

The Supreme Court of Ohio

MEMORANDUM

To: Chief Justice Sharon L. Kennedy and Justices

CC: Robert W. Horner III, Administrative Director
Gina White Palmer, Deputy Administrative Director, Legal Services
Stephanie Graubner Nelson, Director, Office of Court Services

From: Judge Joyce Kimbler, Chair, Medina County Court of Common Pleas,
General Division
Magistrate Penny Gates, Vice-Chair, Clermont County Court of Common
Pleas, Domestic Relations Division
Marya Kolman, Manager, Dispute Resolution Section

Date: December 30, 2025

Subject: 2025 Annual Report of the Commission on Dispute Resolution

Pursuant to Sup.R. 16.09, Judge Joyce Kimbler, Medina County Court of Common Pleas, General Division, Chairperson of the Commission on Dispute Resolution (“Commission”) and Magistrate Penny Gates, Clermont County Court of Common Pleas, Domestic Relations Division, Vice-Chairperson of the Commission, submit the Commission’s 2025 Annual Report. The Commission thanks the staff of the Dispute Resolution Section, Court Services Division, and the Judicial College for their assistance in the preparation of this report.

Purpose of the Commission on Dispute Resolution

As provided in Sup.R. 16.02, the Commission advises the Supreme Court and its staff on the following:

- 1) Promotion of statewide rules and uniform standards concerning the use of dispute resolution in Ohio courts;
- 2) The development and delivery of dispute resolution education and professional development activities for judges, magistrates, court personnel, attorneys, and court-affiliated dispute resolution professionals;
- 3) The development and delivery of dispute resolution services for disputes arising among county and local public officials throughout Ohio;
- 4) The consideration of any other issues the Commission deems necessary to assist the Supreme Court and its staff regarding the development and delivery of dispute resolution programs and services.

2025 Activities and Accomplishments

The full Commission met by videoconference on March 18, 2025, June 17, 2025, and December 9, 2025. Commission subcommittees and work groups also met by videoconference and telephone throughout the year. The Commission worked with the Dispute Resolution Section as follows during 2025:

Dispute Resolution Education and Training Subcommittee

William Froehlich, chair

- Contract, staff, and volunteer educators conducted seven different rule-based dispute resolution training and education courses for mediators, court personnel, and attorneys over forty-seven training days. These programs included Fundamentals of Mediation, Specialized Family and Divorce Mediation, Domestic Abuse Issues for Mediators, School Attendance Mediation, Child Protection Mediation, Neutral Evaluation, and Parenting Coordination. Additionally, five advanced training programs were held including two half-day advanced programs for parenting coordinators, mediation ethics, and mediating advanced divorce financial issues. There were 401 participants in the rule-based and advanced education and training events.
- Eighteen virtual roundtables were held for court staff and court-connected dispute resolution professionals to share best practices and provide networking opportunities. These included separate roundtables for civil, family, eviction, foreclosure, appellate, school attendance, settlement week, experienced mediators, and parenting coordinators. Each roundtable began with a short educational program presented by a conversation starter followed by a discussion facilitated by the conversation starter and Dispute Resolution Section staff. Roundtable topics included safety guidance for mediators, mediation techniques in challenging cases, working with families where a child is resisting contact with a parent, developing a school attendance mediation program, using technology to improve outcomes in eviction mediation, best practices for settlement weeks and many more. There were 210 participants in the 2025 roundtables.
- Online dispute resolution course modules on the Fundamentals of Mediation, Family and Divorce Mediation, Child Protection Mediation, and Domestic Abuse Issues are available through the Learning Management System administered by the Judicial College. These modules, which are available to court personnel, attorneys, and mediators as well as to training participants, were completed by 2,045 individuals in 2025.
- The subcommittee is in the process of reviewing and updating the training materials for the trainings required by Rule 16.23 of the Rules of Superintendence for the Courts of Ohio.

Government Conflict Resolution Services (“GCRS”) Subcommittee

Garry Hunter, chair

- Dispute Resolution Section staff and contract mediators mediated three GCRS cases with a total of 16 mediation sessions and responded to numerous inquiries about the program. GCRS is a confidential dispute resolution program designed to assist county and local public officials in resolving and preventing conflicts on a wide variety of topics using mediation, facilitation, and neutral evaluation.
- Subcommittee members provided information about the GCRS program to groups of government officials by giving short presentations at their meetings, putting information about the program on association websites and in newsletters, and sharing the GCRS brochure.
- The GCRS subcommittee and the Dispute Resolution Section worked with the Ohio Channel to develop a short informational video about the GCRS program that is posted on the Dispute

Resolution Section website. Subcommittee members and others can show this video at government association meetings and events to promote GCRS.

Policy and Procedure Subcommittee

Judge Karen Phipps, chair

- The Supreme Court announced 2025 as the year of the “Settlement Week Sweep.” Settlement week is a proven and effective case management tool that helps reduce civil and domestic relations case backlogs by establishing a week, or other defined time period, to mediate older cases that appear ready for resolution. Settlement weeks can be beneficial for all involved. The parties have the opportunity to work with an experienced mediator to settle their disputes expeditiously, outside of court, saving the time and expense of going to trial. The court can reduce its caseload and focus on the cases which cannot be resolved, except by trial.
- The Dispute Resolution Section provided training and resources to courts to assist them with their settlement week programs including in-person training for two courts and a virtual roundtable for court staff and mediators. The Section also developed sample forms and documents, which are on the Section website, that courts can adapt and use for their settlement week programs.
- Settlement week information, resources, and sample documents are available on the Dispute Resolution Section website for courts interested in learning more about starting settlement week programs.
- A short informational video about settlement week was developed by the Ohio Channel, with input from the subcommittee and the Dispute Resolution Section. It is on the Section website and is available for courts to use in promoting their settlement weeks.
- The following courts held one or more settlement week programs in 2025 and resolved hundreds of cases: Cuyahoga County Court of Common Pleas, General Division; Delaware County Court of Common Pleas, Domestic Relations Division; Franklin County Court of Common Pleas, Domestic Relations and Juvenile Division; Hamilton County Court of Common Pleas, Domestic Relations Division; Hamilton County Court of Common Pleas, Juvenile Division; Hancock County Court of Common Pleas, Probate and Juvenile Division; Lorain County Court of Common Pleas, Domestic Relations and Juvenile Division; Medina County Court of Common Pleas, Domestic Relations Division; and Summit County Court of Common Pleas, General Division.
- The use of neutral evaluation increased in 2025. Neutral evaluation is an outcome-oriented process in which the parties to a dispute present their claims or defenses and evidence to a neutral third party. The neutral party then shares impressions about the strengths and weaknesses of the case which often promotes settlement. The Dispute Resolution Section developed a toolkit and other resources and provided training to assist courts with their neutral evaluation programs.
- The directory of all local court mediation programs has been updated and expanded and can be accessed through the Dispute Resolution Section website under “Local Courts Contacts for Dispute Resolution.”

Strategic Planning Subcommittee

Maara Fink, chair

- The subcommittee continues to work on a review of the status of mediation and other dispute resolution programs in Ohio twenty-five years after the institutionalization of mediation in Ohio courts.
- The subcommittee began by gathering updated information about current dispute resolution programs in Ohio courts. A survey was sent to court administrators and dispute resolution programs in Ohio courts and 139 courts responded. The survey asked about present programs, past programs that were terminated, and the court's possible interest in additional dispute resolution programs. The survey also asked courts if their mediators are staff, contract, or volunteer mediators.
- During the summer and fall of 2025, the subcommittee held four focus groups that included mediators and court administrators from the original institutionalization of mediation projects and mediators who began mediating more recently.
- The subcommittee is developing recommendations for court-related mediation programs using the information gathered by the survey and the focus groups.
- Additionally, the subcommittee and section staff are working on an initiative to increase the availability of mediators in rural and underserved counties by developing a list of mediators who will mediate, either in-person or virtually, in areas beyond their current practice areas. This resource will be available to courts in early 2026.

School Attendance Subcommittee

Judge Lori Reisinger, chair

- School attendance mediation provides a facilitated problem-solving approach to address chronic absenteeism and truancy in a supportive, non-judgmental way. The goal of the process is to identify the issues or problems that are causing poor attendance and then help the family and the school develop a voluntary plan to improve the student's attendance. The School Attendance Mediation subcommittee and Dispute Resolution Section staff began a successful pilot school attendance mediation program in collaboration with Champaign County Family Court and the Urbana City Schools. This program, which uses virtual mediation, began with Urbana Elementary school in early 2025 and expanded to include Urbana Junior High in the fall of 2025. Forty-two of the 58 students whose families received mediation improved their attendance and avoided receiving court truancy charges. The Dispute Resolution Section provided mediators, training, and resources for the pilot project.
- The pilot project will continue in Champaign County in 2026 and will also be expanded to other counties.
- The subcommittee and Dispute Resolution staff have developed resources and sample forms for courts interested in beginning a school attendance mediation program.
- The subcommittee is collaborating with the Dispute Resolution Education and Training subcommittee to update the school attendance mediation training standards and training materials. They have also piloted a new half-day school attendance mediation training program for experienced mediators who would like to mediate school attendance cases.

Dispute Resolution Section

Marya Kolman, Anne Thompson, and Kevin Lottes, Section staff

- The Dispute Resolution Section staff worked with and assisted the Commission on all the projects listed above.
- The Dispute Resolution Section Manager and Mediation Counsel mediated 32 cases, with a total of 131 mediation sessions, referred to them by the Court. The goal of these mediations was to assist the parties in resolving their conflicts themselves without the need for formal court proceedings. Most of these cases involved public records, state and local tax, and workers' compensation issues and required multiple mediation sessions.
- The Section maintained a national and international presence through membership, leadership, presentations and curriculum development in the Association for Conflict Resolution, the Association of Family and Conciliation Courts, the Ohio Mediation Association, and the American Bar Association Dispute Resolution Section.
- Section staff helped develop or update many of the training programs described above and served as faculty in some of these programs. They also served as conversation starters and facilitators for several section roundtables.