

Judicial Department Reverses Course, Releases Staff Salaries After Nerve story

Published: Monday, 30 November 2020 09:19

By Rick Brundrett - The Nerve

Less than three hours after The Nerve revealed Friday that the S.C. Judicial Department was [keeping secret](#) the salaries of department employees making at least \$50,000 annually, the agency released a list of 300 staffers in that group, including judges.

Department public information director Ginny Jones provided the list without explanation to The Nerve late Friday afternoon. In a follow-up written reply, The Nerve requested who in the department made the final decision to provide the records, and the department's reasoning in reversing its prior refusal to publicly release the salaries.

No response was received by publication of this story.

In earlier denying The Nerve's formal request under the state Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) for salary records, Jones in a written response said the S.C. Supreme Court – the state's top court – has “never held that the Judicial Branch's internal records may be released to the public,” and that court system's “longstanding practice has been that internal records will not be made available to the public.”

Yet, as The Nerve pointed out, the department – the third branch of state government – is a taxpayer-funded state agency, and that the exact pay of a public employee making at least \$50,000 yearly is considered a public record under the [FOIA](#).

Unlike many other state agencies, the Judicial Department is not included in the [state salary database](#) maintained by the S.C. Department of Administration.

In a written statement for Friday's story, which was published about 2 p.m., Taylor Smith, an attorney for the South Carolina Press Association, said the department's “failure to provide the salary information requested in this instance is a violation of state law and harms the public's understanding of the performance of public officials within the Department.”

The salary list, which was released by Jones about 4:40 p.m. Friday, shows the names, titles and base annual salaries of department employees making \$50,000 or more a year. A total of 300 staffers are listed; the overall number of department employees wasn't provided, though the most recent state budget authorizes 640 total positions, including judges.

S.C. Supreme Court Chief Justice Donald Beatty – the administrative head of the Judicial Department – is the state's top-paid judge. His base annual salary, according to the salary list, is \$212,160 – \$4,160 higher than his base pay after he convinced state lawmakers in 2019 to give himself and other judges a [33% pay raise](#).

The four other Supreme Court justices – John Few, Kaye Hearn, George James and John

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Kittredge – receive a base salary of \$202,057 according to the list.

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James Lockemy, the chief judge of the S.C. Court of Appeals – the state’s second-highest court – makes a base \$200,036 annually, while that court’s eight other associate judges – John Geathers, Blake Hewitt, D. Garrison Hill, Thomas Huff, Aphrodite Konduros, Stephanie McDonald, Paula Thomas and Bruce Williams – receive a base \$197,005, the list shows.

There are 49 circuit and 60 family court seats under state law. The salary list shows 46 circuit judges each making a \$191,954 base annual salary, and 59 family court judges receiving a base \$186,902.

Under state law, legislators establish the salaries of the Supreme Court chief justice and associate Supreme Court justices; pay for Court of Appeals, circuit and family court judges is based on set formulas, which means that they all benefit at the same time from pay hikes. Judges are the highest-paid Judicial Department employees, according to the salary list.

The Legislature elects Supreme Court, Court of Appeals, administrative law, circuit and family court judges. South Carolina and Virginia are the only states where their legislatures play primary roles in electing judges.

Judges aren’t the only well-paid employees in the S.C. Judicial Department. The salary list provided to The Nerve shows 11 other staffers receiving base annual salaries of at least \$100,000. Another 43 employees are in the \$75,000-\$99,000 range, and 127 workers make at least \$50,000 to \$74,000.

The higher-paid staffers include lawyers as well as technology and other support services employees. Several work in the Office of Disciplinary Counsel, an arm of the Supreme Court that investigates ethics complaints against judges and lawyers.

As The Nerve previously [revealed](#), no appellate, administrative law, circuit or family court judges from fiscal 2015 through fiscal 2019 received any public sanctions for ethics violations, despite hundreds of complaints that collectively were filed during the period involving those categories of judges.

Following is a list of the 25 top-paid Judicial Department employees, other than judges, according to the salary list provided to The Nerve:

- Daniel Shearouse, clerk of the Supreme Court: \$139,322;
- Tonnya Kohn, state court administrator: \$139,322;
- John Nichols, disciplinary counsel: \$139,322;
- Christopher Haley, information technology director: \$132,600;
- Joel Hilke, IT security architect: \$118,162;
- Jenny Kitchings, clerk of the Court of Appeals: \$113,300;

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Published on Monday, 30 November 2020 09:10

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- Paul Magarolo, fiscal services director: \$113,300;
- Georgette Rivers, human resources director: \$113,300;
- Deborah McKeown, commission counsel director: \$113,300;
- Dawn Przirembel, general counsel to the chief justice: \$104,787;
- Christina Newhouse, deputy director, IT infrastructure operations: \$100,000;
- Carey Markel, deputy disciplinary counsel: \$99,681;
- Brenda Shealy, chief deputy clerk, Supreme Court: \$98,520;
- Rebecca Hunter, chief staff attorney, Supreme Court: \$98,520;
- Claire Allen, chief deputy clerk, Court of Appeals: \$98,520;
- Patricia Howard, chief staff attorney, Court of Appeals: \$98,520;
- Robert McCurdy, deputy director, trial court services: \$98,520;
- Karama Bailey, deputy director, court reporting: \$98,520;
- Margaret McGee, deputy clerk, S.C. Bar admissions: \$98,520;
- Carla Spires, deputy director, fiscal services: \$98,520;
- Gwendolyn Watson, deputy director, human resources: \$98,520;
- Steven Fagan Jr., IT applications development manager: \$95,000;
- William White II, IT infrastructure services manager: \$94,230;
- Julie Boland, procurement and asset senior manager: \$89,943;
- Teresa Gosnell, IT applications administration manager: \$88,439

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