

## **Subject: Experience, Qualification, and the Purpose of the Orphans' Court**

Dear Members of the Task Force,

Thank you for the time and care you have devoted to studying the structure and future of Maryland's Orphans' Courts. As a **current judge on the Orphans' Court for Allegany County**, I appreciate the opportunity to offer a brief perspective for your consideration before your final meeting.

I recognize that the task before you—examining the composition, qualifications, and best practices for fiduciary adjudication—is a significant one. In reviewing the materials circulated by the task force, I noted that judges were categorized primarily by formal educational attainment. On that list, my background appears as “high school diploma,” placing me among the lay judges. While factually accurate, that designation does not fully reflect the training, experience, or preparation many judges bring to the Orphans' Court.

I grew up in foster care and was living independently by the age of sixteen, without access to traditional academic pathways. Despite that, I spent nearly twenty years with **Maryland Legal Aid** as a **legal assistant**, where I handled cases and represented clients in **administrative hearings and administrative appeal hearings**. My work included conducting investigations, developing case theory, preparing evidence, and advocating for clients in formal adjudicatory settings. This work was supported by rigorous initial and ongoing training through Maryland Legal Aid, including an intensive residential training program and continual professional education throughout my tenure.

Following that experience, I founded and operated a successful business with two locations, gaining practical expertise in fiduciary responsibility, contracts, compliance, and financial oversight—skills that arise frequently in estate and probate matters. I did not arrive on the Orphans' Court without preparation; I arrived with decades of applied legal and fiduciary experience.

I fully agree that education and formal credentials are important considerations. I would respectfully suggest, however, that the task force's mandate—to examine the *purpose* and *composition* of the Orphans' Court and to recommend improvements—also requires careful attention to **Maryland's regional diversity**. Courts in Baltimore City and central Maryland operate in legal, economic, and practical environments that differ substantially from those in rural Western Maryland and other outlying jurisdictions.

Structural solutions or qualification requirements that may function well in urban jurisdictions do not always translate cleanly—or equitably—to smaller or rural communities. A move toward uniformity, particularly one that narrows pathways to service, risks unintended consequences, including reduced accessibility, diminished local knowledge, and the loss of capable judicial officers whose qualifications are grounded in experience rather than traditional academic trajectories.

The historical strength of the Orphans' Court has been its ability to reflect the communities it serves while maintaining fidelity to the law. As the task force considers possible structural consolidation or heightened credentialing requirements, I hope it will do so with sensitivity to regional variation and with an appreciation for the value of diverse professional and life experiences in judicial service.

Thank you for your work and for considering this perspective as you finalize your recommendations.

Respectfully,

**Penny Lyn Walker**

Judge, Orphans' Court

Allegany County, Maryland