

"In Good Hands": Michigan Supreme Court, State Court Administrative Office Welcome New Faces

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By *Kathryn Haroney, MSC Public Information Office Intern*



Thomas Clement, General Counsel

At first, General Counsel of the Michigan Supreme Court wasn't a job that Thomas Clement expected to pursue. "I knew several of my predecessors...all of them spoke very highly about the job," Clement says, but "it wasn't necessarily something that I was seeking out." He enjoyed his role as assistant attorney general and division chief in the Michigan Attorney General's Office, and it would be very difficult for him to leave that position. However, a series of encounters with former General Counsel Joe Baumann, Chief Justice Young, State Court Administrator Milton Mack, and others at MSC made him "increasingly excited" about the possibility of taking on the role of General Counsel. "I was very pleased, very excited, and anxious to get started and kind of wrap my arms around what the job was all about."

Clement is one of three new faces to join the ranks of the Supreme Court and State Court Administrative Office in recent months. In addition to a new general counsel, the state's courts welcome two new regional administrators, Paul Paruk and Jennifer Phillips, who oversee Region 1 and Region 6, respectively.

A Lathrup Village native and alumnus of Western Michigan University, Thomas Clement received his Juris Doctor from Michigan State University. He and his wife, Beth, have four children. Though the only lawyer in his family, "I was interested in the law from a young age," he recalls, "...I have always enjoyed reading and the law-making process."

When he was selected for the position of general counsel, Clement was "honored," and he remarks, "It's really a unique opportunity that not many people get." He is particularly excited to put to work his background in litigation, management, and legislative work in order to continue with his predecessors' efforts to establish statewide e-filing, develop additional IT projects, and liaise with the legislature to establish common goals that benefit both branches.

“This job brings all of those together...All of those different areas that I've been fortunate to gain experience in over time, I think, come together nicely to allow me to do the best I can in this job.”

In fact, bringing things—and people—together is one of Clement's favorite parts of being general counsel so far. His job involves a great deal of “teamwork” and collaboration with a “great team” of actors in the Hall of Justice and beyond, including the Justices, the State Court Administrator, the Board of Law Examiners, the Communications Department, and the staff in Trial Court Services. “Even right from the beginning it's really had that team feel or that family feel,” Clement notes. “We all take our specific skill sets and kind of weave them together...to get answers that are good for the Court, all the courts throughout the state, and for us as an office together.”



Paul Paruk, Region 1 Administrator

Courts and law run in Paul Paruk's veins. His father, Walter Paruk, was also a judge, and from him the new Region 1 Administrator learned from a young age the importance of service and community. “My father at home always preached public service,” Paruk recalls, “I learned that, as a judge, you should provide back to the community. That's how I've tried to lead my life as a judge.”

Paruk followed in his father's footsteps, even winning his father's seat at the 31st District Court. The Hamtramck native is an alumnus of the University of Michigan and Wayne State University School of Law, and he and his wife of 30 years, Donna, have three children.

With a background on the bench, Paul Paruk was an ideal candidate to lead the courts of Region 1. The former chief judge served for over 25 years before being selected to spearhead the trial courts of Wayne County, a job for which Paruk says he is “very energized and excited.” Paruk's experience as a judge and chief judge has already been a valuable tool for his new job. “My role as chief judge and as judge in general has influenced my outlook on the position,” he remarks. As chief judge, Paruk had numerous administrative duties, and those responsibilities

have shaped and honed his skills at the regional level as well. “I’ve been able to see from that perspective what we need, and I’ve been able to bring that over to this side as a regional.”

Paruk plans to put that unique perspective to use to achieve ambitious goals for Region 1. “My goal as a regional is to make the trial courts the best in the nation” and to “make sure we have the very best trial court judges in the state of Michigan,” he says. Region 1 is unique, Paruk notes, because though it has just one probate and one circuit court, they are the largest in the state. Region 1 is also home to the only four municipal courts in Michigan.

To accommodate the unique characteristics of Region 1, Paruk looks to innovative tools as he works toward his goals. The use of technology to “increase efficiency and save money” is one method that Paruk hopes will lead his region to top-level service. Providing trial court judges and administration with education, training, and, most of all, support from its regional leadership are key to achieving this, he notes. Echoing what he learned about serving the community from his father, Paruk declares, “My goal is to be as responsive as possible to the trial courts,” so that he can “offer them as much help and service as we can.”



Jennifer Phillips, Region 6 Administrator

“Busy.” That’s how Jennifer Phillips describes her first several weeks as regional administrator of the newly-formed Region 6. “It’s been a whirlwind of meetings and training,” she adds. Phillips finds this aspect of the job is fulfilling and enjoyable, however, because it provides her with opportunities to interact directly with trial court staff. “I am on the road a lot,” she remarks, “but I love getting out and meeting the judges and administrators.”

Like Paruk, Phillips has family ties to the courts: her father is Judge Carl Marlinga of the Macomb County Probate Court. But Phillips initially had plans to follow a career path that didn’t lead toward the courts. She received her Bachelor of Arts degree in Psychology from Oakland University and had tentative plans to become a psychologist. As Phillips recalls, however, “I began working in law firms and courts as I was going to school and loved the court

environment and really enjoyed the administrative side.” She returned to Oakland University to obtain her Master of Public Administration degree and would later serve as court administrator of the Macomb County Circuit Court. “I couldn’t be more pleased with how my career has turned out,” she remarks.

Phillips carries her “invaluable” trial court administrative experience to her current position. “Having worked in the courts for almost 20 years, I have a good understanding of what makes courts tick and what judges and administrators need, and don't need, to help keep things running smoothly.”

As head of the reorganized administrative region comprised of Oakland, Macomb, St. Clair, and Lapeer counties, Phillips applies her knowledge and familiarity with trial courts to ensure that the entire region operates with efficiency. Of her top priorities, she says, “I'm hoping to have more time in the courts and more availability to the judges and administrators.” The recent reorganization of the administrative regions that resulted in the creation of Region 6 will assist her in attaining this goal, Phillips believes, remarking, “I really think it helps both me and Paul Paruk, the new Region 1 Administrator, to have more time to meet the needs of our regions.”

As she works to facilitate the smooth operations of her region’s courts, Phillips looks forward to partnering with both SCAO staff and her “fellow regionals.” “I already liked and respected a lot of people from SCAO who I met in my time at the trial courts, but I have an even greater appreciation for what many of them do now,” she says, and the other regional administrators “are a talented group...They have helped me tremendously and are willing to help within my region whenever I need back-up.”

Above all, Phillips aspires to uphold the “faith and trust” that has been placed in her. “I want the courts to know they are in good hands and we are here to support them.”

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