complaint, as provided in § 17.1-913, or when* such filing of papers or giving of testimony is motivated or accompanied by actual malice. No other publication of such papers or proceedings shall be privileged in any action for defamation except that (i) the record filed by the Commission with the Supreme Court, in support of a formal complaint filed therewith, continues to be privileged and (ii) a writing ~~which~~ *that* was privileged before its filing with the Commission shall not lose such privilege by such filing.

§ 17.1-917. Assistance and information; complaint forms.

A. State and local public bodies and departments, officers and employees thereof, and officials and all personnel of the courts of the Commonwealth shall cooperate with and give reasonable assistance and

183 information to the Commission and any authorized representative thereof in connection with any
184 investigations or proceedings within the jurisdiction of the Commission.

185 B. In all state courts within the Commonwealth a sign shall be posted in a location accessible to the public
186 that notes the availability of and provides instructions to obtain a downloadable electronic version of any
187 standardized form developed and utilized by the Judicial Inquiry and Review Commission for the filing of a
188 complaint from the official website of the judicial system of the Commonwealth.

189 C. *The Commission may consider any anonymous comments alleging judicial misconduct that are*
190 *submitted by an individual as part of a judicial performance evaluation program survey response, when such*
191 *comment is conveyed by the Office of the Executive Secretary of the Supreme Court of Virginia to the*
192 *Commission pursuant to § 17.1-100, provided that the individual who submitted such comment contacts the*
193 *Office of the Executive Secretary of the Supreme Court of Virginia as soon as practicable after the*
194 *submission of such comment to identify himself in conjunction with the comment and provide his contact*
195 *information. Any comments alleging judicial misconduct, and the identifying information of the complainant*
196 *associated with such comments, shall be kept confidential by the Commission.*