



**COURT WATCH | DATA REPORT**  
**2023 Q4**

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# Our Mission

Shelby County's criminal legal system is one of the least transparent in the country. We know that injustice thrives in empty courtrooms. To combat that, we launched our court watch program, following the lead of many like it across the country.

We developed a rubric for volunteers to use as a way to help them evaluate judges and the events and processes they see in the courtroom.

Our goal is for everyone to understand what the courtroom environment is like for the average person with a criminal case in Shelby County. We believe that this rubric has helped both volunteers and the community alike understand the way our elected judges conduct themselves in the courtroom.

Although the public has access to court proceedings, it is imperative to acknowledge that a significant portion of the negative and long-lasting effects of these courtroom events occur outside of public view. To promote transparency and accountability, our Court Watch Program Manager and Data Scientist collaborated to produce this report.

The report, which combines court watch and data analysis, provides an overview of the performance of judges in Criminal and General Sessions courts at 201 Poplar Avenue over the last year. It offers rubric excerpts and detailed data insights that provide a more comprehensive understanding of the impact these judges have.

# Our Data

This report is a collaboration between two Just City programs: Court Watch and the newly established Public Data Accountability Project (PDAP), which promotes sharing of Just City data and analysis with journalists, partners, and government leaders. We believe the data in this report should be provided by Shelby County government, and the purpose of this project is to fill that role until they adequately provide it. The backbone of PDAP is Just City's large SQL database which blends together multiple public data sources into one queryable dataset, enabling analyses like that presented in this report. As of September 2023, our data includes granular information on more than 1.3 million cases including jail bookings, bonds, charges, dispositions, and sentences along with demographics of the defendant in each case.

**The Just City Court  
Watch Program  
exists to bring  
transparency and  
accountability to  
our criminal legal  
system.**



# CRIMINAL COURT JUDGES



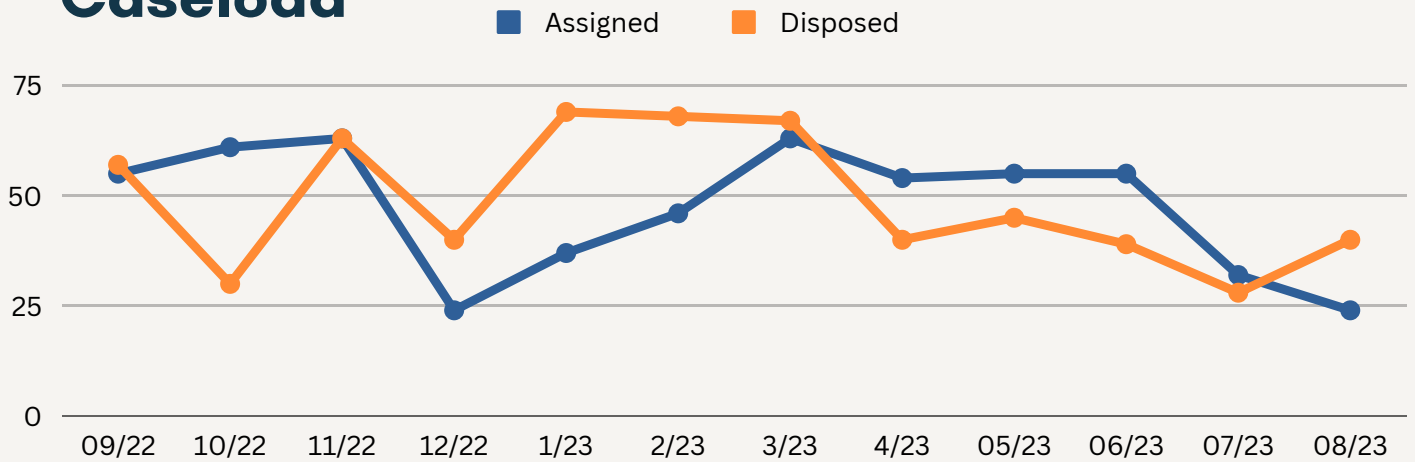
# Judge Paula Skahan | Div I

Before becoming a judge in 2004, Judge Skahan worked on both sides of the criminal justice system, first at the Shelby County Public Defender’s Office as an Assistant Public Defender for one year then as an Assistant District Attorney for three years. She also spent 14 years in private practice.

Judge Skahan performed well in some rubric categories during our initial report but struggled in others. Observers stated that she **consistently appointed public defenders** to people who needed them and had **flawless courtroom access**. However, her scores in the categories of **sensitivity and neutrality fell below average**.



## Caseload



## Case Turnover

34

Judge Skahan oversees an average of **34** cases per day. **32** of those are reset for another date, meaning an average of only two cases are resolved each day. As a result, the average case in this courtroom is resolved in **428** days.

32

Waiting for a dismissal takes even longer—an average of **481** days.

428

481

## Frequent Case Types

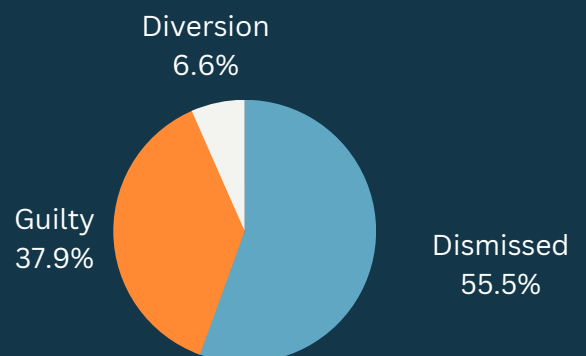
Aggravated Assault (61)

Theft of Property (55)

Fail to Appear in Misdemeanor Case (52)

## Dispositions

Breakdown of charges across 586 disposed cases





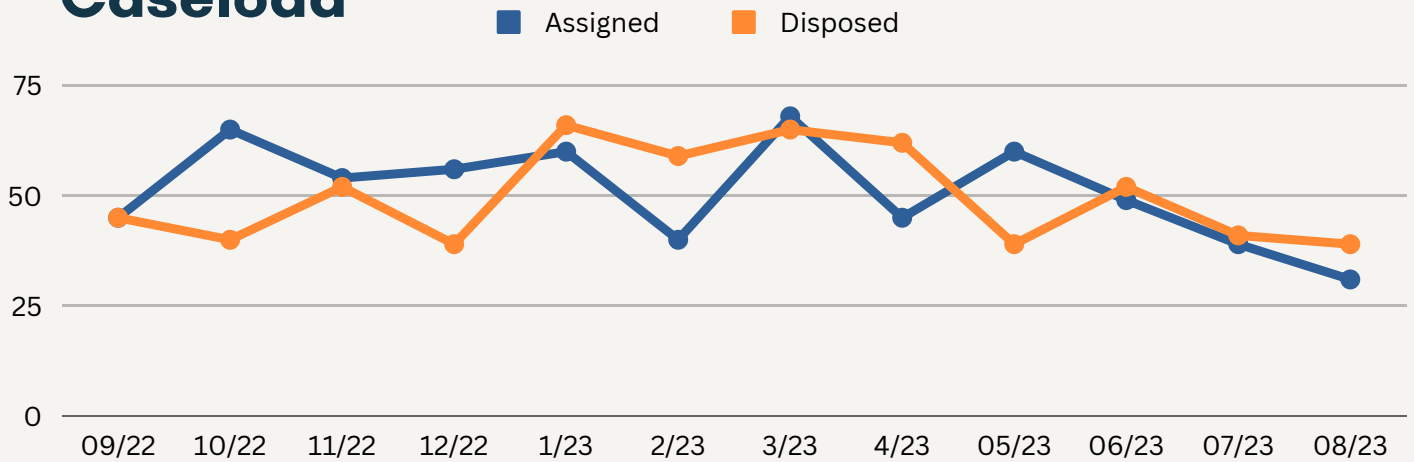
## Judge Jennifer Fitzgerald | Div II

Before beginning her term in 2022, Jenifer Fitzgerald worked in private practice at Fitzgerald, Harris & Fitzgerald as a criminal defense attorney.

Our court watchers have not completed enough rubrics to form a comprehensive summary of her conduct. Judge Fitzgerald's rubric performance results will be published in an upcoming report.



### Caseload



### Case Turnover

41

Judge Fitzgerald oversees an average of **41** cases per day. **39** of those are reset for another date, meaning an average of only two cases are resolved each day. As a result, the average case in this courtroom is resolved in **527** days. Waiting for a dismissal takes even longer - an average of **679** days.

39

527

679

### Frequent Case Types

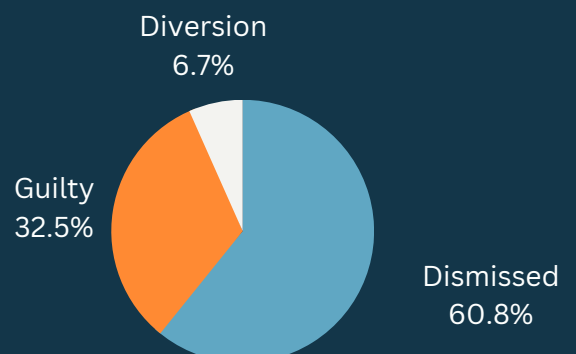
Theft of Property 10,000-60,000 (73)

Aggravated Assault (67)

Theft of Property 2,500-10,000 (43)

### Dispositions

Breakdown of charges across 599 disposed cases





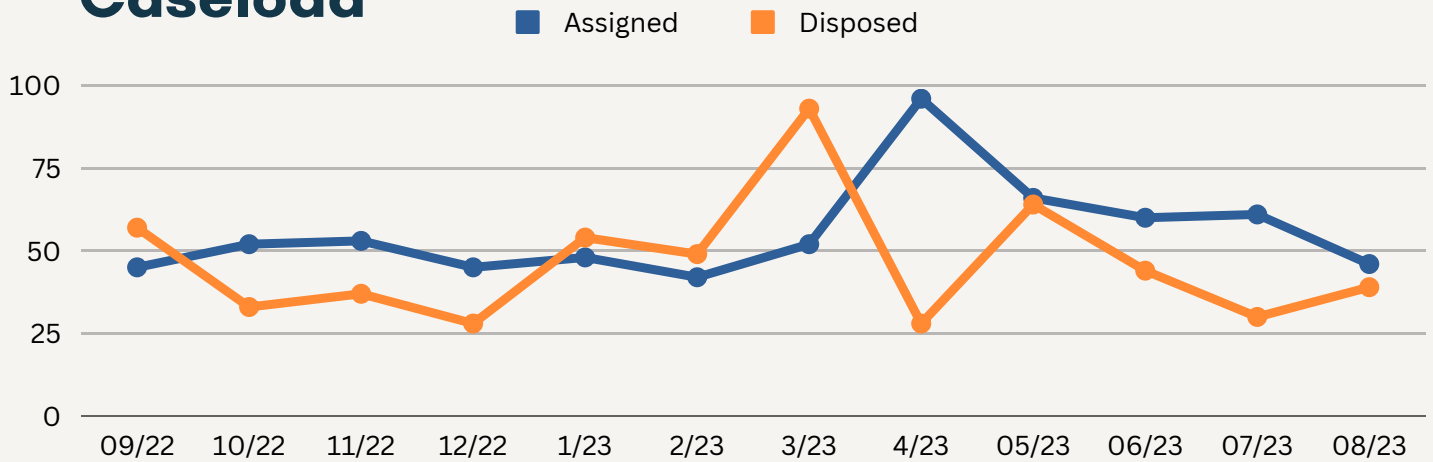
## Judge James Jones | Div III

Before he became a judge in 2022, Judge Jones worked in private practice for about seven years. He also volunteered with Memphis Area Legal Services with the Attorney of the Day program.

Judge Jones' rubric performance results will be published in an upcoming report along with four other newly elected judges.



### Caseload



### Case Turnover

40

Judge Jones oversees an average of **40** cases per day.

38

**38** of those are reset for another date, meaning an average of only two cases are resolved each day. As a result, the average case in this courtroom is resolved in

310

**310** days. Waiting for a dismissal takes even longer – an average of

371

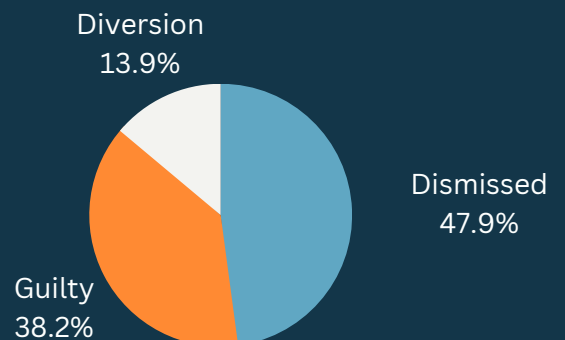
**371** days.

### Frequent Case Types

Aggravated Assault (70)
Theft of Property 10,000–60,000 (60)
Theft of Property 2,500–10,000 (60)

### Dispositions

Breakdown of charges across 574 disposed cases





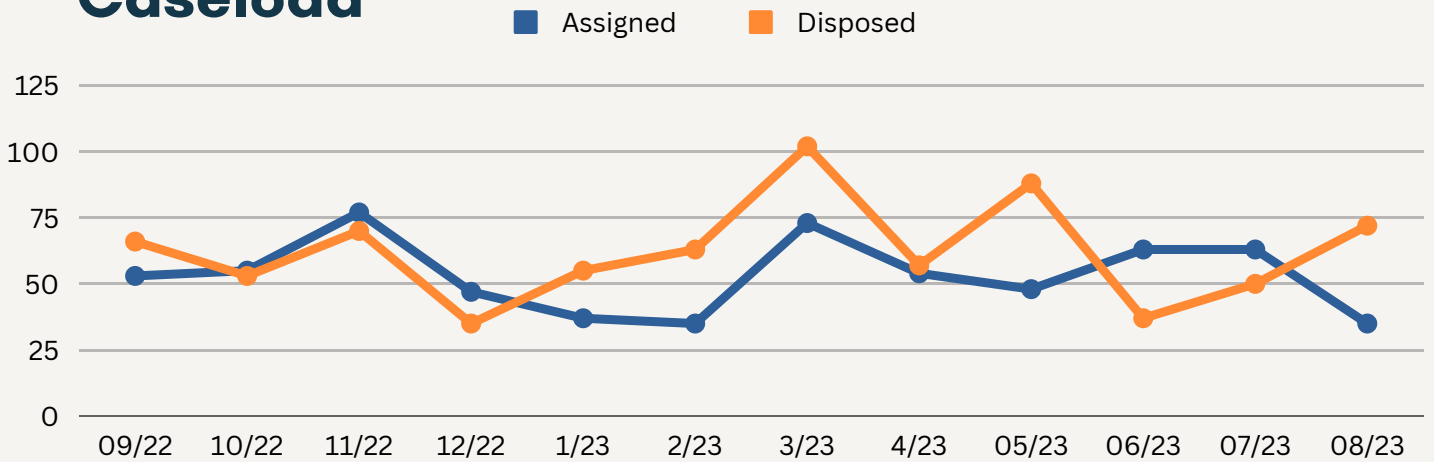
# Judge Carolyn Wade Blackett | Div IV

Judge Blackett practiced in a variety of fields before taking her seat on the bench in 1994. She began at FedEx working in commercial transactions as well as government affairs. She then moved to the Waring Cox Law Firm where she continued work in corporate law until being appointed to her current role.

Judge Blackett's scores are generally average. In the categories of *sensitivity and dignity*, however, she ranks far lower than other judges in this data set. The most commonly cited feedback was that she used *callous language* and consistently *berated the accused rather than moving the docket forward*.



## Caseload



## Case Turnover

38

Judge Blackett oversees an average of **38** cases per day.

35

**35** of those are reset for another date, meaning an average of only three cases are resolved each day. As a result, the average case in this courtroom is resolved in **459** days. Waiting for a dismissal takes even longer - an average of **567** days.

459

567

## Frequent Case Types

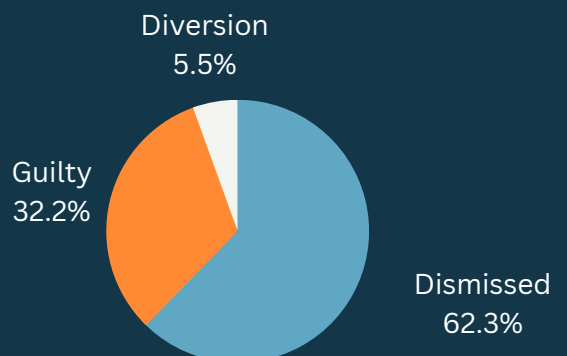
Theft of Property (70)

Fail to Appear in Misdemeanor Case (58)

Aggravated Assault (52)

## Dispositions

Breakdown of charges across 748 disposed cases





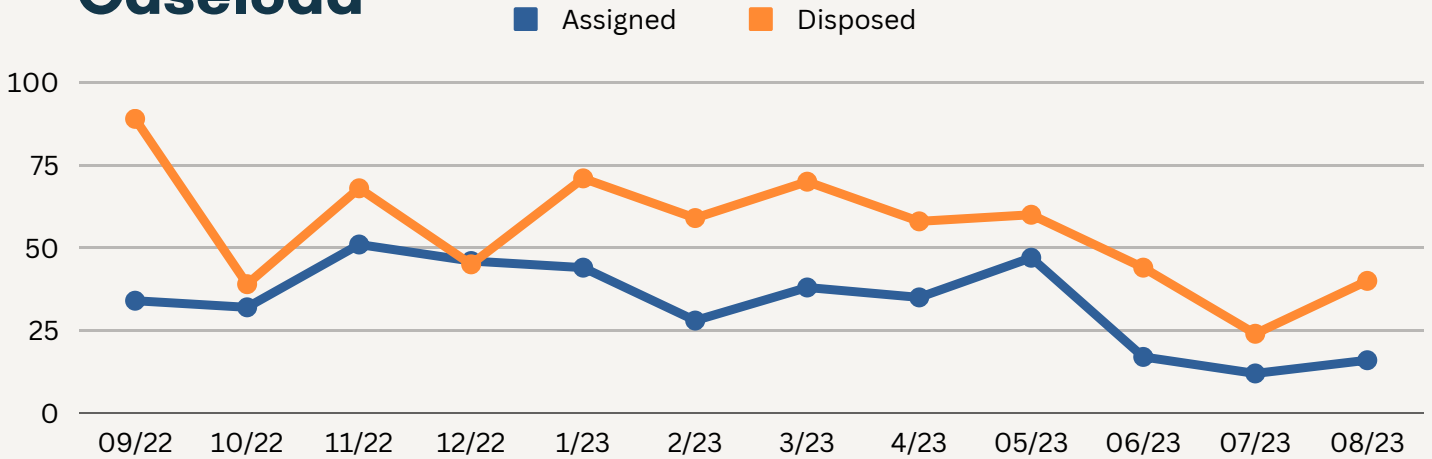
# Judge Carlyn Addison | Div V

Judge Addison spent time as a public defender before becoming a judge. She then went on to work as an environmental court referee and spent nearly eight years as an attorney and magistrate judge with the Juvenile Court of Memphis and Shelby County. She was elected in 2022.

Judge Addison's rubric performance results will be published in an upcoming report along with four other newly elected judges.



## Caseload



## Case Turnover

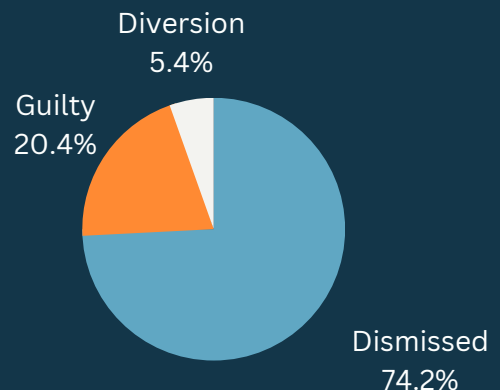
**26** Judge Addison oversees an average of **26** cases per day. **23** of those are reset for another date, meaning an average of only three cases are resolved each day. As a result, the average case in this courtroom is resolved in **364** days. Waiting for a dismissal takes even longer – an average of **376** days.

## Frequent Case Types

Aggravated Assault (132)
Domestic Assault (68)
Aggravated Burglary (29)

## Dispositions

Breakdown of charges across 667 disposed cases





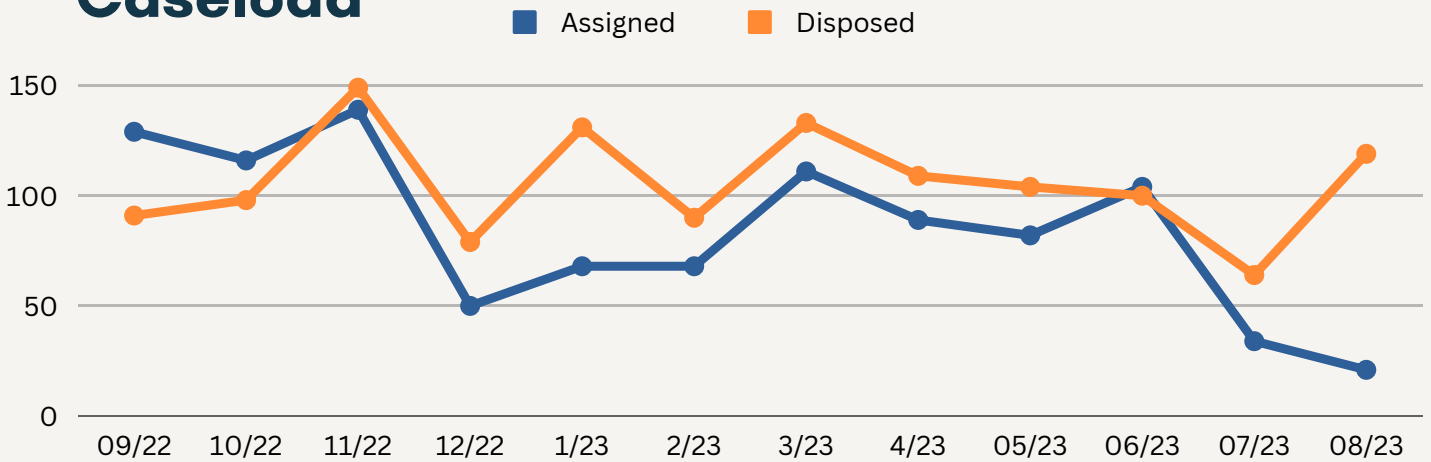
## Judge David Pool | Div VI

Judge Pool worked in private practice at Drexel Chemical Company and eventually at Hudson Ziskind PLLC as an attorney. He also served as a judicial magistrate for several years before his election in 2022.

Our court watchers have not completed enough rubrics to form a comprehensive summary of his conduct. Judge Pool's rubric performance results will be published in an upcoming report.



### Caseload



### Case Turnover

**48** Judge Pool oversees an average of **48** cases per day. **43** of those are reset for another date, meaning an average of only five cases are resolved each day. As a result, the average case in this courtroom is resolved in **327** days. Waiting for a dismissal takes even longer – an average of **432** days.

### Frequent Case Types

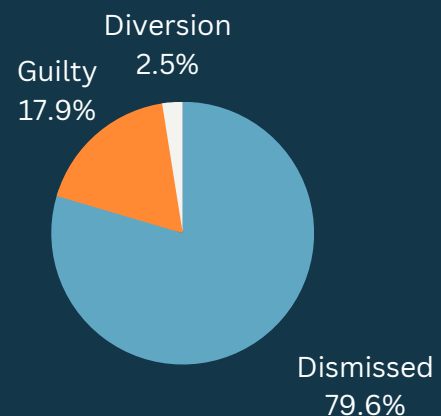
Possession of a Controlled Substance (219)

Possession of Cocaine (137)

Convicted Felon in Possession of a Firearm (103)

### Dispositions

Breakdown of charges across 1,287 disposed cases





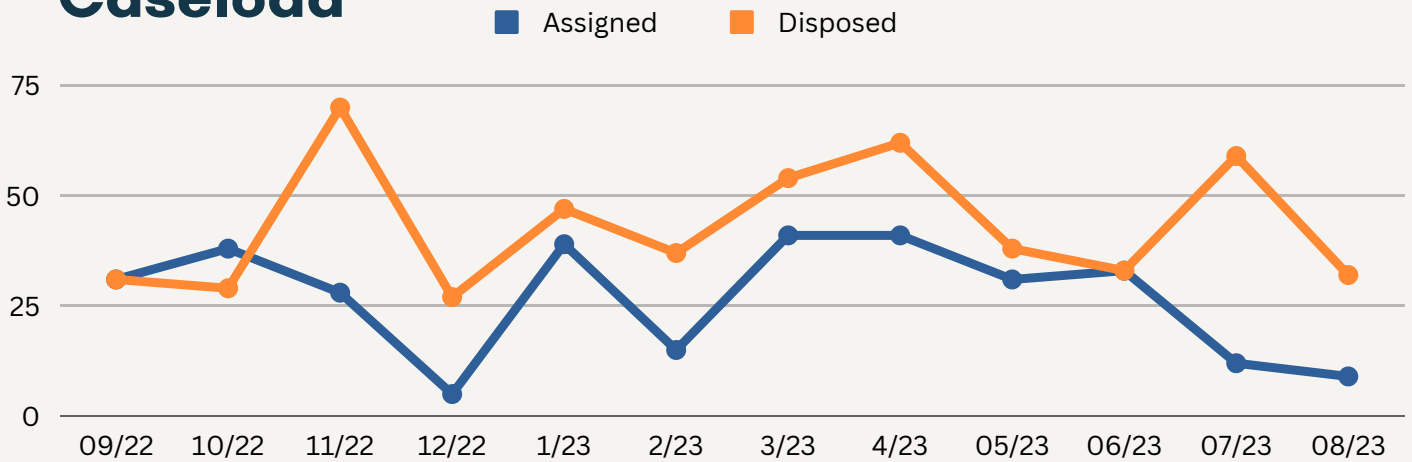
# Judge Lee Coffee | Div VII

Before becoming a judge in 2006, Judge Coffee spent time both as a Shelby County Assistant Public Defender and Assistant District Attorney. He also worked as an Assistant U.S. Attorney for the Western District of Tennessee and as an Assistant District Attorney in Houston, Texas.

Our initial rubric indicated that Judge Lee Coffee outperformed all other judges, receiving the **highest overall score**. However, feedback from the accused and our observers noted his **condescending attitude and mean-spiritedness** during proceedings.



## Caseload



## Case Turnover

38

Judge Coffee oversees an average of **38** cases per day. **36** of those are reset for another date, meaning an average of only two cases are resolved each day. As a result, the average case in this courtroom is resolved in **800** days.

36

Waiting for a dismissal takes even longer - an average of **965** days.

800

965

## Frequent Case Types

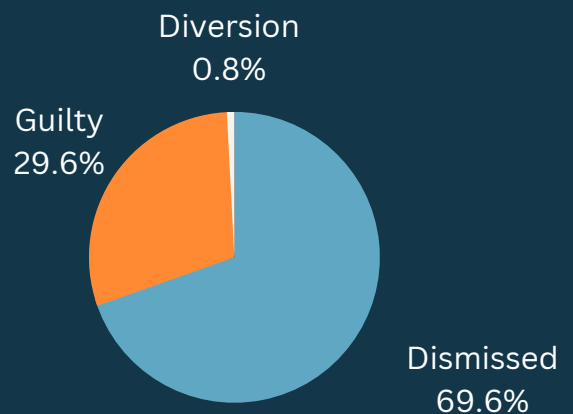
Theft of Property 10,000-60,000 (44)

Unlawful Carrying or Possession of a Weapon (42)

Convicted Felon in Possession of a Firearm (34)

## Dispositions

Breakdown of charges across 519 disposed cases





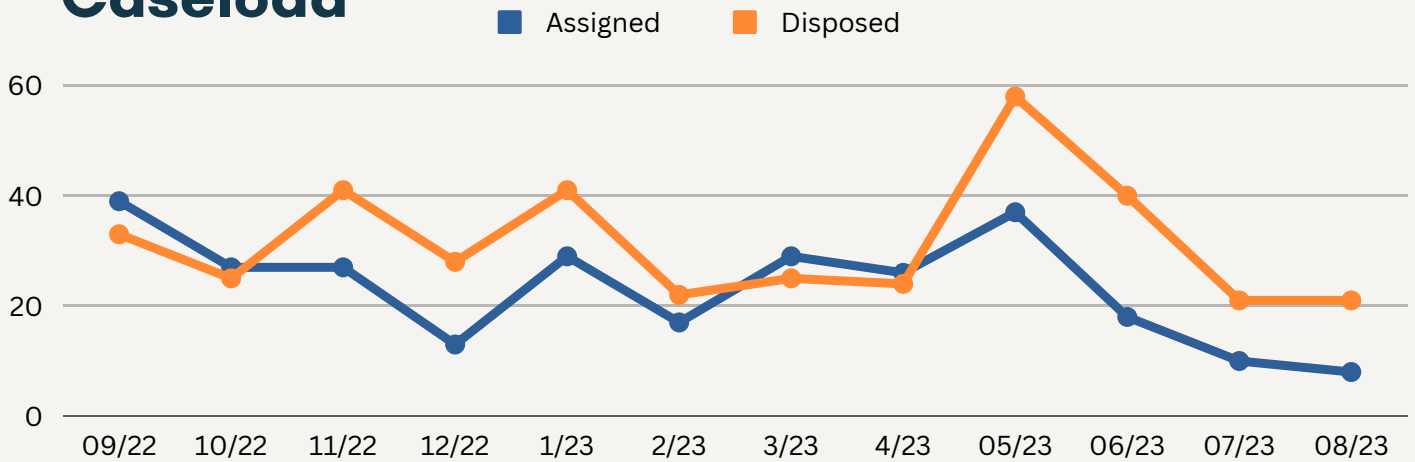
# Judge Chris Craft | Div VIII

Judge Craft was first elected in 1994. Previously, he managed his family farm in Proctor, Arkansas and worked in private practice at the firm of Craft & Craft. He went on to become an Assistant District Attorney and Senior Trial Prosecutor in the Major Violators Unit before becoming a judge. He has also served as an Adjunct Professor of Law at the University of Memphis Law School.

Judge Craft's performance revealed that he excelled in some areas but faced challenges in others. Notably, he **consistently appointed public defenders** and provided **easy access to his courtroom**. However, his scores were **significantly lower than average** in the categories of **sensitivity and neutrality**. Observers often stated that Judge Craft **harshly treated the accused**.



## Caseload



## Case Turnover

35

Judge Craft oversees an average of **35** cases per day. **33** of those are reset for another date, meaning an average of only two cases are resolved each day. As a result, the average case in this courtroom is resolved in **743** days.

33

743

848

Waiting for a dismissal takes even longer - an average of **848** days.

## Frequent Case Types

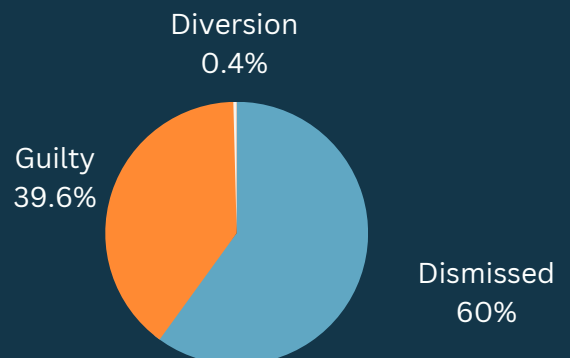
Unlawful Carrying or Possession of a Weapon (46)

Aggravated Assault (36)

Aggravated Burglary (25)

## Dispositions

Breakdown of charges across 379 disposed cases





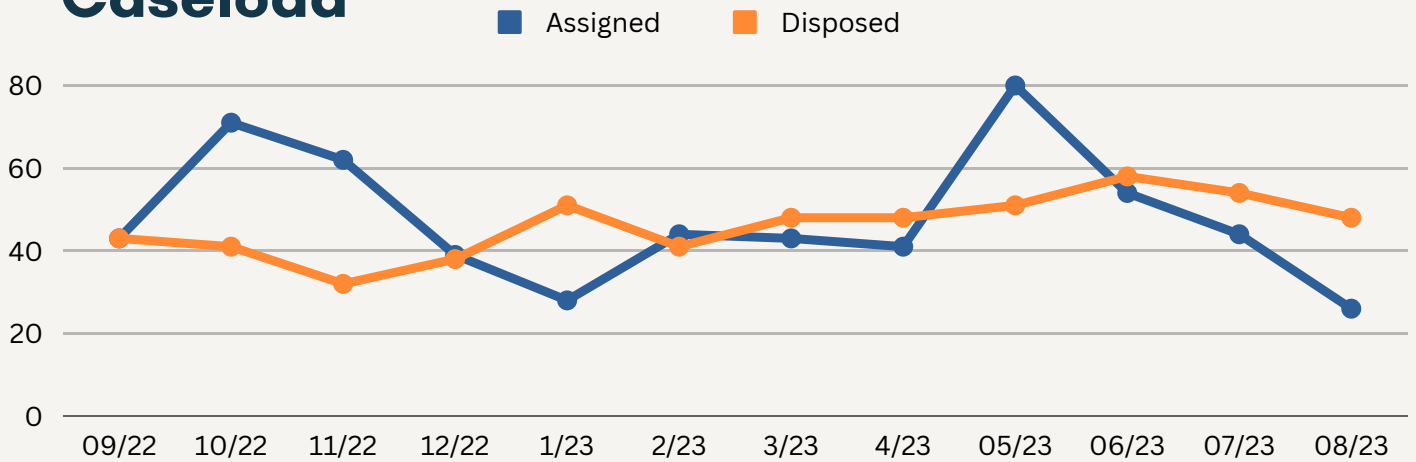
## Judge Melissa Boyd | Div IX

Before becoming a judge in 2022, Judge Boyd worked as a Shelby County Assistant District Attorney and had a solo practice for about ten years. Notably, Judge Boyd did not practice law from December 21st, 2015 to January 21st, 2016 as she was suspended by the Tennessee Supreme Court for misconduct.

Judge Boyd has been on leave since May. Other Criminal Court judges have managed the Division IX docket in her absence. A timeline for her return to the bench remains uncertain. Before her leave of absence, she received a public reprimand from the Board of Judicial Conduct for soliciting donations for a local school while wearing her judicial robe.



### Caseload



### Case Turnover

40

Of an average **40** hearings per day, **38** of those are reset for another date, meaning an average of only two cases are resolved each day. As a result, the average case in this courtroom is resolved in **545** days.

38

545

634

Waiting a for a dismissal takes even longer, with an average of **634** days.

### Frequent Case Types

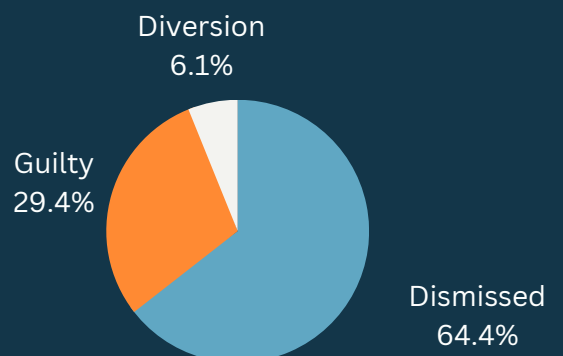
Theft of Property 10,000-60,000 (64)

Aggravated Assault (46)

Theft of Property 2,500-10,000 (45)

### Dispositions

Breakdown of charges across 553 disposed cases





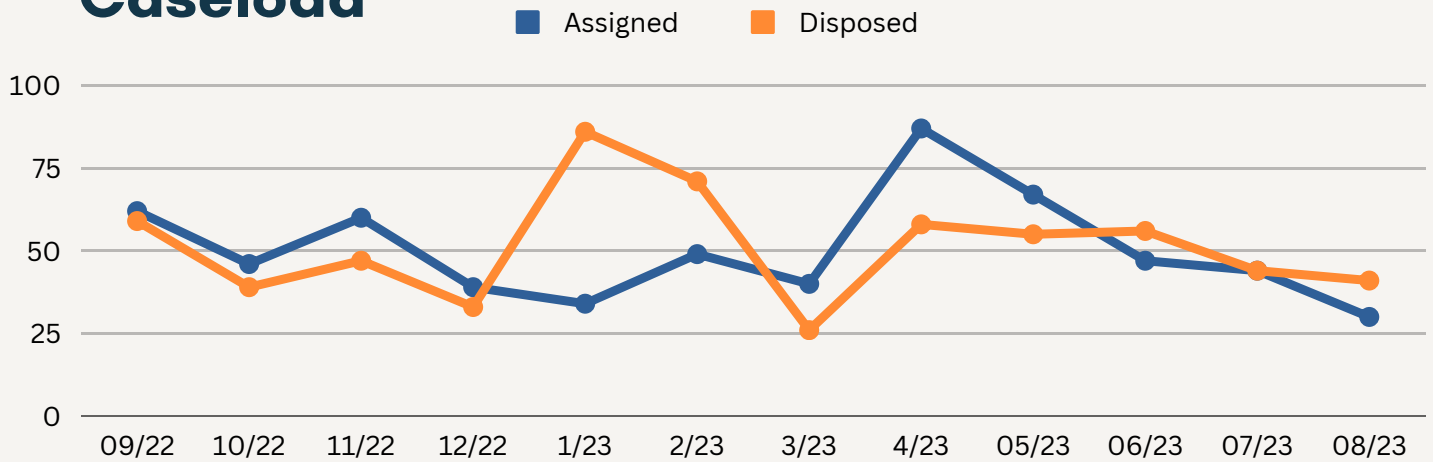
## Judge Jennifer Mitchell | Div X

Judge Mitchell worked at the Office of the Shelby County Public Defender for thirteen years. She then started her own practice where she worked as a criminal defense lawyer for four years until taking her seat on the bench in 2018.

Judge Mitchell performed well on the rubric in most areas. Observers say that she consistently **addressed everyone respectfully** and **explained things thoroughly for the accused**. However, her scores for the category of **timeliness** fell below average with multiple comments of **excessive tardiness**.



### Caseload



### Case Turnover

**44** Judge Mitchell oversees an average of **44** cases per day. **42** of those are reset for another date, meaning an average of only two cases are resolved each day. As a result, the average case in this courtroom is resolved in **521** days. Waiting for a dismissal takes even longer - an average of **576** days.

### Frequent Case Types

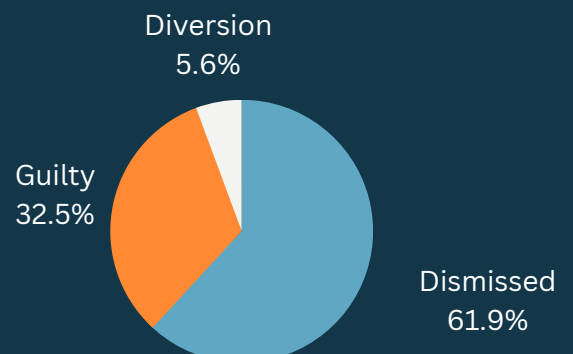
Theft of Property 10,000-60,000 (59)

Aggravated Assault (51)

Theft of Property 2,500-10,000 (41)

### Dispositions

Breakdown of charges across 615 disposed cases



# GENERAL SESSIONS JUDGES





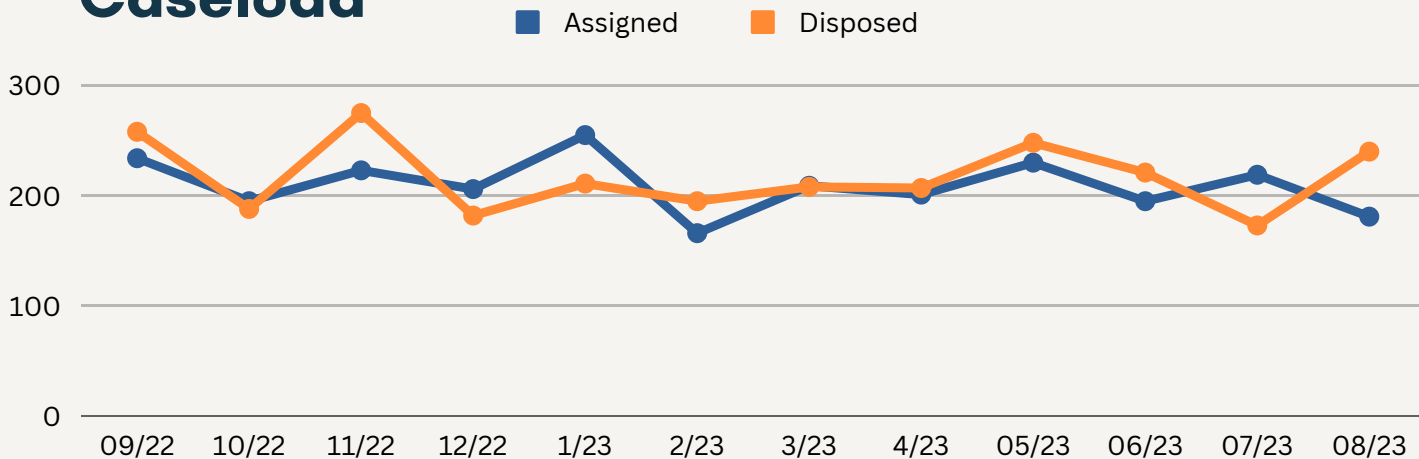
# Judge Bill Anderson | Div 7 | Veteran's Court

Judge Anderson has held a number of roles in the criminal justice system. He was a counselor at a juvenile institution, worked as a probation and parole officer for the Tennessee Department of Corrections, served as an assistant director of a girl's group home, and was a supervisor at Shelby County Pretrial Services. Anderson spent 26 years as a criminal defense attorney before his election in 2010.

Judge Anderson's scores were noticeably lower than the other judges in his cohort. While his scores for categories of dignity and sensitivity do not stand out, he ranked lowest in this group of judges for his **lack of neutrality** and **inconsistency in appointing public defenders**.



## Caseload



## Case Turnover

79

69

220

230

Judge Anderson oversees an average of **79** cases per day. **69** of those are reset for another date, meaning an average of ten cases are resolved each day. As a result, the average case in this courtroom is resolved in **220** days. Waiting for a dismissal takes longer—an average of **230** days.

## Frequent Case Types

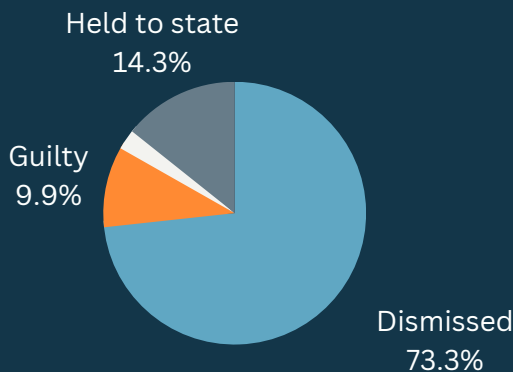
Theft of Merchandise less than 1,000 (218)

Aggravated Assault (208)

Theft of Property less than 1,000 (191)

## Dispositions

Breakdown of charges across 2,606 disposed cases







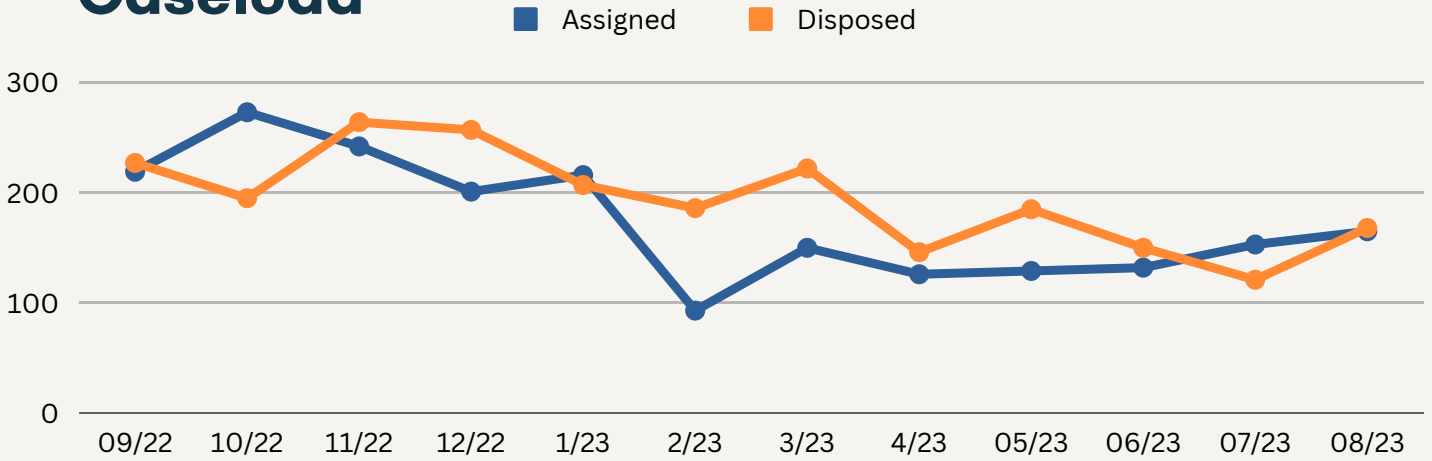
# Judge Lee Wilson | Div 8 | Drug Court

Judge Wilson has served as a judge in several divisions of General Sessions Criminal Court. He was appointed to Division 10 in General Sessions in 2009 and worked as a lawyer for 25 years. He was elected to become the judge in Division 8 in 2022.

Our court watchers have not completed enough rubrics to form a comprehensive summary of his conduct. Judge Wilson's rubric performance results will be published in an upcoming report.



## Caseload



## Case Turnover

**87** Judge Wilson oversees an average of **87** cases per day. **78** of those are reset for another date, meaning an average of nine cases are resolved each day. As a result, the average case in this courtroom is resolved in **152** days. Dismissal times in this court are similar - an average of **153** days.

## Frequent Case Types

Possession of a Controlled Substance (627)

Possession of a Firearm/Dangerous Felony (382)

UPCS Meth (238)

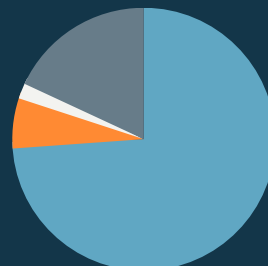
## Dispositions

Breakdown of charges across 2,328 disposed cases

Held to state  
18.1%

Guilty  
6.2%

Dismissed  
73.9%





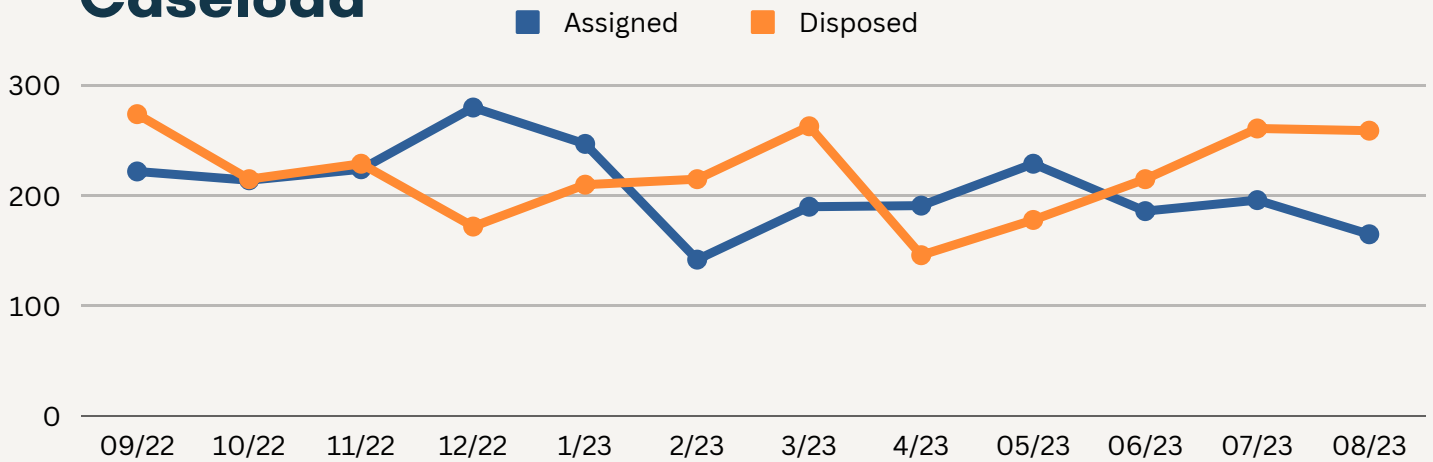
## Judge Sheila Bruce-Renfroe | Div 9 | Mental Health Court

Before her election in 2022, Judge Renfroe practiced both criminal and civil law. She worked at the Renfroe Law Firm for seven years before transitioning into private practice. At the time of her election, Judge Renfroe had 22 years of experience in legal practice.

Judge Renfroe's rubric performance results will be published in an upcoming report along with four other newly elected judges.



### Caseload



### Case Turnover

61  
50  
170  
160

Judge Renfroe oversees an average of **61** cases per day. **50** of those are reset for another date, meaning average of nine cases are resolved each day. As a result, the average case in this courtroom is resolved in **170** days. A dismissal in this court takes less time - an average of **160** days.

### Frequent Case Types

Theft of Merchandise less than 1,000 (287)

Aggravated Assault (167)

Theft of Property 10,000-60,000 (166)

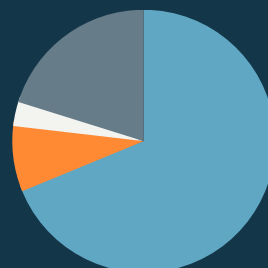
### Dispositions

Breakdown of charges across 2,637 disposed cases

Held to state  
20.2%

Guilty  
8.1%

Dismissed  
68.8%





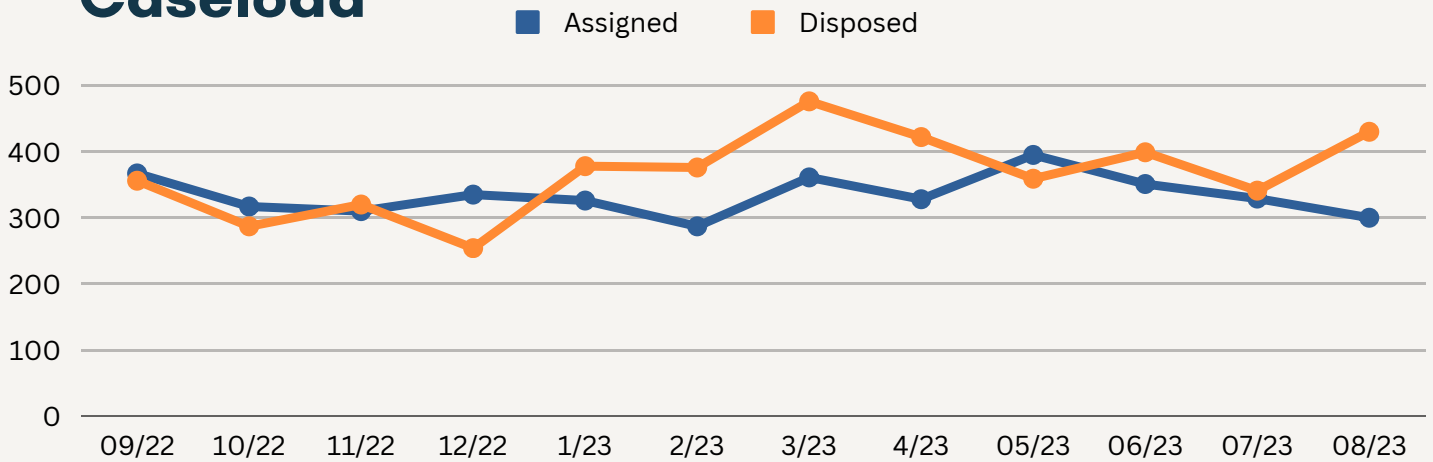
# Judge Greg Gilbert | Div 10 | Domestic Violence Court

Judge Gilbert was elected to Division 10 in September of 2022. He previously worked as an Assistant District Attorney, eventually rising to Chief Prosecutor of the Shelby County Domestic Violence Court. He now serves as the judge of the same court.

Judge Gilbert's rubric performance results will be published in an upcoming report along with four other newly elected judges.



## Caseload



## Case Turnover

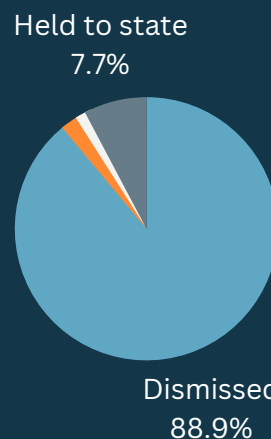
**97** Judge Gilbert oversees an average of **97** cases per day. **80** of those are reset for another date, meaning an average of 17 cases are resolved each day. As a result, the average case in this courtroom is resolved in **184** days. Dismissal times in this court are similar—an average of **186** days.

## Frequent Case Types

Domestic Assault (2156)
Aggravated Assault (891)
Vandalism 1,000 or Less (332)

## Dispositions

Breakdown of charges across 4,398 disposed cases



# Judge Karen Massey | Div 11

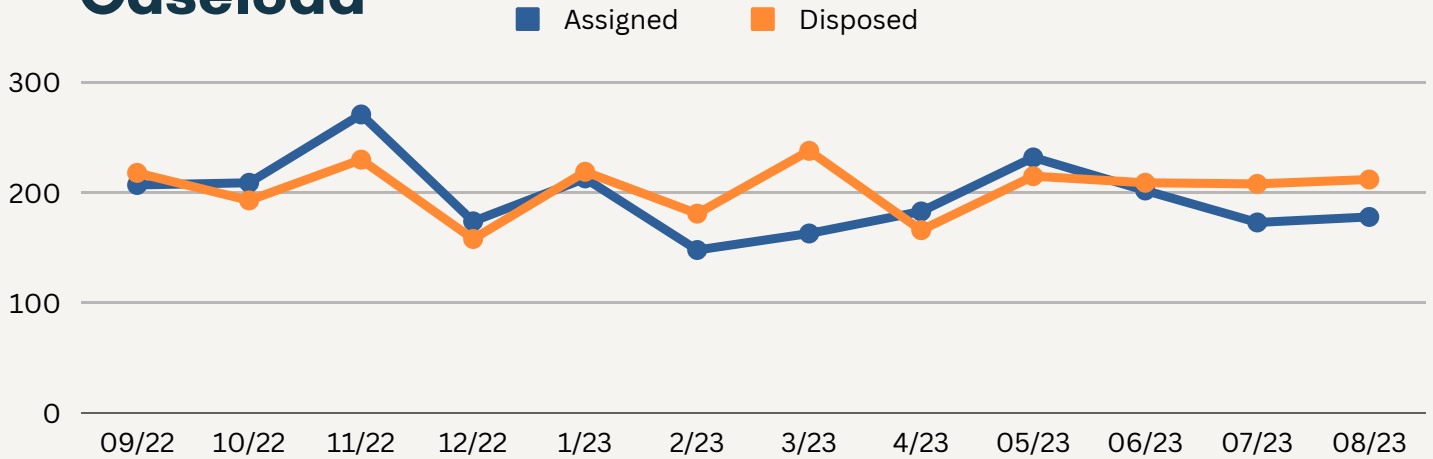


Judge Massey served in the United States Air Force and worked as a public defender prior to becoming a judge. She was first elected in 2006.

Judge Massey's rubric scores were generally average. Notably, her rankings in the **timeliness** and **sensitivity** categories were **below average**. Observers in her courtroom indicated that the **experience was inconsistent**, and her **treatment of the accused was influenced by her mood**.



## Caseload



## Case Turnover

67

Judge Massey oversees an average of **67** cases per day.

57

**57** of those are reset for another date, meaning an average of 10 cases are resolved each day. As a result, the average case in this courtroom is resolved in **162** days. Dismissal times in this court are similar—an average of **159** days.

162

159

## Frequent Case Types

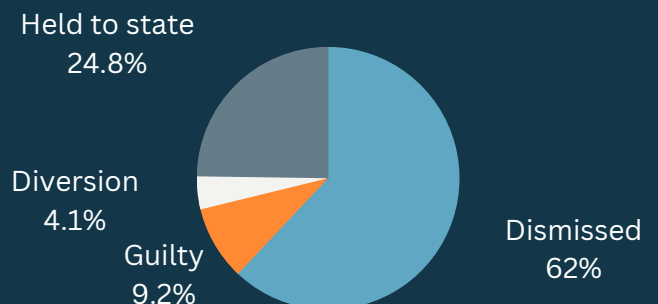
Theft of Merchandise less than 1,000 (250)

Theft of Property 10,000–60,000 (158)

Aggravated Assault (156)

## Dispositions

Breakdown of charges across 2,447 disposed cases



# Judge Ronald Lucchesi | Div 12

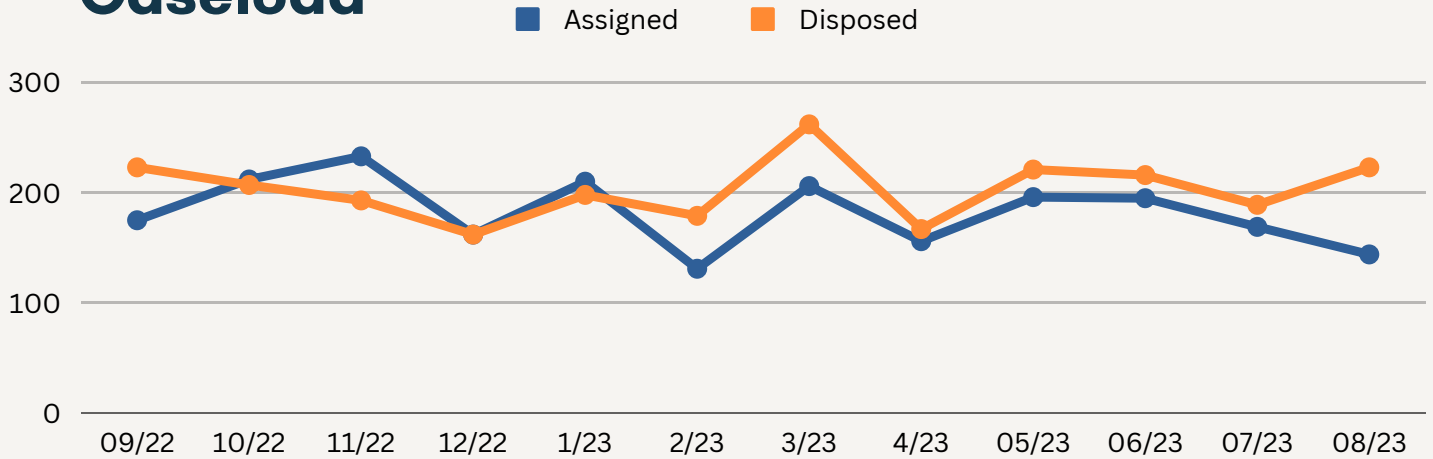


Before being elected to the bench in 2014, Judge Lucchesi worked as an attorney at the Law Offices of Lucchesi & Skahan.

Judge Lucchesi performed well in all areas except public defender appointment. Observers say he is fair and has a good control of the courtroom. However, he has multiple mentions of his inflexibility in his decision making regarding appointing public defenders to those in need.



## Caseload



## Case Turnover

63

Judge Lucchesi oversees an average of **63** cases per day.

53

**53** of those are reset for another date, meaning an average of **10** cases are resolved each day. As a result, the average case in this courtroom is resolved in **192** days. Dismissal times in this court are similar—an average of **194** days.

192

194

## Frequent Case Types

Theft of Merchandise less than 1,000 (193)

Theft of Property 10,000-60,000 (159)

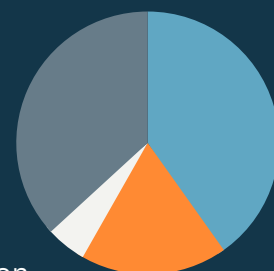
Aggravated Assault (146)

## Dispositions

Breakdown of charges across 2,440 disposed cases

Held to state  
36.8%

Dismissed  
40.2%



Diversion  
5%

Guilty  
18.1%



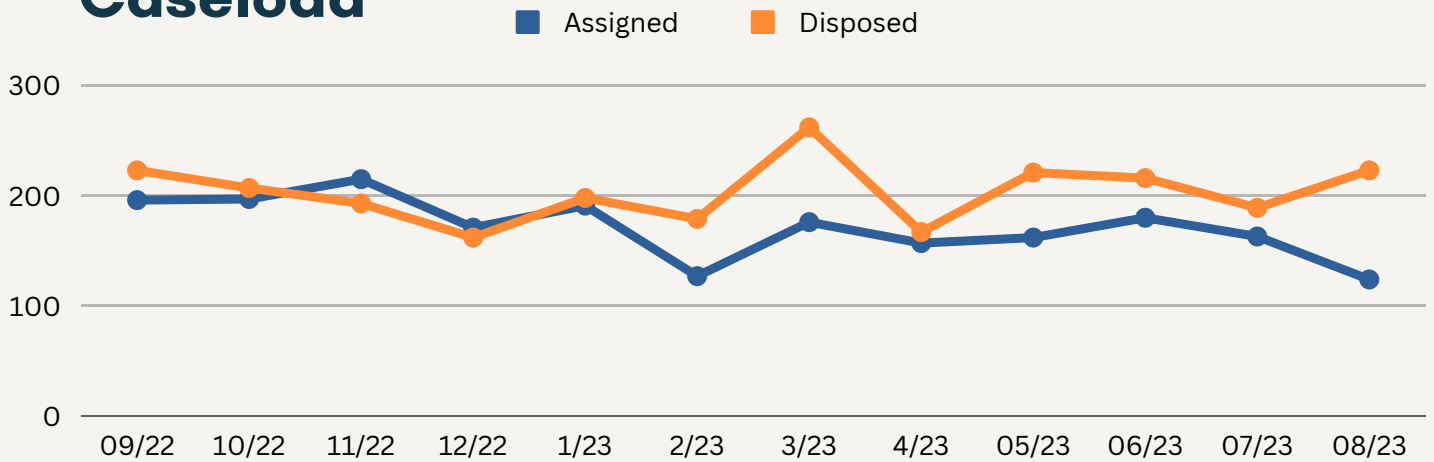
# Judge Louis Montesi | Div 13

Judge Montesi was first elected in 1990, making him the longest serving current General Sessions judge. Prior to taking the bench, Montesi worked as an Assistant District Attorney, an assistant city attorney, and chief city prosecutor.

Overall, Judge Montesi scored well on the rubric in all areas, with a slight dip in the *dignity* category. Observers noted that he remained *punctual* and maintained an *organized and efficient courtroom*. However, some also expressed concern over his *apparent bias towards the State* and his declining patience as court sessions progressed.



## Caseload



## Case Turnover

**43** Judge Montesi oversees an average of **43** cases per day. **34** of those are reset for another date, meaning an average of nine cases are resolved each day. As a result, the average case in this courtroom is resolved in **136** days. Dismissal times in this court are similar—an average of **137** days.

## Frequent Case Types

Theft of Merchandise less than 1,000 (192)

Aggravated Assault (153)

Theft of Property less than 1,000 (133)

## Dispositions

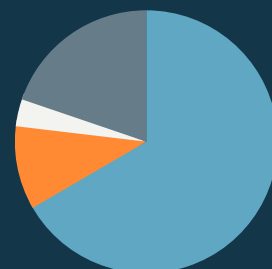
Breakdown of charges across 2,245 disposed cases

Held to state  
19.8%

Diversion  
3.3%

Guilty  
10.3%

Dismissed  
66.6%





# Judge Christian Johnson | Div 15

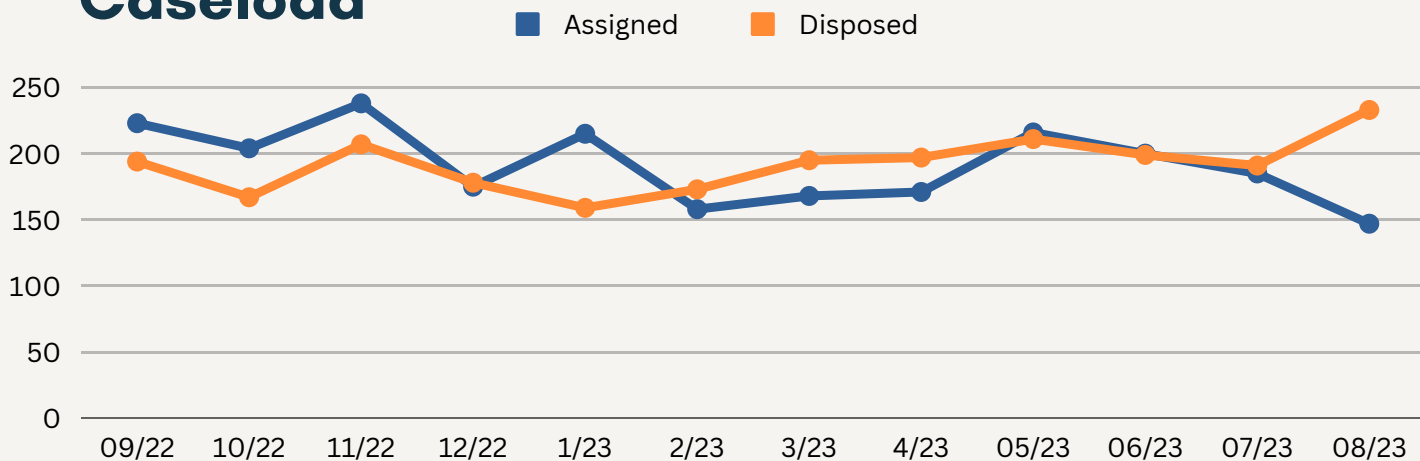


Before his 2022 election to the bench, Judge Johnson worked in private practice as a paralegal and a lawyer. He was also an advanced diesel mechanic in the United States Marine Corps.

Judge Johnson's rubric performance results will be published in an upcoming report along with four other newly elected judges.



## Caseload



## Case Turnover

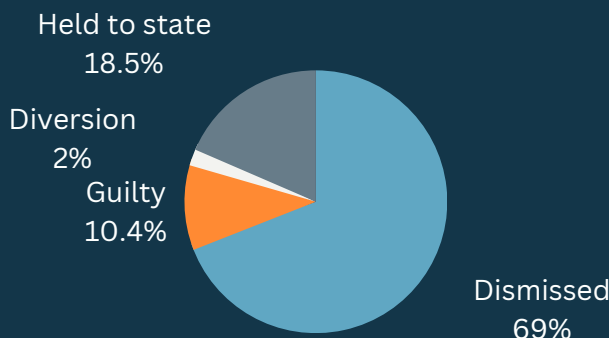
**60** Judge Johnson oversees an average of **60** cases per day. **51** of those are reset for another date, meaning an average of nine cases are resolved each day. As a result, the average case in this courtroom is resolved in **158** days. Dismissal times in this court are similar—an average of **162** days.

## Frequent Case Types

- Theft of Merchandise less than 1,000 (231)
- Theft of Property 10,000-60,000 (165)
- Theft of Property less than 1,000 (155)

## Dispositions

Breakdown of charges across 2,304 disposed cases



# DATA DISCLAIMERS

Please keep in mind the following while reading through the report:

- For this report, we consider only cases that were filed or disposed during September 1, 2022 through August 31, 2023. When computing case length, we took the average time from the case's file date until the earliest disposition date. For top case types, we only considered the highest charge on the cases. "Nolle Prosequi" and "Dismissed" are both considered to be "Dismissed" in our analysis, but these have subtle differences.
- Our data is pulled from public data sources. If information is missing or incorrect in these data sources, our data will be incorrect as well. If a case is expunged (removed from public record), then we do not have access to the information associated to that case. Cases can be expunged for successfully completed diversions, certain guilty convictions, and, most commonly, cases for which all charges are dismissed. For more information, check out [the Clean Slate Fund page on our website](#).
- Note that all judges do not handle the same types and levels of cases. For example, felonies can only be disposed in Criminal Court, meaning that Criminal Court judges will see more severe types of cases than General Sessions judges. Therefore, comparing statistics across these two different types of courts may not be appropriate.
- Our analyses only consider cases with misdemeanor or felony charges. In other words, we filter out cases with only city ordinances, petitions, etc... as the primary charges. Additionally, traffic violations are not considered except for DUIs.

This report is the culmination of months of tireless effort and dedication. Our commitment to transparency is unwavering, and we're pleased to provide our community with insight into our courthouse's daily operations, recognizing the impact it has on Shelby County.

We extend our heartfelt appreciation to our Court Watch Interns, Sam Frank and Lily Resha, who invested themselves wholly in ensuring the accuracy of this report. Their contributions, and those of our volunteers, are immeasurable.



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