

Ocean County judge faces ethics charges in his own Family Court case in Somerset County

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An ethics complaint has been filed against an Ocean County Superior Court judge for allegedly identifying himself as a judge while trying to resolve his Family Court matter in Somerset County.

SOMERVILLE - An Ocean County Superior Court judge is facing ethics charges for allegedly continuing to mention his judicial standing when he went to the Somerset County Probation office to discuss his child support obligations and the emancipation of a child.

In a complaint issued Monday by the state's Advisory Committee on Judicial Conduct, Superior Court Judge James W. Palmer Jr., who sits in the Civil Division in Ocean County, is charged with violating the rules of judicial conduct by identifying himself as a judge as he tried to resolve a child support matter and the emancipation of a child who is the custody of his ex-wife.

One of those rules states that judges should "avoid lending the prestige of their office to advance a personal interest."

Palmer did not respond to a request for comment.

In March 2011, Palmer and his wife were divorced in Somerset County. At that time, arrangements were made with the Somerset County Probation Division for his payment of child support.

According to the complaint, Palmer, who previously served in the Family and Criminal divisions in Burlington County, came to the Somerset County Courthouse on March 21, 2017 to discuss his child support obligations and the emancipation of the child.

Once he arrived at the Probation office, Palmer introduced himself as "Judge James Palmer" and showed the lanyard around his neck with his judicial identification, according to the complaint.

Palmer then introduced himself to the caseworker on his matter as "Judge Palmer" and mentioned that he sits on the bench in Ocean County.

Palmer and the caseworker began a discussion about whether his ex-wife had mailed a required consent form for the emancipation to the court.

When the caseworker said no form had been received, the complaint said, Palmer got out his cell phone and showed the caseworker a picture of the consent form. The caseworker again said no form had been received.

Palmer also said he also wanted to dispute a cost of living increase increased in his child support obligation because he said he "had not received a raise," the complaint said.

Palmer's annual salary was \$165,000 in 2017, the same as it was in 2010, the year after he joined the bench. He was granted tenure in 2015.

The caseworker told Palmer that he needed to file a motion to contest the increase. Palmer said that he understood what had to be done because he had previously sat in the Family Division.

In a conversation that lasted 20 minutes, the caseworker "repeated several times" what Palmer was required to do to emancipate the child and dispute the support adjustment. Eventually the caseworker called a senior probation officer for assistance.

The senior probation officer repeated what the caseworker had said, and told Palmer that a new law, effective Feb. 1, 2017, required new paperwork for the emancipation.

The senior probation officer then contacted her supervisor to assist Palmer who, according to the complaint, again identified himself as a judge to the supervisor.

The supervisor reviewed Palmer's case file and found that both he and his ex-wife had been notified of the new requirements, but neither had responded.

Palmer continued to say his ex-wife had submitted the proper paperwork, but the supervisor, with the file in front of her, saw no evidence that the ex-wife had done so.

Palmer then told the supervisor that he shouldn't have to pay the increased support "because you voted that I don't get a raise."

Under the law, once Palmer files an an answer to the complaint about what transpired on March 17 last year, a public hearing will be scheduled.

After the hearing the Advisory Committee on Judicial Conduct will recommend to the state Supreme Court what, if any, public discipline should be imposed on a judge. The New Jersey Supreme Court is the only body that can publicly discipline a judge.

The case documents can be found at <http://www.judiciary.state.nj.us/attorneys/acjc.html?lang=eng>.

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