

## Who's In Charge in Your District?

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My middle child is named Charles. The other day I referred to him as [Charles in Charge](#). He asked me why teachers and other adults always called him that. Ah, me. It seems my cultural references are dated.

Regardless of whether you are old enough to have had a Scott Baio poster in your room, if your work involves the courts, it is a good idea to know who is in charge of district court in your district.

**That person is the chief district court judge.** Chief district court judges have administrative supervision and authority over the operation of the district courts and magistrates in their districts. The Chief Justice of the North Carolina Supreme Court [selects chief district court judges](#), who serve at the Chief Justice's pleasure. There are 41 chief district court judges in North Carolina – one for each administrative district.

A list of the current chief district court judges by district is available [here](#). If, like me, you can't keep all those district numbers straight, a map of district court districts is available [here](#).

**Powers and duties.** Many of the powers and duties of chief district court judges are enumerated in G.S. [7A-146](#). They include:

- Arranging schedules and assigning district court judges for sessions of district court, including arranging sessions for the trial of specialized cases and assigning district court judges to promote specialization;
- Arranging or supervising the calendaring of noncriminal matters for trial or hearing;
- Supervising the clerk of superior court in carrying out the clerical functions of district court;
- Assigning matters to magistrates and prescribing times and places for magistrates to be available (or delegating the latter task to another district court judge, the clerk of superior court, or to a chief magistrate appointed for this purpose);
- Assigning magistrates to temporary duty outside of their county of residence during an emergency;
- Designating another district court judge to act as chief district court judge during the absence or disability of the chief district court judge;
- Designating certain magistrates to appoint counsel and accept waivers of counsel;
- Arranging for the drawing of a civil court jury panel; and
- Arranging for the reporting of civil cases.

**Meetings and waiver lists.** Chief district court judges also are required to meet [at least annually](#), upon the call of the Chief Justice, to discuss problems affecting the courts and the improvement of court operations. At this meeting, they must also prepare and adopt uniform schedules of offenses for which magistrates and clerks of court may accept written appearances, waivers of trial or hearing, and pleas of guilty or admissions of responsibility. The schedules referred to in that last item are colloquially termed the [waiver lists](#). Each year at that meeting I tell the chief district court

judges about changes to the waiver lists that have been proposed by state agencies and others or are required by new legislation. It is an annual treat to listen to a group of distinguished jurists discuss the appropriate sanctions for unlawful acts such as the bathing of animals in parks and the taking of menhaden by purse seine net.

**Way cooler stuff.** I know. No one says “way cool” anymore. Alright, then, some of this work is *tight*. (If you don’t know what that means, ask your kids or grandkids.)

Chief district court judges sometimes act as catalysts and conveners in their districts, spurring people from different disciplines to work together on issues affecting justice. This work ranges from coordinating the construction of new facilities like family justice centers, where victims of domestic violence can apply for legal assistance as well as social and health services, to the establishment of therapeutic courts like veterans treatment courts that address underlying health issues that contribute to criminal behavior.

**Recent initiatives.** Last year, Chief District Court Judge J. Corpening (District 5: New Hanover and Pender Counties) convened school officials, law enforcement officers, and other interested parties in New Hanover County to consider the number of juvenile delinquency proceedings arising from allegations that a child misbehaved in school and whether there was a better way to discipline students. The group developed a school-justice partnership program, which requires that schools use a graduated discipline model. Under this model, minor disciplinary matters are addressed at school soon after they occur, rather than through referrals to the court system, a process that incurs inevitable delays and which adds to already crowded courtroom dockets. The Criminal Investigation and Adjudication Committee of the North Carolina Commission on the Administration of Law and Justice has cited New Hanover’s program as a possible way to mitigate the costs of raising the juvenile age to 18. See Criminal Investigation and Adjudication Committee, North Carolina Commission on the Administration of Law and Justice, [Interim Report](#), at 15 (July 2016).

The same year Chief District Court Judge Marcia Morey (District 14: Durham County) spearheaded efforts to create a misdemeanor diversion program for 16- and 17-year olds in her district. Judge Morey partnered with law enforcement departments, schools, and community leaders to launch the program, which provides for a pre-arrest deferral of criminal charges for any 16- or 17-year old first time misdemeanor offender who is alleged to have committed a misdemeanor other than a firearm offense, sex offense, or traffic offense. Ninety-four percent of referrals have culminated in successful completion of the program. Judge Morey shared information about the program with the Criminal Investigation and Adjudication Committee of the North Carolina Commission on the Administration of Law and Justice. You can view the PowerPoint that accompanied her comments [here](#).

**With great power comes great responsibility . . .** and modest pay. Don’t get me wrong. Chief district court judges aren’t complaining. Their salaries, along with those of many other judicial branch officials, were [increased by 4.5% this year](#). Chiefs are paid \$3,780 more than other district court judges (\$120,490 to \$116,710).

Now that you know who is in charge, check out the rad work they are doing in your district.