

House Bill 126 (AS PASSED HOUSE AND SENATE)

By: Representatives Willard of the 51st, Meadows of the 5th, Oliver of the 82nd, Kelley of the 16th, Coomer of the 14th, and others

A BILL TO BE ENTITLED
AN ACT

1 To amend Chapter 1 of Title 15 of the Official Code of Georgia Annotated, relating to
2 general provisions for courts, so as to change provisions relating to the Judicial
3 Qualifications Commission; to expand the membership of the commission and provide for
4 panels; to provide for duties and responsibilities; to provide for appointment of members,
5 filling of vacancies, and confirmation; to provide for definitions; to provide for rules; to
6 provide for confidentiality and exceptions; to amend Code Section 15-9-2.1 of the Official
7 Code of Georgia Annotated, relating to appointment, compensation, term, authority,
8 qualifications, training, and other limitations of associate probate court judges, so as to
9 change provisions relating to the practice of law outside of serving as an associate probate
10 court judge; to provide for a short title; to provide for related matters; to repeal conflicting
11 laws; and for other purposes.

12 BE IT ENACTED BY THE GENERAL ASSEMBLY OF GEORGIA:

13 style="text-align:center">**PART I**

14 style="text-align:center">**SECTION 1-1.**

15 Part I of this Act shall be known and may be cited as "The Judicial Qualifications
16 Commission Improvement Act of 2017."

17 style="text-align:center">**SECTION 2-2.**

18 Chapter 1 of Title 15 of the Official Code of Georgia Annotated, relating to general
19 provisions for courts, is amended by revising Code Section 15-1-21, relating to the creation
20 of the Judicial Qualifications Commission, powers, composition, appointment, term, removal
21 of members, procedures, and confidentiality, as follows:

22 "15-1-21.

23 (a) Pursuant to Article VI, Section VII, Paragraph VI of ~~Section VII of Article VI~~ of the
24 Constitution, there is hereby created the Judicial Qualifications Commission, which shall

25 have the power to discipline, remove, and cause involuntary retirement of judges in
 26 accordance with such Paragraph. As used in this Code section, the term 'commission'
 27 means the Judicial Qualifications Commission.

28 (b) The ~~Judicial Qualifications Commission~~ commission shall consist of ~~seven~~ ten
 29 members who shall be subject to confirmation by the Senate.

30 (c) From January 1, 2017, until June 30, 2017, the members of the commission shall be
 31 as follows:

32 (1) Two judges of any court of record, appointed by the Supreme Court;

33 (2) One member of the State Bar of Georgia who shall have been an active status
 34 member of the State Bar of Georgia for at least ten years and shall be a registered voter
 35 of this state, appointed by the President of the Senate from a list of at least ten nominees
 36 from the board of governors of the State Bar of Georgia; provided, however, that if a
 37 nominee is not selected from such list, the board of governors shall submit another slate
 38 of ten nominees;

39 (3) One member of the State Bar of Georgia who shall have been an active status
 40 member of the State Bar of Georgia for at least ten years and shall be a registered voter
 41 of this state, appointed by the Speaker of the House of Representatives from a list of at
 42 least ten nominees from the board of governors of the State Bar of Georgia; provided,
 43 however, that if a nominee is not selected from such list, the board of governors shall
 44 submit another slate of ten nominees;

45 (4) One citizen member, who shall be a registered voter of this state but shall not be a
 46 member of the State Bar of Georgia, appointed by the Speaker of the House of
 47 Representatives;

48 (5) One citizen member, who shall be a registered voter of this state but shall not be a
 49 member of the State Bar of Georgia, appointed by the President of the Senate; and

50 (6) One member of the State Bar of Georgia, who shall have been an active status
 51 member of the State Bar of Georgia for at least ten years and shall be a registered voter
 52 of this state, appointed by the Governor to serve as chairperson of the commission.

53 ~~(d) From July 1, 2017, through December 31, 2020, the members of the commission shall~~
 54 ~~be as follows:~~

55 ~~(1) Two judges of any court of record, appointed by the Supreme Court;~~

56 ~~(2) One member of the State Bar of Georgia who shall have been an active status~~
 57 ~~member of the State Bar of Georgia for at least ten years and shall be a registered voter~~
 58 ~~of this state, appointed by the President of the Senate from a list of at least ten nominees~~
 59 ~~from the board of governors of the State Bar of Georgia; provided, however, that if a~~

60 nominee is not selected from such list, the board of governors shall submit another slate
61 of ten nominees;

62 ~~(3) One member of the State Bar of Georgia who shall have been an active status~~
63 ~~member of the State Bar of Georgia for at least ten years and shall be a registered voter~~
64 ~~of this state, appointed by the Speaker of the House of Representatives from a list of at~~
65 ~~least ten nominees from the board of governors of the State Bar of Georgia; provided,~~
66 ~~however, that if a nominee is not selected from such list, the board of governors shall~~
67 ~~submit another slate of ten nominees;~~

68 ~~(4) One citizen member, who shall be a registered voter of this state but shall not be a~~
69 ~~member of the State Bar of Georgia, appointed by the Speaker of the House of~~
70 ~~Representatives;~~

71 ~~(5) One citizen member, who shall be a registered voter of this state but shall not be a~~
72 ~~member of the State Bar of Georgia, appointed by the President of the Senate; and~~

73 ~~(6) One member of the State Bar of Georgia, who shall have been an active status~~
74 ~~member of the State Bar of Georgia for at least ten years and shall be a registered voter~~
75 ~~of this state, appointed by the Governor to serve as chairperson of the commission.~~

76 ~~(e) On and after January 1, 2021, the members of the commission shall serve for a term~~
77 ~~of three years and until their successors are appointed and shall be as follows:~~

78 ~~(1) Two judges of any court of record, appointed by the Supreme Court;~~

79 ~~(2) One member of the State Bar of Georgia who shall have been an active status~~
80 ~~member of the State Bar of Georgia for at least ten years and shall be a registered voter~~
81 ~~of this state, appointed by the President of the Senate from a list of at least ten nominees~~
82 ~~from the board of governors of the State Bar of Georgia; provided, however, that if a~~
83 ~~nominee is not selected from such list, the board of governors shall submit another slate~~
84 ~~of ten nominees;~~

85 ~~(3) One member of the State Bar of Georgia who shall have been an active status~~
86 ~~member of the State Bar of Georgia for at least ten years and shall be a registered voter~~
87 ~~of this state, appointed by the Speaker of the House of Representatives from a list of at~~
88 ~~least ten nominees from the board of governors of the State Bar of Georgia; provided,~~
89 ~~however, that if a nominee is not selected from such list, the board of governors shall~~
90 ~~submit another slate of ten nominees;~~

91 ~~(4) One citizen member, who shall be a registered voter of this state but shall not be a~~
92 ~~member of the State Bar of Georgia, appointed by the Speaker of the House of~~
93 ~~Representatives;~~

94 ~~(5) One citizen member, who shall be a registered voter of this state but shall not be a~~
95 ~~member of the State Bar of Georgia, appointed by the President of the Senate; and~~

96 ~~(6) One member of the State Bar of Georgia, who shall have been an active status~~
 97 ~~member of the State Bar of Georgia for at least ten years and shall be a registered voter~~
 98 ~~of this state, appointed by the Governor to serve as chairperson of the commission.~~

99 (d) Effective July 1, 2017, the commission shall be reconstituted. The members serving
 100 on the commission immediately prior to July 1, 2017, shall cease to serve on that date, but
 101 such prior members shall be eligible for reappointment to succeed themselves or to fill
 102 another position on the commission as further set forth in subsection (f) of this Code
 103 section. The powers, functions, and duties of the former commission with regard to the
 104 investigation, discipline, removal, and involuntary retirement of judges are transferred to
 105 the commission created effective July 1, 2017; provided, however, that the formal advisory
 106 opinions, pending and former complaints and disciplinary actions, records, orders,
 107 contracts, agreements with judges, and rules of the former commission shall be retained by
 108 the commission created effective July 1, 2017. Appropriations to the former commission
 109 for functions transferred to the commission created effective July 1, 2017, shall be
 110 transferred to the commission created effective July 1, 2017, as provided for in Code
 111 Section 45-12-90. Personnel previously employed by the former commission and the
 112 equipment and facilities of the former commission for functions transferred to the
 113 commission created effective July 1, 2017, shall likewise be transferred to the commission
 114 created effective July 1, 2017.

115 (e)(1) Effective July 1, 2017, the commission shall be divided into a seven-member
 116 investigative panel and a three-member hearing panel.

117 (2) The investigative panel shall be responsible for:

118 (A) The investigative, prosecutorial, and administrative functions of the commission;

119 (B) Promulgating rules of the commission as set forth in subsection (j) of this Code
 120 section;

121 (C) The selection of an individual to serve as the director of the commission who shall
 122 be an active status member of the State Bar of Georgia and who shall not engage in the
 123 practice of law, other than to represent the commission, or serve in a judicial capacity;
 124 and

125 (D) Authorization of employment of such additional staff as the commission deems
 126 necessary to carry out the powers assigned to the commission.

127 (3) The hearing panel shall be responsible for:

128 (A) Adjudicating formal charges filed by the investigative panel;

129 (B) Making recommendations to the Supreme Court as to disciplinary and incapacity
 130 orders; and

131 (C) Issuing formal advisory opinions on its own initiative or on the recommendation
132 of the investigative panel, subject to review by the Supreme Court, regarding the
133 Georgia Code of Judicial Conduct.

134 (f)(1) As used in this subsection, the term:

135 (A) 'Attorney' means a lawyer who has been an active status member of the State Bar
136 of Georgia for at least ten years and is a registered voter in this state.

137 (B) 'Citizen' means an individual who is neither an attorney nor a judge and who is a
138 registered voter in this state.

139 (C) 'Judge' means an elected or appointed public official who presides over a court of
140 record.

141 (2) The State Bar of Georgia may recommend to the respective appointing authorities a
142 list of the names of individuals for consideration to serve as attorney commission
143 members.

144 (3)(A) The seven members of the commission's investigative panel shall be appointed
145 as follows:

146 (i) One attorney member shall be appointed by the Governor and shall serve a term
147 of four years; provided, however, that the initial appointment shall be for two years,
148 and thereafter, successors to such member shall serve terms of four years;

149 (ii) Two judge members shall be appointed by the Supreme Court and each shall
150 serve terms of four years; provided, however, that the initial appointments shall be for
151 two and four years, respectively, as designated by the Supreme Court for each
152 appointment, and thereafter, successors to such members shall serve terms of four
153 years;

154 (iii) Two members, consisting of one attorney and one citizen, shall be appointed by
155 the President of the Senate and each shall serve terms of four years; provided,
156 however, that the initial appointment of the attorney member shall be for four years
157 and the initial appointment of the citizen member shall be for one year, and thereafter,
158 successors to such members shall serve terms of four years; and

159 (iv) Two members, consisting of one attorney and one citizen, shall be appointed by
160 the Speaker of the House of Representatives and each shall serve terms of four years;
161 provided, however, that the initial appointment of the attorney member shall be for
162 three years and the initial appointment of the citizen member shall be for two years,
163 and thereafter, successors to such members shall serve terms of four years.

164 (B) The investigative panel members shall annually elect a chairperson and vice
165 chairperson for such panel.

166 (4)(A) The three members of the commission's hearing panel shall be appointed as
 167 follows:

168 (i) One citizen member shall be appointed by the Governor for a term of four years
 169 and his or her successors shall serve terms of four years; and

170 (ii) One judge member and one attorney member shall be appointed by the Supreme
 171 Court and each shall serve terms of four years; provided, however, that the initial
 172 appointment of the judge member shall be for three years and the initial appointment
 173 of the attorney member shall be for one year, and thereafter, successors to such
 174 members shall serve terms of four years.

175 (B) The judge member shall serve as the presiding officer of such panel.

176 (5) All members' initial terms shall begin on July 1, 2017, and their successors' terms
 177 shall begin on July 1 following their appointment.

178 (6) A commission member shall be eligible to serve so long as he or she retains his or
 179 her status as an attorney, citizen, or judge, but a vacancy shall be created by operation of
 180 law when he or she no longer has the designation for which he or she was appointed.

181 Any vacancy for a member shall be filled by the appointing authority, and such appointee
 182 shall serve the balance of the vacating member's unexpired term; provided, however, that
 183 if the appointing authority fails to fill a vacancy within 60 days of being notified of such
 184 vacancy by the commission, the Governor shall appoint a replacement member from the
 185 same category of member. Any member of the commission may serve two full terms.
 186 Any member appointed pursuant to subsection (c) of this Code section, for an initial term
 187 as provided by this subsection, or to fill a vacancy may serve an additional two full terms.

188 ~~(f)~~(g)(1) The names of the appointees ~~Any list of nominees~~ required by this Code section
 189 shall be submitted by the appointing authorities to the Senate no later than the third
 190 Monday in January. Any member appointed to the commission shall serve until the
 191 Senate confirms such ~~nominee~~ appointee, and if an individual's name is not submitted by
 192 such deadline, he or she shall not be eligible for ~~appointment~~ confirmation.

193 (2) If an appointee is not confirmed by the Senate, the appointing authority shall
 194 promptly submit another appointee's name, notwithstanding the deadline expressed in
 195 paragraph (1) of this subsection.

196 (3) If the Senate is not in session at the time an appointee's term begins or a vacancy is
 197 created, an appointee for such term or to fill such vacancy shall be effective until his or
 198 her name can be submitted to the Senate and his or her appointment can be confirmed at
 199 the next regular session.

200 (h) Members and staff of the hearing panel shall not engage in any ex parte
201 communications regarding a disciplinary or incapacity matter of a judge, including with
202 members and staff of the investigative panel.

203 (i)(1) Each member of the commission shall be entitled to vote on any matter coming
204 before his or her respective panel unless otherwise provided by rules adopted by the
205 commission concerning recusal. The chairperson of the investigative panel and the
206 presiding officer of the hearing panel shall retain a vote on all matters except those in
207 which such chairperson or presiding officer has been recused. No commission member
208 present at a panel meeting shall abstain from voting unless he or she is recused. The rules
209 of the commission shall establish grounds for recusal and the process for allowing a
210 temporary replacement of a commission member in such circumstance.

211 (2)(A) As used in this paragraph, the term 'for cause' shall include indictment for or
212 conviction of a felony or any offense involving moral turpitude; misconduct,
213 malpractice, malfeasance, misfeasance, nonfeasance, or incapacity; failure to attend
214 three or more panel meetings or hearings in a one-year period without good and
215 sufficient reason; or abstaining from voting, unless recused.

216 (B) Removal of a panel member for cause shall be by a unanimous vote of all of the
217 appointing authorities for the members of that particular panel.

218 (3) A quorum of the investigative panel shall require at least four members to be present
219 and shall consist of at least one judge, one attorney, and one citizen. A quorum of the
220 hearing panel shall require all members to be present. A decision by a panel shall be by
221 majority vote of the members present except for minor procedural or administrative
222 matters assigned to the director, chairperson, or presiding officer, as applicable, for a
223 decision as provided by the rules of the commission.

224 (4)(A) Members of the commission shall serve without compensation but shall receive
225 the same daily expense allowance as members of the General Assembly receive, as set
226 forth in Code Section 28-1-8, for each day such member is in physical attendance at a
227 panel meeting or hearing, plus either reimbursement for actual transportation costs
228 while traveling by public transportation or the same mileage allowance for use of a
229 personal motor vehicle in connection with such attendance as members of the General
230 Assembly receive.

231 (B) Notwithstanding subparagraph (A) of this paragraph, no member shall receive such
232 expense allowance or travel reimbursement if he or she is entitled to receive an expense
233 allowance, travel reimbursement, or salary for performance of duties as a state
234 employee.

235 (C) Expense allowances and travel reimbursement shall be paid from moneys
 236 appropriated or otherwise available to the commission.

237 ~~(g)(j) The investigative panel shall promulgate rules for the commission's The Judicial~~
 238 ~~Qualifications Commission may adopt procedures for its own governance which comport~~
 239 ~~with due process and are not otherwise provided by the Georgia Constitution or this Code~~
 240 ~~section; provided, however, that such procedures shall not allow an individual member to~~
 241 ~~initiate an investigation without presenting such proposal to the other members of the~~
 242 ~~commission at a commission meeting~~ rules shall be effective only upon review and
 243 adoption by the Supreme Court. Such rules shall allow for a full investigation of a judge
 244 only upon the approval of the investigative panel, not upon the request of an individual
 245 panel member or the director. When a commission member receives information relating
 246 to the conduct of a judge, such member shall provide such information to the commission's
 247 director for appropriate action.

248 ~~(h) Members of the commission shall be subject to removal from the commission by an~~
 249 ~~affirmative vote of six members of the commission, with the member who is subject to~~
 250 ~~removal being disqualified from any such vote.~~

251 ~~(i) No person shall serve more than two consecutive terms as a member of the~~
 252 ~~commission; provided, however, that any person appointed pursuant to subsection (c) of~~
 253 ~~this Code section may serve for three consecutive terms as a member of the commission.~~

254 ~~(j) Notwithstanding Chapter 14 of Title 50, unless otherwise waived by the judge involved,~~
 255 ~~all papers filed with and proceedings before the commission, including any investigation~~
 256 ~~that the commission may undertake, shall be confidential, and no person shall disclose~~
 257 ~~information obtained from commission proceedings or papers filed with or by the~~
 258 ~~commission, except as provided in this Code section. Such papers shall not be subject to~~
 259 ~~disclosure under Article 4 of Chapter 18 of Title 50.~~

260 (k)(1) All information regarding a disciplinary or incapacity matter of a judge shall be
 261 kept confidential by the investigative panel and commission staff before formal charges
 262 are filed; provided, however, that if prior to filing formal charges such judge and
 263 investigative panel agree to a satisfactory disposition of a disciplinary matter other than
 264 by a private admonition or deferred discipline agreement, a report of such disposition
 265 shall be publicly filed in the Supreme Court.

266 (2) After the filing and service of formal charges:

267 (A) With respect to an incapacity matter of a judge, all pleadings, information,
 268 hearings, and proceedings shall remain confidential; and

269 (B) With respect to a disciplinary matter of a judge, all pleadings and information shall
 270 be subject to disclosure to the public and all hearings and proceedings shall be open and

271 available to the public except to the extent that such pleadings and information or
 272 hearings and proceedings could be properly sealed or closed by a court as provided by
 273 law.

274 (3) With respect to administrative and other matters, all records and information shall be
 275 subject to disclosure to the public and all meetings, or portions thereof, shall be open and
 276 available to the public except to the extent such records, information, and meetings
 277 would:

278 (A) Disclose disciplinary matters of a judge protected in paragraph (1) of this
 279 subsection;

280 (B) Disclose incapacity matters of a judge protected in paragraph (1) or
 281 subparagraph (A) of paragraph (2) of this subsection;

282 (C) Be considered a matter subject to executive session, if the commission were
 283 considered to be an agency under Chapter 14 of Title 50; or

284 (D) Not be required under Code Section 50-18-72, if the commission were considered
 285 to be an agency.

286 (4) The work product of the commission and its staff and the deliberations of the
 287 commission shall remain confidential.

288 (l) Notwithstanding subsection (k) of this Code section, information regarding a
 289 disciplinary or incapacity matter of a judge may be disclosed or the confidentiality of such
 290 information may be removed, when:

291 (1) The privilege of confidentiality has been waived by the individual who was the
 292 subject of the commission's investigation; or

293 (2) The commission's rules provide for disclosure:

294 (A) In the interest of justice and to protect the public;

295 (B) When an emergency situation exists; or

296 (C) When a judge is under consideration for another state or federal position.

297 ~~(k)(m)~~ Information submitted to the commission or its staff, and testimony given in any
 298 proceeding before the commission or one of its panels, shall be absolutely privileged, and
 299 no civil action predicated upon such information or testimony shall be instituted against
 300 any complainant, witness, or his or her counsel.

301 ~~(l)~~ If, after an investigation is completed, the commission concludes that a letter of caution
 302 is appropriate, it shall issue a letter of caution to the judge in lieu of any further proceeding
 303 in the matter. The issuance of a letter of caution shall be confidential in accordance with
 304 subsection (j) of this Code section.

305 ~~(m)~~ If, after an investigation is completed, the commission concludes that disciplinary
 306 proceedings should be instituted, the notice and statement of charges filed by the

307 ~~commission, along with the answer and all other pleadings, shall remain confidential in~~
308 ~~accordance with subsection (j) of this Code section. Disciplinary hearings ordered by the~~
309 ~~commission shall be confidential, and recommendations of the commission to the Supreme~~
310 ~~Court, along with the record filed in support of such recommendations, shall be~~
311 ~~confidential in accordance with subsection (j) of this Code section. Testimony and other~~
312 ~~evidence presented to the commission shall be privileged in any action for defamation. At~~
313 ~~least four members of the commission shall concur in any recommendation to issue a~~
314 ~~public reprimand against or to censure, suspend, retire, or remove any judge.~~

315 (n) A respondent who is recommended for public reprimand, censure, limitation on the
316 performance of judicial duties, suspension, retirement, or removal shall be entitled to a
317 copy of the proposed record to be filed with the Supreme Court, and if the respondent has
318 objections to it, to have the record settled by the hearing panel's presiding officer. The
319 hearing panel's recommendation as to an order in a disciplinary or incapacity matter shall
320 be reviewed by the Supreme Court in accordance with its rules and the rules of the
321 commission. ~~commission's chairperson. The respondent shall also be entitled to present~~
322 ~~a brief and to argue the respondent's case, in person and through counsel, to the Supreme~~
323 ~~Court. A majority of the members of the Supreme Court voting shall concur in any order~~
324 ~~of public reprimand, censure, suspension, retirement, or removal. The Supreme Court may~~
325 ~~approve the recommendation, remand for further proceedings, or reject the~~
326 ~~recommendation. A member of the commission who is a judge shall be disqualified from~~
327 ~~acting in any case in which he or she is a respondent.~~

328 ~~(n) Upon issuance of a public reprimand, censure, suspension, retirement, or removal by~~
329 ~~the Supreme Court, the notice and statement of charges filed by the commission along with~~
330 ~~the answer and all other pleadings, including the recommendation of the commission to the~~
331 ~~Supreme Court and the record filed in support of such recommendation, shall no longer be~~
332 ~~confidential.~~

333 (o) When a judge knows that he or she is under investigation by the commission and a
334 commission member is representing a party before such judge, the judge shall be
335 disqualified from presiding over such matter. The findings and records of the commission
336 during an open meeting shall not be exempt from disclosure under Article 4 of Chapter 18
337 of Title 50."

338

PART II

339

SECTION 2-1.

340 Code Section 15-9-2.1 of the Official Code of Georgia Annotated, relating to appointment,
 341 compensation, term, authority, qualifications, training, and other limitations of associate
 342 probate court judges, is amended by revising paragraph (1) of subsection (e) as follows:

343 "(1) It shall be unlawful for any full-time associate judge of the probate court to engage
 344 in any practice of law outside his or her role as an associate judge of the probate court;
 345 provided, however, that such prohibition shall not apply when he or she is serving as a
 346 judge advocate general or in any other military role in a reserve component of the United
 347 States Army, United States Navy, United States Marine Corps, United States Coast
 348 Guard, United States Air Force, United States National Guard, Georgia National Guard,
 349 Georgia Air National Guard, Georgia Naval Militia, or the State Defense Force. It shall
 350 be unlawful for any part-time associate judge of the probate court to engage directly or
 351 indirectly in the practice of law in his or her own name or in the name of another as a
 352 partner in any manner in any case, proceeding, or matter of any kind in his or her own
 353 court or in any other court in any case, proceeding, or any other matters of which his or
 354 her own court has pending jurisdiction or has jurisdiction. It shall be unlawful for any
 355 associate judge of the probate court, full-time or part-time, to give advice or counsel to
 356 any person on any matter of any kind whatsoever that has arisen directly or indirectly in
 357 his or her own court, except such advice or counsel as he or she is called upon to give
 358 while performing the duties of an associate judge of the probate court."

359

PART III

360

SECTION 3-1.

361 All laws and parts of laws in conflict with this Act are repealed.