



IN THE  
**Indiana Supreme Court**

Supreme Court Case No. 22S-JD-390

In the Matter of the Honorable  
Jeffrey F. Meade, Judge of the  
Gibson Circuit Court,  
*Respondent.*

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Decided: January 12, 2023

Judicial Discipline Action

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**Per Curiam Opinion**

Chief Justice Rush and Justices Massa, Slaughter, Goff, and Molter concur.

## **Per curiam.**

We find that Respondent—the Honorable Jeffrey F. Meade, Judge of the Gibson Circuit Court—engaged in judicial misconduct by making intemperate comments from the bench; by holding an off-the-record, unrecorded child-in-need-of-services (“CHINS”) hearing in which he ruled on various substantive motions; and by failing to provide all parties to those CHINS proceedings with sufficient notice, an opportunity to be heard, and an opportunity to fairly participate in the hearing. Not only were Respondent’s actions prejudicial to the administration of justice in those specific cases, but they also damaged the public’s confidence in the integrity and impartiality of the judiciary more generally. For the reasons set forth below, we agree with the parties that Respondent’s misconduct warrants a seven-day unpaid suspension from office.

This matter is before us on the Indiana Commission on Judicial Qualifications’ (“Commission”) “Notice of the Institution of Formal Proceedings and Statement of Charges” (“Complaint”) against Respondent. Contemporaneously with the filing of charges, the parties tendered a “Statement of Circumstances and Conditional Agreement for Discipline” in which they stipulated to the following facts.

## **Background and Stipulated Facts**

Respondent was admitted to the Indiana bar in 2000 and has served as the judge of Gibson Circuit Court since January 1, 2007. At all relevant times, Respondent presided over a general jurisdiction docket that included CHINS, guardianship, paternity, and dissolution cases.

### **A. Intemperate comments from the bench.**

From 2015 until February 2022, Respondent presided over a paternity case, *In re the Paternity of H.L.* During a November 2019 hearing on the parents’ cross-petitions to modify custody, as well as during a December 2020 telephonic conference, Respondent repeatedly made comments about his own divorce and custody proceedings and compared his situation with that of the litigants before him.

During the November 2019 hearing and a hearing in May 2021, Respondent also made disparaging statements to and about the parties, including:

- Telling Father to “be quiet,” “zip it,” to “shut [his] mouth,” and to “shut up,” even after Father apologized and indicated he understood.
- Referring to Father as “Bud,” “Buddy,” “Bro,” and “Man.”
- “And then what you don’t have is, see, you don’t have the child being passed off like a football. Oh, I’ll pick—let me run for ten yards with it because I don’t want that child to go over ten extra—over ten extra yards, and then the handoff.”
- “This is just bullshit. I’m sorry, I’m a farm boy. I was raised—I’m older than you. I was scooping hog shit long before you, man. I’m going to tell you what, this is crap. It stinks. This kind of behavior stinks. Okay?”
- “Now, I’m not playing with this. Okay? This is the 10<sup>th</sup> freaking day of this hearing. Okay? And again I’m not prejudging nothing. I’m going to hear this case out and we’ll let the attorneys do their findings. Okay? But I’m going to tell you what, you best be calling daddy up to get some money coming, I’m telling you that right now, because you have intentionally interfered with this woman’s parenting time. Okay? And it’s going to cost you a bundle. Okay?”
- “This is one of the most egregious, okay, egregious interference of parenting time that I’ve ever seen. Okay? You do not follow my order again you bring your toothbrush, you’re going to be over there for days and weeks and months. Is this crystal for you, man?”

The Commission alleged, and Respondent agrees, that these statements violated Rules 1.2 and 2.8(B) of the Code of Judicial Conduct.

## **B. *Ex parte* and due process violations.**

Beginning in November 2018, Respondent presided over CHINS (and related guardianship) cases involving three siblings (“Children”). In December 2019, Children’s foster parents moved to intervene in the CHINS

cases, with the intention to adopt Children; the motion was granted. In March 2020, Paternal Grandmother moved to intervene and filed for third-party custody, and the court reporter advised the parties that Respondent would consider Grandmother's motion at a May 14, 2020, hearing.

At an April 29, 2020, telephonic attorney conference — attended by counsel for DCS, Foster Parents, Mother, Father, and the CASA Executive Director — Respondent granted a motion for grandparent visitation, over Foster Parents' objection. Over the next two weeks, Grandmother petitioned for guardianship of Children; DCS petitioned for permanency and joinder of the CHINS and guardianship cases; and Foster Parents petitioned to adopt Children.

The May 14, 2020, hearing on Grandmother's motion to intervene was held in Respondent's chambers. Present were Respondent, DCS's counsel, Mother's and Father's counsel, and the CASA Executive Director. Foster Parents' counsel participated through speakerphone. No audio recording or transcript was made of the hearing.

At this hearing, Respondent granted Grandmother's motion to intervene and granted DCS's motion for permanency and joinder. But even after Grandmother was made a party to the case — and despite the fact that she was sitting in the hallway outside the courtroom while the hearing was held — Respondent failed to summon her or otherwise allow her to participate.

Respondent also considered three oral motions at this off-the-record hearing: (1) DCS's motion to dismiss the CHINS case; (2) Mother's motion for Children to have extended visits with Grandmother; and (3) Mother's motion to remove the CASA assigned to the CHINS cases. Respondent gave Foster Parents 14 days to submit a response to DCS's motion to dismiss and, over Foster Parents' objection, granted Mother's motions for extended visitation with Grandmother and to remove the assigned CASA. Respondent denied Foster Parents' request to appear in person and present evidence on the oral motions before Respondent ruled.

After the hearing, Respondent — without Foster Parents' knowledge — asked Mother's counsel to help the court reporter prepare a minute entry

for the hearing. Foster Parents' counsel later communicated to DCS's counsel that she had a different recollection of Respondent's oral rulings, but her proposed changes were not incorporated into the final order.

Nearly two years later, on March 15, 2022, Respondent—through his staff—changed the CCS entry for the May 14, 2020, hearing to assert that it was an “Administrative Event,” not a “Hearing Journal Event.”

## Discussion

“The effectiveness of the judiciary ultimately rests on the confidence that citizens confer on judges. Judges, therefore, must remain vigilant to guard against any actions that erode that public trust.” *Matter of Adams*, 134 N.E.3d 50, 54 (Ind. 2019).

The Commission charges, and Respondent agrees, that his actions violated the following provisions of the Indiana Code of Judicial Conduct:

- Rule 1.1, requiring judges to comply with the law, including the Code of Judicial Conduct;
- Rule 1.2, requiring judges to avoid impropriety and act at all times in a manner promoting public confidence in the judiciary's integrity;
- Rule 2.2, requiring judges to uphold and apply the law and to perform all judicial duties fairly and impartially;
- Rule 2.5, requiring judges to perform judicial and administrative duties competently, diligently, and promptly;
- Rule 2.6, requiring judges to accord to every person who has a legal interest in a proceeding the right to be heard according to law;
- Rule 2.8(B), requiring judges to be patient, dignified, and courteous to litigants; and
- Rule 2.9(A), prohibiting judges from initiating, permitting, or considering *ex parte* communications.

Respondent also agrees that his misconduct was prejudicial to the administration of justice.

The Conditional Agreement notes, as mitigators, that Respondent has accepted responsibility for his conduct and expressed remorse; cooperated with the Commission throughout the investigation; has been receiving

coaching services; and is engaged in counseling services with a therapist. Further, Gibson County recently appointed a new magistrate to serve its Circuit and Superior Courts and to handle many family-law matters. Respondent also has updated the technology in the courtroom and his office to better accommodate remote hearings on the record.

The parties cite no aggravating factors beyond Respondent’s previous discipline; he received caution letters in 2008 and 2010 and completed a deferred resolution in 2017 for what the parties describe as “demeanor issues” and “non-judicious behavior.” But this sole aggravator reveals a troubling pattern of misconduct. This is the fourth time Respondent has been disciplined for intemperate or injudicious behavior during his sixteen years as a judge. He received his first private caution during his second year in office, and the facts giving rise to this complaint began just two years after his most recent discipline concluded. While acknowledging the steps Respondent has taken to remedy his demeanor issues—specifically, completing an eight-session coaching intensive called *Mindful Boundaries for Judicial Officers* and engaging in counseling services—we note that the *Mindful Boundaries* report recommends that Respondent pursue “ongoing coaching at a maintenance level,” while the parties’ proposed discipline imposes no similar requirement.

Respondent’s pejorative remarks to litigants, improper *ex parte* communications, and due process violations “diminish[ ] public confidence in the judiciary” and “erode the public’s perception of the courts as dispensers of impartial justice.” *In re Van Rider*, 715 N.E.2d 402, 404 (Ind. 1999). However, we cannot overlook the fact that we are considering this matter following the parties’ submission of a conditional agreement. *In re Koethe*, 922 N.E.2d 613, 616 (Ind. 2010). Such agreements are often the product of lengthy negotiations and may merit a less severe sanction than might otherwise be imposed after a trial on the merits. *Id.* at 616; *see also In re Young*, 943 N.E.2d 1276, 1280 (Ind. 2011).

“The purpose of judicial discipline is not primarily to punish a judge, but rather to preserve the integrity of and public confidence in the judicial system and, when necessary, safeguard the bench and public from those who are unfit.” *In re Hawkins*, 902 N.E.2d 231, 244 (Ind. 2009). The sanction

must be designed to deter similar misconduct and assure the public that judicial misconduct will not be condoned. *Id.*

The Commission and Respondent agree that an appropriate sanction for his misconduct is a seven-day suspension without pay. “A suspension from office without pay, regardless of duration, is not a minor sanction. Even more than a public reprimand, any such suspension is a significant blemish on a sitting judge’s reputation.” *Hawkins*, 902 N.E.2d at 246.

We agree that this suspension is warranted in light of Respondent’s misconduct. The Court therefore orders that Jeffrey F. Meade shall be suspended from the office of Judge of the Gibson Circuit Court without pay for seven (7) days commencing at 12:01 a.m. on January 30, 2023. The suspension shall terminate and the Judge shall automatically be reinstated to office at 12:01 a.m. on February 6, 2023.

With this opinion, we terminate the disciplinary proceedings relating to the circumstances giving rise to this case. Because this action was dismissed without a hearing and without a finding of misconduct by a panel of Masters, Respondent will not be assessed costs. *See* Ind. Admis. Disc. R. 25(IV).

Rush, C.J., and Massa, Slaughter, Goff, and Molter, JJ., concur.

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