

Superior Court Chief Judge Appointed for a Second Term



District of Columbia Superior Court Chief Judge Lee Satterfield will serve a second four-year term as head of the city's local trial court, according to a release today from the District of Columbia Judicial Nomination Commission.

Satterfield, who was appointed chief judge in 2008, was unchallenged in his bid for a second term. In a written statement released this morning, he said that he is "gratified that the Commission has shown its continued confidence in my skills and leadership as chief judge."

"This job is not an easy one, but it is incredibly rewarding to be able to improve the administration of justice and the services and programs we offer the residents of my hometown," he said. "With the incredibly talented judiciary and court managers at the Superior Court, I am confident that we can continue to make improvements to a court that is already one of the best in the country."

Satterfield, in a statement submitted to the commission in May as part of his application, said that one of his top priorities is to make the court more "user-friendly." At a public forum earlier this month, Satterfield explain that this could mean anything from bringing down the time it takes for judges to resolve cases to changing scheduling so litigants don't waste time waiting at court.

A native Washingtonian, Satterfield joined the court in 1992. Before his nomination, he was an assistant U.S. attorney in Washington from 1984 to 1988, a private practice lawyer with Sachs, Greenbaum & Taylor from 1988 to 1991 and, finally, a trial attorney at the U.S. Department of Justice in the year leading up to his appointment.

Satterfield was presiding judge of the family division in 2001 and then served as the first presiding judge of the Family Court after Congress enacted the Family Court Act in early 2002, a position he held until late 2005.

In 2008, he replaced now-Senior Judge Rufus King III as chief judge. Satterfield first applied to be chief in 2000, but King was selected to serve the first of his two terms at the time instead.

The commission, a seven-person body led by U.S. District Chief Judge Emmet Sullivan, recommends applicants for Superior Court and District of Columbia Court of Appeals judgeships to the White House and appoints the chief judges of both courts. Judges are nominated by the president and confirmed by the U.S. Senate, but the commission has the final say on designating the chief judges.

Other commission members are Venable partner Karl Racine, Dickstein Shapiro partner Woody Peterson, Leftwich & Ludaway partner Natalie Ludaway, the Rev. Morris Shearin Sr., AFL-CIO Vice President William Lucy, and Morgan, Lewis & Bockius partner Grace Speights.

The commission, in a release about Satterfield's redesignation, noted "significant improvements to the Court's operations under Chief Judge Satterfield's leadership," including the expansion of the community courts model citywide – a system where judges are assigned misdemeanor cases based on where the alleged offenses took place – and the creation of "juvenile drop-in centers," which offer an alternative to detention for young offenders.

Satterfield has also pushed to make the court friendlier for litigants without a lawyer. He oversaw a change to the Code of Judicial Conduct that gives judges more leeway to make sure pro se litigants understand court proceedings. Earlier this month, he adopted a new order allowing temporary pro bono representation for low-income litigants in two of the highest-volume civil division calendars, small claims and debt collections.

At the public forum hosted by the commission earlier this month, Satterfield did field complaints about ongoing concerns with court operations and policy. Representatives of the Council for Court Excellence, a local nonprofit court watchdog, pressed Satterfield about why the court wasn't releasing more data on case management and performance. Satterfield said that some of that data, especially about specific judges, couldn't be public, but that they were working on releasing more general numbers.

Time has been another major concern. Satterfield acknowledged that the court could do better at resolving cases more quickly and also at taking a different approach to scheduling that would cut down on the time litigants spend in court waiting for their case to be called.

The commission expressed its confidence in Satterfield, praising his "extensive experience and exceptional abilities."

"Satterfield is widely respected by colleagues, court staff, litigants, attorneys, public officials, and other members of the community, and he has been recognized and lauded for his leadership, intellect, temperament, integrity, commitment, and vision," the commission said.

Satterfield's new term will begin Oct. 1.

National Law Journal photo by Diego M. Radzinski.