

JUDICIAL QUALIFICATIONS COMMISSION
STATE OF GEORGIA

In Re:

JUDGE SHERMELA J.
WILLIAMS

SUPREME COURT DOCKET
NO. S24Z1139

JQC COMPLAINT
NOS. 2022-102, 2023-223, and
2023-348

In Re:

JUDGE SHERMELA J.
WILLIAMS

SUPREME COURT DOCKET
NO. S25Z0722

JQC COMPLAINT
NOS. 2023-813, 2023-1023,
2024-123, 2024-197, 2024-294,
2024-661, 2024-887, 2024-691,
and 2024-960

REPORT AND RECOMMENDATION

On June 6, 2024, the Director of the Judicial Qualifications Commission (“JQC”) filed formal charges against Judge Shermela J. Williams which were docketed as Supreme Court Docket No. S24Z1139. The Director then filed an additional set of charges on February 17, 2025, which were subsequently docketed as S25Z0722. Across the two sets of formal charges, Judge Williams faces thirty-one (31) counts of alleged misconduct.¹ The formal charges allege that Judge Williams violated the Georgia Code of Judicial Conduct (“CJC”) to

¹ Originally, there were thirty-two (32) counts. However, the Director voluntarily withdrew Count 6 in the second set of charges, as it was a duplicate of Count 15 in the first set of charges.

include Rules 1.1, 1.2(A), 1.2(B), 1.3, 2.2, 2.4(B), 2.5(A), 2.8(B), 2.9(A), and 2.10(B).

These violations allege instances of misconduct which occurred while she was a sitting Fulton County Superior Court Judge and include actions taken in her judicial capacity as a judge, as well as actions taken off the bench but while a judge. More specifically, the formal charges fall into four categories of misconduct: (1) improper ex parte communication with a litigant; (2) failure to timely rule on matters before the Court; (3) illegal arrest and false imprisonment of a witness; and (4) using the prestige of the office to further her personal interests.

Pursuant to O.C.G.A. § 15-1-21(e)(3)(A) and JQC Rule 24(C), a full hearing was held on the formal charges. For judicial economy and at the request of the parties, both docketed matters were heard concurrently in one consolidated hearing that took place across three meetings of the Hearing Panel on May 21-23, 2025, June 26-27, 2025, and July 14, 2025. Having carefully considered the evidence presented and the arguments made during the six-day hearing, we now respectfully submit our Report and Recommendation to the Supreme Court of Georgia pursuant to O.C.G.A. § 15-1-21(e)(3)(B) and JQC Rule 24(D) and (E).

Procedural History

On June 6, 2024, the Director of the JQC filed the first set of formal charges against Judge Williams. By and through her counsel, Judge Williams filed her Answer to Formal Charges on July 22, 2024. The parties engaged in discovery as prescribed by the rules and litigated pretrial motions. On January 7, 2025, having determined the matter was ripe for trial, the Hearing Panel set a final hearing for March 5, 2025.

A few weeks prior to the start of the final hearing, on February 17, 2025, the Director filed an additional set of formal charges against Judge Williams. Given the filing of new charges and an unavoidable serious felony trial conflict of

her counsel, Judge Williams moved to continue the final hearing, which was granted in an Order Continuing Final Hearing on February 25, 2025. In the meantime, Judge Williams filed her Answer to Formal Charges (the second set) on March 19, 2025.

On March 4, 2025, the Presiding Officer of the Hearing Panel was appointed to the Investigative Panel and a new Presiding Officer was appointed. The new Presiding Officer conducted a status conference with the parties on April 3, 2025, to ascertain case readiness and inquire of a timeline as to the new charges. After conferring with the parties, a final hearing on both sets of charges was set for May 21-23, 2025, and June 26-27, 2025.

On the first day of trial, May 21, 2025, Judge Williams filed her Motion to Quash Formal Charges or in the Alternative Request for a Stay of the Proceedings and an Evidentiary Hearing.² The Director requested a one-day stay to file a written response to the pleading. We denied the respective stay requests of both parties, but indicated we would consider the motion in the intervening time between parts one and two of the hearing.

On June 9, 2025, we denied the request for an evidentiary hearing but set the motion for oral argument on June 13, 2025, via Zoom videoconference. On June 23, 2025, we notified the parties of the ruling via email and entered a written Order Denying Motion to Quash Formal Charges on June 25, 2025.

The trial then resumed on June 26, 2025, as planned. Evidence was closed late in the day on June 27, 2025, with only closing arguments remaining. We reconvened a final time on July 14, 2025, for closing arguments. The final transcript of the proceedings (Volumes I-VI plus exhibits) was filed on September 2, 2025.

² In a conference call on May 20, 2025, Respondent's counsel alerted the Presiding Officer that he would be filing said motion in the morning.

Standard and Burden of Proof

“Charges of misconduct shall be established by the standard of clear and convincing evidence...[t]he burden of proof is on the Director.” JQC Rule 7; *Inquiry Concerning Crawford*, 310 Ga. 403, 405 (2020).

If we find that the Director has met this burden, we must then determine whether there are “constitutionally prescribed circumstances in which judicial discipline may be imposed.” *Inquiry Concerning Coomer*, 315 Ga. 841, 847 (2023).

Those grounds are as follows:

- (1) willful misconduct in office;
- (2) willful and persistent failure to perform the duties of office;
- (3) habitual intemperance;
- (4) conviction of a crime involving moral turpitude; or
- (5) conduct prejudicial to the administration of justice which brings the judicial office into disrepute.

Ga. Const. Art. VI, § 7, ¶ VII; JQC Rule 6(A)

In the instant case, the Director asserts that grounds one and five are the appropriate grounds for discipline to be considered.

The first ground – willful misconduct in office – means “actions taken in bad faith by the judge acting in her judicial capacity.” *Coomer I*, 315 Ga. at 859 quoting *Matter of Inquiry Concerning a Judge No. 94-70*, 265 Ga. 326, 327-328 (1995).

The fifth ground – conduct prejudicial to the administration of justice which brings the judicial office into disrepute – means either “inappropriate actions taken in good faith by the judge acting in her judicial capacity, but which may appear to be unjudicial and harmful to the public’s esteem of the judiciary” or “actions taken in bad faith by a judge acting outside her judicial capacity.” *Coomer I*, 315 Ga. at 842 (establishing that “the Director would need to prove bad faith by clear and convincing evidence.”).

Should we find any grounds for discipline, the JQC rules then require us to recommend sanctions to the Supreme Court for its consideration. JQC rule 6(B); see also *Coomer I*, 315 Ga. at 846 (finding that “[t]he Constitution divides tasks associated with judicial discipline between the JQC and this Court, assigning to the JQC the power to investigate, try, and recommend disciplinary sanctions in judicial misconduct matters, and vesting only this Court with the power to impose disciplinary sanctions.”).

Findings of Fact

Respondent, Judge Shermela J. Williams, declared her intent to run for Superior Court Judge of Fulton County in October 2019 and qualified on March 6, 2020. (Hearing Transcript “HT” I-69-70; HT V-1302).³ In June 2020, she prevailed in a hotly contested election over the incumbent, Judge Rebecca Rieder. (HT I-70-72, 79; HT V-1308). Judge Williams was sworn into office on December 28, 2020, and began serving as a Fulton County Superior Court Judge on January 1, 2021. (HT I-76, 79; HT V-1309). Judge Williams was re-elected by Fulton County voters in 2024 with no opposition. (HT I-47).

Judge Williams received her undergraduate degree from The Howard University in 2004 and her law degree from Georgetown University Law Center in 2007. (HT V-1289). She became a member of the Pennsylvania Bar in 2008 and the Georgia Bar in 2011. (HT I-65). Prior to becoming a judge, she had a varied legal background, working in both civil and criminal law. (HT I-65-69). All totaled, she spent approximately a decade as a prosecutor – first in the Philadelphia District Attorney’s Office and later in both the Fulton County District Attorney’s Office and DeKalb County District Attorney’s Office. (HT I-67-68; HT V-1292-1293). In the civil arena, she did both plaintiff and defense

³ Cites to the hearing transcript will be referred to as “HT” followed by the transcript volume number and page number(s).

work and handled a very small portion of non-complex domestic cases. (HT I-66, 69; HT V-1295-1297).

Upon taking the bench, Judge Williams was assigned to the Family Law Division, where she handled exclusively domestic cases. (HT I-76; HT IV-956). She inherited a voluminous caseload, which was the highest of all four Family Division judges. (Respondent's Exhibit-4).⁴ After her first two-year term in the Family Division expired, Judge Williams volunteered to serve a second term and eventually served as Chief Judge of the Family Division. (HT IV-965, 1002; HT V-1311-1312, 1314). At the time of the final hearing, Judge Williams had completed her second term in the Family Division and was assigned a general docket caseload, including both criminal and civil cases. (HT I-294).

Approximately one year after she began her tenure as a Fulton County Superior Court Judge, Judge Williams was notified by the JQC Director of her first complaint in February 2022, which involved allegations of improper *ex parte* communications with a litigant. (P-3; HT V-1331-1332). Over the next two years, the JQC received additional complaints against Judge Williams concerning numerous instances of failing to timely rule in matters before her; the illegal jailing of a witness; and an improper communication on behalf of a family member in a pending matter.

We now address each of these allegations below.⁵

⁴ Throughout the remainder of this document, Respondent's exhibits will be referred to as "R" followed by the exhibit number. The Director's exhibits will be referred to as "P" followed by the exhibit number. Joint exhibits will be referred to as "J" followed by the exhibit number.

⁵ Before the final hearing began, on May 21, 2025, the Director and Judge Williams' counsel, presented a document entitled "Stipulations and Admission to Formal Charges" wherein Judge Williams admitted to the majority of the failure to timely rule charges. The Director also withdrew Count 6 in the second set of charges as duplicative of Count 15 in the first set of charges. The document was jointly signed by the Director, Judge Williams, and her counsel. This document was not marked and tendered as an exhibit, but will be made a part of this record and filed with the Supreme Court concurrent with the filing of this Report and Recommendation.

Ex Parte Communication with Brandy Alexander – (S24Z1139 – Counts 1-6)

Brandy Alexander is a licensed attorney in Florida and in Georgia and at the time of the complaint, worked as a family law attorney doing primarily Guardian ad Litem (“GAL”) work in the metropolitan Atlanta area. (HT II-498-499). Unsurprisingly, she had multiple cases in the Family Division of Fulton County Superior Court in which she served as a GAL, including cases in front of Judge Williams. (HT II-501). Judge Williams first became acquainted with Ms. Alexander in February 2021, when they met via Zoom to discuss the possibility of Ms. Alexander doing GAL work for the judge. (HT I-82-83; HT II-500-501). It was during that meeting that they realized they were members of the same sorority (aka “sorors”), Delta Sigma Theta, Inc. (HT I-83; HT II-501).

In September 2021, the father of Ms. Alexander’s child filed a Petition for Modification of Parenting Time and Contempt. (HT I-80; HT II-501). The case was assigned to Family 3, Judge Williams’ division, and the Clerk’s office generated the usual 30-day notice as it does as a matter of routine. (HT I-81; J-1). The case was set for a status calendar with a Judicial Officer (“JO”) on October 28, 2021, at 2:00 p.m. via Zoom. (J-1).⁶ Because Ms. Alexander had pending GAL cases before multiple judges in the Family Division, she authorized her attorney, Kathryn “Kate” Franklin, to contact Judge Williams’

On July 14, 2025, after evidence was closed and just prior to closing arguments, Judge Williams’ counsel presented a document entitled “Amended Admissions and Stipulations to Formal Charges.” Notably, this document was only signed by Judge Williams. Neither her counsel nor the Director signed it. It appears to be presented *pro se* by Judge Williams and claims to clarify which misconduct and factual allegations she now admits after she heard all of the evidence. This document was also not marked and tendered as an exhibit, but will be made a part of this record and filed with the Supreme Court concurrent with the filing of this Report and Recommendation.

⁶ Pursuant to local rules of the Family Division of Fulton County, filings all follow this same JO track initially unless the parties request that the assigned judge hear the case instead.

office to inquire as to whether a senior judge could be appointed to handle the matter. (HT II-381, 502-503).

On October 18, 2021, Ms. Franklin called Judge Williams' chambers to make that specific inquiry and clearly identified herself as the attorney representing Ms. Alexander on her pending case. (HT II-382). Ms. Franklin spoke with Janel Bowles, who said she would have to speak with the judge to determine the answer to the question and call Ms. Franklin back. Ms. Franklin then left her telephone number with Ms. Bowles. (HT II-382-383). Ms. Bowles first denied, then equivocated, then denied, then equivocated once again, then eventually denied that she spoke to Ms. Franklin about a senior judge. (HT IV-1110-1116). On this issue, we find Ms. Franklin to be highly credible. Her testimony, though brief, was straightforward and did not waiver. Conversely, we find on this point and others, Ms. Bowles' testimony lacks credibility.⁷

Ms. Franklin did not receive a return call from the judge's staff. However, that same afternoon, Ms. Alexander received a telephone call from Judge Williams on Ms. Alexander's cell phone. (HT II-503). This did not immediately alarm Ms. Alexander, as it was not unusual in her GAL role to receive calls directly from judges. (HT II-503). This soon changed when Ms. Alexander realized that Judge Williams was not calling about a GAL matter but rather Ms. Alexander's own case, then pending before the judge. (HT II-504). Ms. Alexander testified first to the JQC Investigative Panel on June 17, 2022, which was memorialized in its entirety as P-7 and then again at the final hearing on

⁷ Ms. Bowles was an interesting witness, to say the least, and her testimony was at many times convoluted, confusing, equivocal, and evasive, which eroded our trust in her willingness and ability to answer questions fully and accurately. As she explained to one panel member, "I'm an attorney, and I generally answer in a gray area." (HT IV-1116). That philosophy is neither helpful nor illuminating in a truth-seeking process. When asked what other answers she had given that were in the "gray area" she testified "None to this point" and somewhat unconvincingly pledged that she would do her best moving forward to let us know if her answer was in the gray area or not. (HT IV-1117).

May 22, 2025. In all material respects, Ms. Alexander’s testimony remained consistent and credible across both proceedings.

According to Ms. Alexander, Judge Williams told her that someone claiming to be her attorney had called chambers, asking how to get a senior judge assigned to the case, and she wanted to know if that was true. (HT II-504-505). Judge Williams told Ms. Alexander that when she told her staff that she intended to call her personally, Janel Bowles had warned her that “it was an *ex parte* conversation and she shouldn’t do it.” (HT II-506-507). Ms. Alexander testified that the judge’s response was to tell Ms. Bowles that “I’m a soror, we’re in the same sorority...and that it would be on the shield.” (HT II-507). Judge Williams asked Ms. Alexander why she wanted a senior judge and if she was embarrassed about what might come up during the hearing. (HT II-505). Ms. Alexander indicated that yes, she would be embarrassed, which prompted Judge Williams to share her own experience—using a racial slur—about her ex-husband. (HT I-115; HT II-505, 509). Judge Williams told her that a senior judge could not hear her case and that she would be keeping it. (HT II-508). However, she indicated that she would handle the matter differently than normal and would remove the case from the 30-day mass calendar and close the courtroom so that potential GAL clients would not be privy to her personal information and it would essentially be the parties and their attorneys in attendance only. (HT I-113-114; HT II-505, 507-508). Judge Williams asked Ms. Alexander if she wanted to call her attorney, Ms. Franklin, and loop her into the conversation. Ms. Alexander declined. (HT II-509).

Early into the call and unbeknownst to Judge Williams, Ms. Alexander had the forethought to seek a witness to the conversation and walked down the hall to where her mentor, suitemate and landlord, Dawn Smith, was located. (HT II-505). Her thought, as she explained, was that Ms. Smith, who was a well-respected and a longtime member of the legal community, could serve as a witness to the conversation should she ever need one. (HT II-505). As she put it

to the Investigative Panel, “I wasn’t sure I would be believed over a judge.” (P-7, p. 29). And, “I felt like I needed to have somebody who was more well-known and more believable than me in the event that it became an issue.” (HT II-505). Remarkably prophetic as it turns out.

Ms. Alexander put the call on speakerphone so that Ms. Smith could hear the conversation. The *ex parte* conversation that ensued was distressing to both Ms. Alexander and Ms. Smith and, ultimately, to us. Ms. Smith’s testimony corroborated Ms. Alexander’s testimony about the substance of the call with Judge Williams. She testified that Ms. Alexander came into her office with her cell phone on speaker but with the microphone muted. She was very flustered and said that Judge Williams was calling her and she wanted a witness. (HT II – 460). Ms. Smith heard the judge say, “My judicial assistant told me I might not should call you, it’s an *ex parte* conversation, but I told her we’re sorors.” (HT II-460-461, 484). She also heard the judge say that “I know your lawyer, Kate Franklin, asked for a senior judge, but we’re not going to do a senior judge. I’m going to handle it.” (HT II-461, 486). Judge Williams then began speaking about family law matters and how she knew they could get ugly and that she didn’t want that for Ms. Alexander, having experienced it herself. She told Ms. Alexander three or four times during the call that “she was her soror and had her back.” (HT II-461, 487). According to Ms. Smith, Ms. Alexander was obviously flustered and did not say much. Judge Williams did most of the talking in the ten minutes of the call that Ms. Smith heard (HT II-461, 484).

Once the call concluded, Ms. Smith and Ms. Alexander “both sat there in pretty stunned silence.” (HT II-462). Ms. Smith, who had worked for a judge and served as an administrative law judge assessed the call as “highly inappropriate.” (HT II-462). “It was not simply about scheduling. It was about her taking care of her in a family court matter and their connection as a sorority sister, and I told her [Brandy] that was my assessment of it.” (HT II-462). The clear message was “Don’t worry, I got you.” (HT II-461, 488, 497). Despite

Respondent's urging to the contrary, we find Ms. Smith to be a disinterested witness, without bias, and above reproach. Accordingly, we fully credit her testimony.

Ms. Alexander called her attorney after the call with Judge Williams ended. Ms. Franklin felt they had an ethical obligation to report the judge and tried without success to get Ms. Alexander to agree to do so. (HT II-511-512). This proposition terrified Ms. Alexander because she was afraid that a JQC complaint would come back to her and Judge Williams would still be on her case. (HT II-511-512). Initially, Ms. Franklin intended to withdraw from representation, but after researching the issue further, Ms. Franklin decided she could stay on the case. (HT II-513).

Judge Williams admitted that she made the call to Ms. Alexander. What she chiefly disputed was her reason for calling and the content of her conversation with Ms. Alexander. She insisted that when she made the call, she had no idea of why she was calling Ms. Alexander other than she was handed a cryptic note by her staff that said "Brandy Alexander Senior Judge." (HT I-91-93; HT V-1374). Rather than requesting her staff to call or seek more information for her, Judge Williams called Ms. Alexander herself, assuming that it was likely about a GAL case. (HT I-97, 101-102; HT V-1372-1373). When she spoke with Ms. Alexander, it became apparent early on that the matter was not regarding a GAL case but Ms. Alexander's own pending litigation before the judge for which she was seeking a senior judge. (HT I-101-102). Rather than end the call, Judge Williams testified that she explained the senior judge process to Ms. Alexander and told her why that was not possible and only spoke to her about logistics but not the substance of her case. (HT I-175; HT V-1373). She denied that Ms. Bowles expressed concern to her about making the call at all and denied ever using the term "soror" or saying it was "on the shield." (HT I-105-106). She admitted that she offered to pull the case off the mass

calendar/JO track and put it on a specially set date in front of her.⁸ (HT I-106-107, 111; HT-1373). She further admitted that she offered to add Ms. Franklin, Ms. Alexander's attorney, to the call to explain the plan.⁹ At no time did she offer to call the opposing party's counsel or add her to the call.

The call concluded and the judge did as she said she would. She directed her staff to remove it from the mass calendar and put it on a special date in front of her. She also testified that she directed her staff to email the parties (meaning Ms. Franklin and opposing counsel) and inform them that she had spoken to Ms. Alexander, that she is a GAL in front of the Court and that the case was being moved to her track. (HT I-100-101, 119-120; HT V-1374). As the date for the mass calendar approached, opposing counsel contacted Judge Williams' chambers asking for the Zoom videoconference link for the mass calendar. (P-2). The judge's staff responded that the matter had been removed and placed on a different calendar in front of Judge Williams. Understandably, opposing counsel was confused and concerned. (P-2).

When the new hearing date arrived, there was a discussion about how the case got to where it was and why it was diverted from its usual JO track. Judge Williams explained *a portion* of the chronology on the record to the parties. (P-1). Judge Williams never disclosed that she had a private telephone conversation about the case with Ms. Alexander, a litigant. In defense of this, the judge testified that until these formal charges were filed and she received discovery, she did not know that her staff had failed to tell opposing counsel that she had a conversation with Ms. Alexander. (HT I-119-120, 130). This explanation gives us great pause given that opposing counsel stated quite clearly

⁸ According to Respondent, this was done with some regularity in cases that she deemed high profile or special in some way, like so-called "celebrity cases" or cases involving transgender issues, for example. (HT I-108,117).

⁹ It is perplexing as to why Respondent believes this offer somehow blessed the conversation. Adding Ms. Franklin to the call merely made it an *ex parte* conversation with a litigant *and* her attorney.

on the record, “Well, your Honor, this is the first I’ve learned of that. I did send an e-mail to your staff attorney when the case was pulled from the original 30-day conference asking why was this case being diverted from the normal course, and I didn’t get a response to that.” (P-1, p. 8). Judge Williams then responded “Well, I can give you the response, hold on.” (P-1, p. 8). Judge Williams then recited for the parties in thorough detail her reasons for doing so, concluding with “so that was the reason, Ms. Conner, and I am sorry you didn’t get a response, but that was the reason.” (P-1, pp.8-10). The opportune moment presented itself for Judge Williams to inform both sides of the *entire* procedural history—most especially what started the entire process of treating the case differently: the private and improper telephone call with Ms. Alexander. That did not happen.

Judge Williams insisted that she did not know—even from what opposing counsel clearly stated on the record—that her staff did not inform opposing counsel about the call to Ms. Alexander, as she claims she had directed. She asserted that what opposing counsel said only made clear for her that opposing counsel did not know the reason the case was removed from the mass calendar. She unconvincingly claimed it was not clear to her that opposing counsel was also unaware of the *ex parte* call, and her staff sat mute during the hearing and did not tell her any different. (HT I-130-137). It strains credulity for Judge Williams to claim that she thought opposing counsel was aware of the *ex parte* call with Ms. Alexander, but yet have no idea why the case was pulled from the mass calendar. If opposing counsel had knowledge of the former, they would have understood the reason for the latter. This attempt to draw what amounts to a distinction without a difference does not inspire confidence in the judge’s testimony on this point and several others.

Rather than disclose the call, the judge focused primarily on making a record of Ms. Alexander’s role as a GAL, including in cases in front of her and inquired as to if anyone had a problem. (P-1, p.7). “So any objections to me

handling the case? And I can tell you that if you ask for a recusal, you are going to have recuse the whole Fulton County bench, so I don't know where you are going." (P-1, p. 7). Petitioner-Father indicated that he wished for Judge Williams to recuse. (P-1, p. 10). A discussion, or browbeating, was then had on the record regarding her potential recusal.¹⁰ Petitioner-Father eventually decided to withdraw his oral motion for recusal, to which the judge responded "All right. Good stuff" and the case remained assigned to Judge Williams. (P-1, pp. 15-16).

A temporary hearing began on January 13, 2022, but was not concluded on that date. Ms. Alexander acknowledged that she felt that the first half of the hearing had not gone well for her. (HT II-515-517). She based this primarily on the judge's demeanor and behavior. As examples, she cited the judge getting frustrated and throwing down her pen (in apparent exasperation) during a witness's testimony; taking over the cross examination of Petitioner-Father; and eating what looked like potato chips out of a bag on the bench during the hearing. (HT II-516). Before the matter reconvened for a second day, Ms. Alexander, through new counsel, reluctantly agreed to file a motion to recuse. (J-3; HT II-523). She was understandably concerned that if her motion was unsuccessful, "she was still my judge, and I then had a motion to recuse her looming over my case." (HT II-523). Petitioner-Father joined in the recusal motion. (J-4).

Admittedly, the motion upset and irritated the judge. (HT I-149, 153, 166). She expressed this in an after-hours phone call to Edidiong Aaron, an attorney who was at one time friends with Ms. Alexander and at the very least an acquaintance of Judge Williams.¹¹ Judge Williams expressed to Ms. Aaron in

¹⁰ While not part of the formal charges, the record presents a textbook case of how not to handle a potential recusal discussion.

¹¹ Neither Judge Williams nor Ms. Aaron wished to call their relationship a friendship. However, the record reveals Ms. Aaron at least felt comfortable enough to send Judge Williams a private chat during a Zoom hearing on a case that Ms. Aaron had pending

that phone call that she had a current family law case with a member of her sorority who she had tried to help and give GAL business to in the past. (HT I-166). She was offended and upset that this person had filed a motion to recuse and felt the person was making it personal and lied about her. (HT I-149; HT II-413, 418). Judge Williams attributed the filing of the motion to the person feeling as though the temporary hearing had not gone in her favor. (HT II-421). She also told Ms. Aaron that the person had called asking about a senior judge, and that they wanted her off the case. (HT-414). Ms. Aaron reported that Judge Williams said, “I called them and asked them, you know, [W]ell, hey what’s going on? You know is it that you’re embarrassed.” (HT-415). Ms. Aaron suggested to the judge that she just recuse from the case and let another judge handle it. (HT II-419). However, Ms. Aaron said that Judge Williams did not want to do so and expressed to her that if anyone looked it up, it would appear that she had done something wrong and could hurt her in a future election. (HT II-419-421). Judge Williams disputes having said this part; though, she acknowledged in her testimony someone might use it against her in an election. (HT I-164-165).

Although Judge Williams did not use any names in her recounting of events, Ms. Aaron immediately recognized that she was speaking about her friend, Ms. Alexander. (HT II-413, 418). Also during that call, Ms. Aaron spoke with the judge about her reputation as a “father-friendly judge.” (HT II-422). Judge Williams indicated to Ms. Aaron that she knew people said that about her but that she views herself as “the child’s judge.” (HT II-422). She explained to

before her. She apparently wanted to call and laugh (and have an improper *ex parte* conversation) with her about this “crazy case.” (HT I-156,160; HT II-409-412; 415-416; 435-436). Additionally, the two women discussed personal matters such as Ms. Aaron’s new baby, her soul journey, and their weight, which seems to indicate a level of closeness beyond what was admitted. (HT I-159).

Ms. Aaron that she starts at a place of joint custody and wants parties to move her away from that. (HT I-168-170; HT II-422-423).¹²

While on the call with Judge Williams, Ms. Aaron texted Ms. Alexander and told her that she was on the phone with the judge and that the judge was talking about her case and the motion to recuse. (HT II-428-429; 524-525; P-7 and P-8). Ms. Alexander was concerned and wanted to know what was said about her and about her case. Ms. Aaron indicated she would call her when their call concluded, and they spoke the next day. (HT II-429, 526).

It is ultimately a small but critical portion of Judge Williams' call with Ms. Aaron and a portion of Ms. Aaron's subsequent retelling of that call to Ms. Alexander that is in dispute. The three eventually agreed that their respective calls took place.¹³ According to Ms. Alexander, Ms. Aaron told her that Judge Williams was upset about the motion to recuse and said that Ms. Alexander "was personally attacking her by filing such a motion, and that she was going to show me personal when she took my child and gave her to her father." (HT II-527). Ms. Aaron has consistently denied to the Investigative Panel and to us that the judge said this to her and has likewise consistently denied that she said this to Ms. Alexander. (HT II-424-427; 436-440; P-8). Similarly, Judge Williams also adamantly denied ever having said it to Ms. Aaron. (HT I-168).

In determining the credibility between Ms. Alexander's account of the conversation and Ms. Aaron's and Judge Williams', we consider many of the same factors jurors are instructed to consider regarding credibility, including bias, motive, interest or lack of interest in the outcome of the case, demeanor or manner of testifying, and the probability or improbability of knowing the facts to

¹² This would seem to show a fundamental misunderstanding or misapplication of the law. Neutral is taking no position whatsoever. Joint physical custody is itself a position and requires specific findings by the Court for the parents to share joint custody.

¹³ Initially, Judge Williams denied to the Investigative Panel that her call with Ms. Aaron happened, or at least claimed not to recall it. In her testimony, she told us that she did not recall the conversation until she was reminded of it in a motion to recuse that was later filed against her by Ms. Aaron. (HT I-154-156, 159, 301).

which he or she testifies. Starting with Ms. Aaron, we have serious concerns about Ms. Aaron’s demeanor and behavior which negatively impact her credibility, most particularly as it surrounds this one critical statement. She quite clearly did not want to cooperate with our proceeding and attempted to evade subpoena service. (HT II-395-396, 398-407). Moreover, on the date of her testimony, she failed to appear as commanded by a subpoena. (HT II-369-373, 391-392). She was inexcusably late for the hearing and was deservedly chastised by a panel member. (HT II-392-393). Not only does this bear upon her credibility as a witness in this case, but it is also disturbing given that she serves as a part-time Magistrate Judge in Clayton County and is subject to the CJC, which she acknowledged.¹⁴ (HT II-393).

Indeed, Ms. Aaron went to great lengths to avoid being involved in the underlying custody case or the JQC matter at all. From her initial refusal to sign an affidavit in a recusal motion to evading subpoena service to failing to appear when instructed, Ms. Aaron has made it clear she does not want to testify as to what she knows about this matter. This leads us to conclude that she had important information that she did not want tied to her and probably regrets sharing that particular piece of information with Ms. Alexander. In her words, she did not want to be involved because she knew it would get “messy.” (HT II-431). And messy it got — Ms. Aaron eventually filed her own recusal motion against Judge Williams. (HT I-155).

In determining the credibility of Judge Williams’ testimony regarding the Edidiong Aaron conversation, we give strong consideration to Judge Williams’ dishonesty about her initial call to Ms. Alexander, the majority of which was

¹⁴ CJC Rule 2.1, Comment 1 provides as follows: Taking action to address known misconduct is a judge’s obligation. Cooperation with appropriate authorities, as required by this rule, in the investigations and proceedings of judicial and lawyer disciplinary agencies instills public confidence in judges’ commitment to the integrity of the judicial system and the protection of the public requires judges to cooperate fully with JQC. Ms. Aaron’s conduct in this case falls woefully short of meeting her obligations as a judge, and we trust that the Director has addressed or will address this in the appropriate manner.

witnessed by Ms. Smith, whose testimony was unimpeachable. Judge Williams was untruthful on this point, and we find that she was not forthright regarding her conversation with Ms. Aaron either. Indeed, she initially disavowed any such discussion had even taken place when she first met with the Investigative Panel about this complaint in 2022. When pressed on some details of the conversation, she responded several times that she did not recall (the more harmful portions) and that she had fallen asleep during the conversation, punctuating that sentiment to the Director with, “Ms. Veal, I am one step above a narcoleptic and anybody who knows me will tell you I will fall asleep on the phone on you in a minute.” (HT I-155, 158, 170).

Ms. Alexander’s testimony was not without concern or problems either. There were several instances on cross examination in our proceeding where Judge Williams’ counsel chipped away at her credibility, eliciting that she had been fired from two previous employers and that she had misrepresented her income and/or loss of income to us and in her custody case. (HT II-535, 540-541, 590-594, 597). Ms. Alexander’s retelling of what happened at her temporary hearing was also contradicted on more than one point by the transcript of that hearing. (HT II-594-600). Additionally, her recollection of a conversation with Tangi Bush, Judge Williams’ former staff attorney, about *in camera* child interviews, was also directly contradicted by Ms. Bush. (HT II-524,598-603; HT III-1024-1031). While these blows struck by Judge Williams’ counsel certainly made our credibility assessment more challenging, they did not make it impossible. We had the opportunity to personally observe not just her words but her manner of testifying and demeanor. Ms. Alexander volunteered things that did not help her, even telling the panel members at one time that she did not report this to the JQC because, “I have very little faith in the JQC...I think the JQC is for show.” (HT II-531-532). Ms. Alexander also has no interest in the outcome of this proceeding. For her, the damage was done the instant word got out and “spread like wildfire” that she had filed a recusal motion and talked

with the Director and the Investigative Panel. (HT II-534). She suffered a lot of collateral damage as a result. (HT II-535). She is now on medication for anxiety and depression and no longer does the GAL work that she loved, stating, “I just really don’t have faith in the judicial system anymore. I don’t want to practice law. I practice law because I have to. That’s how I feed my baby.” (HT II-535-536, 589).

Acknowledging that all three witnesses: Judge Williams, Ms. Aaron and Ms. Alexander have varying degrees of credibility issues, on balance, we find Ms. Alexander to be the more credible witness and credit her version of the substance of her call with Ms. Aaron.

Based on the totality of the circumstances and having weighed the credibility of all of the witnesses who testified on this particular allegation, we find that Judge Williams made the call to Ms. Alexander with full knowledge that the message had come from Ms. Franklin and not Ms. Alexander. She made this call against the advice of her staff because, as Ms. Smith heard her say multiple times, “we’re sorors” and she believed that Ms. Alexander “would have her back” as she indicated she would also have Ms. Alexander’s. She removed the case from the mass calendar without including the other side in the decision. When it became clear at the hearing that opposing counsel was unaware of what had secretly transpired, Judge Williams elected to share portions of the chronology but left out perhaps the most material part of the story: her improper phone call with Ms. Alexander. She kept herself on the case at least through the temporary hearing which began in January 2022. When the motion to recuse was filed, she became upset and expressed her frustration that the situation had become personal and stated what she intended to do in response, displaying a distressing lack of impartiality.

Failures to Timely Rule (S24Z1139 – Counts 7-17 and
S25Z0722 – Counts 6-15)

Across both sets of charges, Judge Williams is accused of failing to timely issue orders in multiple family law cases, which represent twenty-one total counts. With the exception of four counts — one which was withdrawn by the Director, two which Judge Williams disputes, and one that was neither disputed nor admitted — she admitted the remaining seventeen counts.¹⁵ Her admission was entered in writing in the Stipulations and Admission to Formal Charges entered on May 21, 2025, and throughout her testimony on May 21 and again on June 27, 2025. These specific admissions have never been withdrawn.

As the Judge explained, the older family law cases get “the stinkier they get. It’s just – it is not generally the case that people come to a space of kumbaya. It’s generally the case that if they don’t have some direction, that things can get worse.” (HT I-259-260). The parties are often “in a position of turmoil...And so it’s important that the parties have some understanding of next steps going forward...And then last, but certainly not least, so the parties can...heal, move on to whatever’s next.” (HT I-259-260).

Unfortunately, this did not always happen with her cases. For her part, the judge acknowledged that regardless of her many staffing challenges, this was ultimately her responsibility. (HT I-260-261). We readily accept that the Family Division has a high volume and many stressful cases. Judge Williams took over an enormous caseload, which she succeeded in leaving better than she found it. (HT V-1315, 1319; R-4). We further recognize that the counts of failure to timely rule before us make up but a small portion of the total cases which came before this judge.

¹⁵ The Director withdrew Count 6 in the second set of charges. Judge Williams disputes Counts 7 and 10 in the first set of charges and the parties did not address Count 10 in the second set of charges in any stipulation.

According to the judge, it was approximately 1%. (HT V-1342). In any event, we recognize it is not a large number in relative terms. We also recognize that Judge Williams is not the only judge in the Family Division or Fulton County Superior Court or any Superior Court in Georgia who has been tardy on delivering a final order. Indeed, the testimony of multiple lawyers showed that it was not unheard of to wait, sometimes for months, on orders from courts across the state, though Judge Williams' timelines in the complained-of cases are still outliers and are unacceptable.

In the first set of formal charges, case S24Z1139, Judge Williams stipulated and admitted to Counts 8, 9, 11, 12, 13, 14, 15, 16, 17 and the corresponding factual allegations in paragraphs 48-57, 58-62, 63-70, 71-78, 79-86, 87-91, and 92-100. In the second set of formal charges, case S25Z0722, Judge Williams stipulated and admitted to Counts 7, 8, 9, 11, 12, 13, 14, 15, and the corresponding factual allegations in paragraphs 32-25,¹⁶ 36-41, 42-49-50-54, 55-58, 59-62, and 63-65. We accept the stipulations as outlined.

As to Count 7 and Count 10 (in case S24Z1139) and Count 10¹⁷ (in case S25Z0722), which the Judge did not admit, we likewise find that the evidence supports she did not timely rule pursuant to O.C.G.A. § 15-6-21. Judge Williams explained that the two cases she disputed required an evidentiary hearing and that she had not run afoul of O.C.G.A. § 15-6-21. We disagree. She had already held the final hearing, but had not entered an order within the ninety day timeframe. This failure put those parties in the position of having no choice but to request an additional hearing. Had an order been timely entered, the case would have been concluded, and their motions would have been unnecessary.

¹⁶ The Stipulations entered by the parties reads "25," which the Hearing Panel understands to be a scrivener's error and that it should read "35."

¹⁷ This count appears to be an orphan. It was neither in the enumerated list of stipulations, nor was it one that Judge Williams announced she was contesting. We assume it was simply overlooked by the parties.

As mentioned above, these counts are largely undisputed. Judge Williams accepted responsibility for most of them, and her explanations for these late rulings included both personal and professional challenges. Judge Williams was dealing with the understandable emotional fallout of the deaths of her uncle, her mother and her grandmother within the span of just a few years. On a professional level, she testified that she faced a number of personnel changes and staffing challenges during her first term in office. Her original and very experienced staff attorney, Tangi Bush, left in October 2021. (HT IV-1011, 1043). The position was filled in October 2021 by Janel Bowles, who was a longtime lawyer but had never served as a staff attorney. (HT V-1320-1322). It became clear to the judge about six months later, in March 2022, that Ms. Bowles “was not going to work out.” (HT V-1322). Judge Williams attempted to counsel her and “coach her up” but things did not improve. (HT V-1324, 1330). She intended to fire Ms. Bowles in June 2022, but did not due to a death in Ms. Bowles’ family. (HT V-1325). Finally, in April 2023, she allowed Ms. Bowles to resign in lieu of termination. (HT V-1328). Judge Williams readily acknowledged, “I should have fired her much earlier but I didn’t.” (HT V-1329). We agree. Ms. Bowles was clearly not qualified for the position.

Exhibits J-8 through J-29 are replete with sometimes multiple e-mails from litigants and attorneys submitting and re-submitting proposed orders and continually inquiring about a final order or filing motions seeking a final order. While the judge’s staff responded to some of these communications, no meaningful action was taken by Judge Williams or her staff to communicate with the parties as to when the orders would be provided that they were desperately seeking.

Eventually, the issue made its way to the Director of the JQC. On July 20, 2023, Judge Williams and her attorney, Mr. Gabe Banks, were notified by certified mail that the Investigative Panel had authorized a full investigation into multiple allegations of failures to timely issue orders, as well as failure to

timely schedule hearings. (HT V-1332, 1422; P-11). Judge Williams was provided detailed notice of four complaints which represented eleven separate cases in which orders and/or hearings had not been issued or held. (P-11). In a written response to the JQC on August 11, 2023, Judge Williams pledged that Final Orders would be entered by the close of business next week (presumably mid to late August, 2023). (HT V-1423-1424).

Inexplicably, in at least four of these cases, that did not happen.¹⁸ Consequently, the Director sent a second notice approximately six months later by certified mail to Judge Williams and her attorney, once again seeking either a final order or explanation as to why an order had not been done. In the end, final orders were entered anywhere from thirteen to thirty months after the final hearing, as reflected in the Formal Charges.

The Director presented compelling testimony from several parties who suffered the direct and unfortunate consequences of these extraordinarily late rulings. One of those is Mr. Mark Storch, a *pro se* litigant who waited twenty-three months for an order in his case. He repeatedly emailed Judge Williams' staff and appeared twice in person when Judge Williams was on the bench to ask about a ruling in his case. (J-29). She said she knew his case needed an order and promised to make sure it happened soon, even pledging to have it out in the next ten days. (HT III-13-17). That did not happen. As a result, Mr. Storch suffered greatly. As he explained, "Well, I was without all my property, my funds, my personal belongings, my business, my income. I was borderline homeless, hungry. I was – I had health conditions I couldn't address. So it was pretty serious at my age." (HT III-17). After begging for an order with no results, Mr. Storch eventually contacted the JQC. (HT III-21).

¹⁸ The four cases are Green v. Green, 2020CV339373; Thompson v. Hauck, 2019CV330263; Ritter v. Lopez, 2019CV324517; and Diffley v. Moore, 2019CV317122.

Another party is Amber Center, a single mother who waited twenty-nine months for a ruling on the critical issue of child support. (HT III-29). Ms. Center also appeared *pro se* and tried to be respectful of the Court and the Court's time, following up approximately once per month asking when she might expect a ruling. (HT III-29-30). She was told by Judge Williams' staff, "We'll get to it when we get to it. We have all these cases. It's COVID. Like we have all these issues going on." (HT III-30). Ms. Center tearfully testified that despite her many inquiries, "I just felt like mine didn't matter." (HT III-30). Ms. Center eventually became so distraught that she called the judge's chambers and said, "I guess I'll have to wait until my daughter's effing 18 to figure out what child support is." (HT III-32). Ms. Center admitted she was wrong in doing so but it had been nearly three years and "I felt like my voice wasn't being heard." (HT III-32). About ten minutes after that call, Judge Williams personally called Ms. Center back and "instead of like understanding why I am so frustrated, she berated me on the phone, saying it was inappropriate to talk to her staff like that." (HT III-32). Ms. Center continued, "It was just, 'You can't talk to my staff like that. We'll get to your stuff when we get to it.'" (HT III-32). Ms. Center's "stuff" was that she had lost her job during COVID and could not obtain another full-time job because her daughter had a learning disability which required Ms. Center to be home with her every day for virtual school. (HT III-34). Judge Williams had entered a temporary child support order which cut the support Ms. Center received in half, causing severe financial strain for almost three years as she waited for the final ruling. (HT III-34).

Finally, attorney Kelly Reese testified regarding a legitimization and custody case in which her client went before Judge Williams for a final hearing in the Summer/Fall of 2021. (HT II-638). Judge Williams asked the parties to submit proposed orders, which they did, in September 2021. (HT II-639; J-21). Post hearing, Ms. Reese sent several emails to inquire about the status of the ruling and re-sent the proposed order. (HT III-640; J-22). When that got no

results, she filed a motion pursuant to O.C.G.A. § 15-6-21 seeking a final order. (HT II-641; J-20). Ms. Reese received a final order in the case in January 2024, in which her client was legitimated and received what she described as “ample” parenting time. (HT II-643, 648). However, from the time of the trial until the final order was received, outside of a brief visit during the trial, her client was only permitted a single ten-minute FaceTime call per week *for over two years*. (HT II-643).

The Illegal Jailing of Molly Dennis – (S25Z0722 – Counts 1-3)

In October 2023, Judge Williams presided over a divorce bench trial.¹⁹ By all accounts, the case was a high conflict and extremely acrimonious divorce. (HT I-222; HT III-137,180-182). During the trial, the parties’ two young adult children had each taken a side, and each served as a witness for that respective parent. (HT III-183). Molly Dennis, who was then 21 years old, testified on behalf of her mother and supported her mother at trial. (HT III-141,183). The evidence was clear that by the time of trial, Molly’s relationship with her father, Christopher Dennis, and her brother had severely eroded. (HT III-138).

Molly testified that the trial was her first ever in-person court experience, and she was very nervous about testifying. (HT III-43, 45). Her mother’s lawyers had prepared her for her testimony and the questions they would ask and told her that the judge might ask a few questions as well. (HT III-46). However, the record of the trial reveals that Judge Williams asked more than a few questions of Molly. She took over the examination at times, often interrupting the lawyers and stopping several times to lecture Molly, eventually labeling her as “Team Mom.” (HT III-47, 50; P-10). Judge Williams’ treatment of Molly made her extremely anxious and stressed. (HT III-47-50). Molly

¹⁹ The entirety of the bench trial proceeding was admitted as P-10.

testified, “At that point my heart was racing. I was really nervous. I felt like I had said something wrong or upset Judge Williams in some way.” (HT III-51).

More than once, Judge Williams made reference to teaching Molly a lesson. (HT III-52). Molly felt like Judge Williams was not paying attention to her and felt like she did not listen to both sides. (HT III-52, 54). Additionally, “the judge just continued to tell me it wasn’t my business and that I didn’t really know everything that I said that I knew.” (HT III-58). Molly also noticed during the trial that Judge Williams was “filing her nails behind the bench and typing on a phone, and she took a call at one point during the proceedings while—when it was going on still.” (HT III-58,78-79).

During the bench trial, evidence was adduced that Molly had been inside of her father’s apartment with his express permission to retrieve some of her personal belongings. After she left the apartment, Mr. Dennis claimed that certain items had been damaged and/or stolen and he believed that either his daughter or his estranged wife or both were responsible for the damage. A police report was made regarding the incident and tendered during the trial, but nobody was arrested for the offenses. (HT III-70). Molly admitted to breaking some photos during her trial testimony, but denied the theft or other alleged damage. (HT III-69-70, 184; P-10).

There were instances of general courtroom misbehavior and disruption during the trial by Molly and her mother, which were noted and eventually addressed by the judge. (HT I-219; HT III-62; 147, 183, 188, 192-193). Judge Williams verbally reprimanded Molly and her mother, but elected not to exercise her contempt powers—though it appears she certainly had a reason to do so based upon her observations of disruptive and/or inappropriate conduct and demeanor during the proceedings. (HT I-219-220; HT III-147-148,183).

During closing arguments, Judge Williams was reminded of the damage to the father’s property. She interrupted closing arguments and said, “Speaking of which, Molly, stand up. Deputy Wallace, put Molly in custody for me. Bring

Molly to the front for me please.” (HT I-216-218; HT III-187-188; P-5, pp. 296-297). At Judge Williams’ direction, the deputy sheriff handcuffed Molly behind her back and walked her to the front of the courtroom. Judge Williams said, “Molly, let me tell you what I heard evidence of today.” (P-5, pp. 297-298). Judge Williams enumerated a litany of felony offenses that she said Molly had committed and the maximum punishments for each crime. (P-5, p. 298). Judge Williams then commanded the deputy, “Go show her what that cell looks like. Keep going with your argument.” (P-5, p. 300).

When asked how it made her feel to be handcuffed in front of everyone, Molly told us “Humiliated. My entire — it just felt like my heart like dropped out of my chest.” (HT III-67). The handcuffed Molly was then taken to the holding cell, locked up and left alone for 15 to 45 minutes. (HT III-71 73,150, 157, 223). Molly testified that she believed she was under arrest for the enumerated offenses and “honestly thought I was going to get taken to Rice Street [Fulton County Jail] and booked.” (HT III-76). Molly remained huddled on the concrete bench of the holding cell, crying, until the judge instructed the deputy to retrieve her from the jail holding cell and bring her back to the courtroom. (HT III-74, 76). Once there, Judge Williams asked her how the experience was for her. Molly replied, “Horrible.” (P-5, p. 319). Judge Williams then lectured Molly regarding her behavior, the consequences of choices and her “daddy issues.” (P-5, pp. 319-333).

The handcuffs, which Molly recalled as “heavy” were eventually removed. (HT III-77-78). Her mother was crying and her mother’s attorneys were both shaking and upset. (HT III-78). Molly testified that this has shaken her perception of the justice system and that she continues to be nervous when she attends court with her mother. (HT III-79). When her mother asks if she’s nervous to attend, Molly tells her “you never know what can happen in here. Because you don’t. I thought I was done for the day and instead I was put in handcuffs in a holding cell, and I thought I was going to jail.” (HT III-79).

Molly's testimony and demeanor revealed that she has been deeply affected by this experience:

“So my view of the court system and the justice system together just had already been low after watching the way that my mom was treated and that people with money can do basically whatever they want, is what I learned. And it just was reaffirmed to me that the justice system doesn't actually care about you as a person. They care about like what you can do for them.” (HT III-79).

In her Answer to Formal Charges, Judge Williams admits all of the factual allegations with the exception of paragraph 12 as to the amount of time Molly remained in the holding cell. However, she denies in paragraphs 70-72 of her Answer that they amount to misconduct. Judge Williams acknowledged the facts of what happened but strongly asserted multiple times that Molly was not under arrest, even arguing at times with panel members that “I did not place her under arrest” and “It was not my intention to put her in custody” and asserting it was merely a detention and not an arrest. (HT I-220-224). Her attempts to portray this as anything other than what it was – an illegal arrest and false imprisonment – is disingenuous, particularly given her prior legal training and decade of experience as a prosecutor.

Eventually, Judge Williams finally told us that she had no legal authority to have Molly handcuffed and placed in the holding cell and admitted, “I don't disagree” and “I was wrong.” (HT I-232; HT V-1349-1350). Judge Williams expressed that from her perspective, this was done for the purpose of shocking Molly and getting her attention. (HT I-218-219). She testified that young people are her passion and she was just trying to send Molly the message that she was going to end up on the wrong path. (HT I-233).

In support of her actions, Judge Williams called Mr. Dennis, who testified emphatically that he appreciated what he viewed as the judge's understanding of what his children were going through and her attempt to get his daughter's

attention, in particular, and keep her from going down the wrong road.²⁰ (HT III-140, 154-155). Though, he does not seem to remember the event as clearly as Molly. He did not believe that handcuffs were involved and said “I don’t believe that happened...I can’t imagine that she was handcuffed[,]” because “I believe I would have been shocked. That would have had a little bit more of an impact on me to see that.” (HT III-149-152).

In summary, we find that Judge Williams directed the unlawful arrest and false imprisonment of Molly Dennis without any legal authority.

Personal Call on Behalf of Uncle – (S25Z0722 – Counts 4 and 5)

A domestic contempt case was filed in Fulton County Superior Court. The plaintiff was represented by Patricia Shewmaker and Bonnie Stinson of Shewmaker & Lewis. The defendant represented himself. This case was not assigned to Judge Williams, but rather to another colleague in the Family Division, Judge Kevin Farmer. (HT II-624). The defendant in the case, Corey Hill, is Judge Williams’ uncle.

On April 22, 2024, shortly after the case was filed, Judge Williams called Shewmaker & Lewis and asked to speak only with Bonnie Stinson, the junior associate listed on the pleadings in her uncle’s case.²¹ Ms. Stinson was in court and a message was left by the judge with the firm’s receptionist requesting that Ms. Stinson call the judge after hours on the judge’s personal cell phone. (HT II-608-609 and J-30).

Ms. Stinson, who was licensed to practice law in 2022, felt “extremely uncomfortable” when she viewed the message. (HT II-607, 609). She explained,

²⁰ Mr. Dennis was equally, if not more, impressed with Judge Williams’ ability to easily grasp his “massive” DRFA and 5,000 pages of financial information, which was critical given the financial battle between him and his wife. (HT III-136-137).

²¹ Of particular concern, this telephone call was made while Shewmaker & Lewis had at least one pending case before Judge Williams and after she knew that she was under investigation by the JQC for much, if not all, of the previously discussed allegations of misconduct.

“We currently had a case pending in front of Judge Williams, and I didn’t see a reason why she would be contacting me alone.” (HT II-610). She immediately told her supervising partner, Ms. Shewmaker, of the call and showed her the message. (HT II-611). Neither of them knew of a reason why the judge would be calling asking to speak only with Ms. Stinson and given the somewhat unusual nature of the call, Ms. Stinson wondered if it might be regarding an offer of employment with the judge. (HT II-611).

Ms. Stinson waited until after 5:00 p.m., as instructed by the judge, and returned the call to the judge’s cell phone. (HT II-611). A member of the judge’s staff answered and took a message, as the judge was still in court. The call was returned by Judge Williams later that evening. (HT II-612). Judge Williams began the call by stating “it was Judge Williams” but then “quickly went into that she was not calling me and trying to use her capacity in office and title to try to influence me in any way.” (HT II 612-613). She said that she was calling in her personal capacity on behalf of her uncle, who was the opposing party in Ms. Stinson’s case. (HT I-247; HT II-613). According to Ms. Stinson, whose testimony we credit fully, Judge Williams immediately launched into the merits of the case, which prompted Ms. Stinson to ask several times if the judge was representing her uncle.

Ms. Stinson testified to the following:

“She began advocating for her uncle. She mentioned that if this case had gone in front of her, that she would have dismissed it. That there doesn’t seem to be any benefits available, and that we should just figure a way to make this all go away and that I was a reasonable attorney and that the attorneys at my firm were known to be reasonable attorneys, and that there should be a way that we could just figure this out instead of having the case go forward.” (HT II-615).

Ms. Stinson stated the call lasted some 45 minutes, with the judge talking for about 30 of the 45 minutes. (HT II-622). During the call, Judge Williams told Ms. Stinson, “it was her understanding that there were no [GI] benefits, and

that’s you know, that’s what she was advocating for, that the case should go away.” (HT II-617). While the judge did not directly order her to dismiss the case, Ms. Stinson said that it was “strongly emphasized” that it was “an impossible case” and that she would have dismissed it if it had come before her. (HT II-632). She also requested an extension on her uncle’s behalf, and Ms. Stinson told Judge Williams that her uncle would need to make that request himself in writing directly to the assigned judge. (HT II-619). Ms. Stinson remained “very uncomfortable” throughout the call and attempted to be polite and diplomatic but as non-committal as she could. (HT II-622-623). Ms. Stinson had a case in front of Judge Williams at the time of the call that had been to a final hearing about a month prior and was awaiting a final order on the judge’s pronounced oral ruling. However, the parties had requested time for additional briefing which was granted. (HT I-262; HT II-625-626).

Two days later, on April 24, 2024, Ms. Stinson received an email purportedly written by Judge Williams’ uncle. (HT II-619; J-31). It was Ms. Stinson’s belief, and is likewise ours, that the uncle is not the author of the email. (HT II-620). Ms. Stinson noted that the subject line of the email used Superior Court case identifiers and terminology that *pro se* parties typically do not use. She also found the tone of the email to be incredibly formal (e.g. “Nonetheless, I am not challenging service.”) and sophisticated, even for an intelligent *pro se* party. (HT II-620-621). Importantly, we note that the subject line also contains “FW,” suggesting that the uncle had forwarded the email from someone else or from some other email account to Ms. Stinson. (J-31).

In her Answer to Formal Charges (S25Z0722), Judge Williams admitted that she made the telephone call to Ms. Stinson. However, she denied that she asked for an extension, denied that she said that the parties should “work something out,” denied that she was told the uncle needed to file his own request for extension, and denied that she otherwise discussed the merits of the case. (Respondent’s Answer ¶¶23-26, 73-74). She also disputed the material content of

the telephone call when she first testified before us on May 21, 2025. Judge Williams claimed a lack of recall on many of the Director's questions. However, when posed the direct question "During the call with Ms. Stinson, did you argue the merits of the petition to her?" she unequivocally answered "No." (HT I-252-253). When posed the direct question, "Did you tell Ms. Stinson that if a petition like that came before you, it would get dismissed?" she again unequivocally answered, "No." (HT I-254).

It was only after hearing Ms. Stinson testify on May 22, 2025, and after reviewing the transcript between hearing dates that the judge then amended her testimony before us on June 27, 2025, to more closely mirror what Ms. Stinson had previously said about the material portions of the call. Her new, but still decidedly vague, answers on these topics are once again replete with "I'm not saying that I did or did not" or "I don't recall my exact words" or other failed recollection answers. (HT V-1356-1358). But they are now qualified by explaining, "I remember the sentiment" and "I do recall relaying those sentiments. I don't recall if those are my exact words." (HT V-1357-1358). Her explanation for the blatant discrepancy in testimony from day one to day five seems primarily to blame the Director for not providing a statement from Ms. Stinson in discovery or a summary of what her testimony would be. (HT V-1358-1359). She also attributes her lack of memory on the topic to her grandmother's death, which occurred during that time period. (HT V-1365). As the judge stated, "I've been encapsulated by trauma for the last three years." (HT V-1365). We are sympathetic on this point. Yet, she has been able to recite in great detail her memory of other events from this same time, most of which are helpful to her.

To go from unequivocally denying material portions of the conversation happened, to trying to clean up her testimony and now align it with an obviously credible witness, is troubling. This is compounded by the absurd exercise of getting her to admit that she wrote – or at least played a significant role in

writing – the email sent by her uncle. On day one of the hearing, Judge Williams claimed that she had not even seen the email until it was served on her in discovery. (HT I-255). When asked if she helped him write it, she responded, “He wrote down what I said, but no I did not help write the email to that extent. But did he write down what I was telling him? Yes.” (HT I-255). To clarify, a panel member asked, “So you didn’t write it, but you told him what to write?” (HT I-255). Her answer: “No. What he — I didn’t tell him what to write,” and explains that she simply told him about the call and that her assumption was that he was writing as she was talking. (HT I-255). This left us with the impression (or more accurately, misimpression) that she had merely relayed her conversation with Ms. Stinson and that her uncle was taking notes but formulated his own email. When it was pointed out by a panel member a few moments later that “he writes like a lawyer[,]” the judge responded that “he was writing what I was saying....What I said is I didn’t write this email.” (HT I-257).

On day five of the hearing, Judge Williams’ counsel asked, “Did you physically write the email?” and her answer was “No.” (HT V-1360). He then asked, “did you direct your uncle to — what to put in that email?” and her answer was now “Yes.” (HT V-1361). She now did not dispute that she helped her uncle in drafting the email and said “I told him what to write. I never denied that.” (HT V- 1361-1362). This directly conflicts with what she previously said on day one. She attempted to explain this by saying that after reviewing the transcript and talking to her lawyers that she thought she had been clear that she dictated the email to him (the email she claimed not to have seen until discovery) and that she had in fact told him what to say and “never denied that the words in the email were words that came from me.” (HT V-1475). A panel member then pointed out “You told us you didn’t write it” to which she responded, “I didn’t write it.” (HT V-1475). She explained, “I gave him the language. I told him what to write. I told him how to format it. I can tell you distinctively, specifically, I did not write it.” (HT V-1477). Instead, she

agreed—for the moment—that she told him exactly what to say and he typed it in and read it back to her for approval. (HT V-1478). Though, when a panel member asked moments later if it was a fair assessment that she dictated it and he read it to her and she approved it before it was sent, she equivocated somewhat (“for the most part, yes”) but eventually tepidly agreed that was correct. (HT V-1479). We had to work very hard to ask exactly the right question in precisely the right way to get at the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth. That is unfortunate.

In summary, we find that the call took place how it was described by Ms. Stinson and that the email forwarded by Judge Williams’ uncle was authored by Judge Williams.²²

Conclusions of Law

We now consider whether the Director has proven, by clear and convincing evidence, that Judge Williams violated the CJC as alleged in the two sets of Formal Charges.

If we find that Judge Williams violated any of the CJC rules as charged, we must consider whether constitutional grounds for discipline exist.

Ex Parte Communication with Brandy Alexander – (S24Z1139 – Counts 1-6)

Counts 1-6 allege violations of CJC Rules 1.2(A), 2.4(B), 2.5(A), 2.9(A), and 2.10(B).

Count 1

The Director asserts in this count that Judge Williams violated CJC Rule 1.2 (A), which provides that “Judges shall act at all times in a manner that

²² Respondent testified that she knew Ms. Stinson and found her to be a credible attorney known for always being “really straight” with the Court. (HT I-254).

promotes public confidence in the independence, integrity, and impartiality of the judiciary.”

On the second day of the hearing, Judge Williams’ attorney stated, “I’m authorized to state, as it concerns to Count 1 and Count 3, Judge Williams is – is willing to admit that conduct.” (HT II-361). That statement appears to be unequivocal, however, as it turns out, appearances can be deceiving.

Prior to closing arguments, Judge Williams gave us her “Amended Admissions and Stipulations to Formal Charges.” She now states, “Judge Williams denies Counts 1 through 6.” In other words, she admitted the conduct until she denied the conduct.

This situation illustrates the difficulty that we have had trying to determine exactly what conduct or violations Judge Williams admits to and which she denies, considering the totality of her Answers, her Order on Respondent’s Motion for Recusal,²³ her Stipulations and Admission to Formal Charges, admissions presented by her counsel (such as the authorized admission concerning Count 1), her hearing testimony on the first and fifth days, and, finally, her *pro se* Amended Admissions and Stipulations to Formal Charges.²⁴

Outside of any specific admission or denial, we find one statement from the Amended Admissions to be particularly telling: “[F]or clarity and at the Hearing Panel’s request, Judge Williams’s admissions and stipulations are presented herein in full and are consistent with the trial testimony.”

To the extent this particular *pro se* document has any evidentiary value, it may not be evidence of what Judge Williams would like it to be. The timing alone makes it suspicious, considering the “consistent with the trial testimony”

²³ Specifically, footnote 1 in that Order, in which Judge Williams states, “Though not relevant for purposes of this Order or the Court’s analysis of Respondent’s Recusal Motion, the Court denies having *ex parte* conversation with Respondent about this case on October 18, 2022 (sic), or any other time.

²⁴ HT V-1444 provides a good starting point to show the difficulty the Hearing Panel faces in understanding the evidentiary value of this document based on Judge Williams’ own testimony.

portion of the statement, as does the express withdrawal of what had been the previously admitted set of joint admissions and stipulations. And it is unclear how she can now withdraw stipulations made with and relied upon by the Director without the Director's consent.

This issue of what to believe is a problem of Judge Williams' own making. To the extent we can rely on any admission, we can only do so if Judge Williams did not later massage or retract it altogether. When an admission later becomes a retraction, we turn to the other evidence and consider Judge Williams' evolving positions as evidence of her lack of truthfulness and unwillingness to accept responsibility.

Judge Williams admits that she called Ms. Alexander, but she denies that she addressed either the merits or the substance of the case and claims that she addressed only matters of logistics and scheduling. She may not have discussed the merits or substance, but we find that she did not simply limit the discussion to logistics and scheduling in the way she suggests. What she leaves out of her explanation is any mention of those things Ms. Smith heard her say that show bias and favor, such as Judge Williams' repeated statements that she "had [Ms. Alexander's] back." Were Judge Williams to have admitted to such, it would have revealed her true intentions and cast the seemingly innocuous conversation in a very different light.

We find that Judge Williams may not have veered into the substance of the case, but we also find that the subtext of the conversation was clear – I want to help you, and one way I can do so is to move the case off the mass calendar to give you more privacy. To compound matters, Judge Williams did not ever disclose the information to the opposing party, who was represented. The basis for this finding is more fully set forth in Count 3.

By not only making such an offer, but also actually following through with it, and deliberately choosing not to disclose her actions, we find that Judge Williams was not acting independently of the interests of one of the parties, nor

was she acting with integrity or impartially by secretly handling matters as she did. By failing to demonstrate those qualities, Judge Williams therefore failed to *promote public confidence* in them at *all times*. We find that the Director has proven by clear and convincing evidence that Judge Williams violated CJC Rule 1.2(A).

Count 2

The Director asserts in this count that Judge Williams violated CJC Rule 2.4(B), which provides that “Judges shall not permit family, social, political, financial, or other interests or relationships to influence the judge’s judicial conduct or judgment.” A finding of either influence on the judge’s judicial conduct or the judge’s judgment constitutes a violation of this rule.

Judge Williams denied that she engaged in the conduct the Director alleges in this count.

Judge Williams knew she had a professional relationship with Brandy Alexander prior to the phone call. It is also undisputed that Judge Williams and Ms. Alexander were in the same sorority and that fact was known to both of them. What Judge Williams disputes is that those relationships influenced her judicial conduct or her judgment.

Judge Williams would not have known until much later that Ms. Alexander was a party in a case before her, were it not for the phone call. Once she learned that, Judge Williams took control by offering to move the case (and actually moving it, *sua sponte*) off the mass calendar, even though neither Ms. Franklin nor Ms. Alexander asked her to do so. Judge Williams also reassured Ms. Alexander that she “had her back.”

Judge Williams should never have engaged in this conversation with Ms. Alexander. However, once it happened, she should have ameliorated the problem by disclosing it immediately to opposing counsel. She did not do so, even when she knew at the December 14, 2021, hearing that opposing counsel had no knowledge of it. We find by clear and convincing evidence that Judge

Williams allowed her relationship with Ms. Alexander to affect both her judicial conduct and judgment.

For these reasons, we find that the Director has proven Count 2 by clear and convincing evidence and that such conduct violates CJC Rule 2.4(A).

Count 3

The Director asserts in this count that Judge Williams violated CJC Rule 2.9(A).

Just as with Count 1, Judge Williams, through counsel, admitted Count 3 on day two of the hearing (HT II-361), only to later deny Count 3 on day six. This count is therefore still in dispute, and we must turn to the other evidence presented by the Director.

CJC Rule 2.9(A) begins with the fundamental principle of due process: “Judges shall accord to every person who has a legal interest in a proceeding, or that person’s lawyer, the right to be heard according to law.” To protect that principle, *ex parte* communications are generally prohibited. An exception applies “[w]here circumstances *require*²⁵,” the communications are limited to “scheduling, administrative purposes, or emergencies that do not deal with substantive matters or issues on the merits,” when two further conditions are met:

- a) the judge reasonably believes that no party will gain a procedural, substantive, or tactical advantage as a result of the *ex parte* communication; and
- b) the judge makes provision promptly to notify all other parties of the substance of the *ex parte* communication, and gives the parties an opportunity to respond.

Judge Williams does not deny the call was *ex parte*, but as Count 1 addresses, she denies that she discussed the substance or merits of the case and

²⁵ The rule emphasizes the term “require.”

claims that the discussion was limited to scheduling and logistics.²⁶ As we learned through Ms. Smith’s testimony, the substance of the call was not as innocent as Judge Williams claims.

Considering the totality of the evidence, we find that Judge Williams violated CJC Rule 2.9(A) in several respects. First, we are unable to find that “circumstances required” Judge Williams to call Ms. Alexander. That her own staff advised her not to make the call further undermines any argument that “circumstances required” her to make the call.

Next, the rule limits the subject matter of what can be discussed. By repeatedly telling Ms. Alexander that “she was her soror and had her back,” as Ms. Smith heard her say, Judge Williams violated the due process tenet of fairness and, thereby, the spirit and letter of this rule. Such a statement shows that it was Judge Williams’ intent to provide a procedural benefit (greater privacy) by moving the case off the mass calendar so that she could keep the case in front of her from inception.²⁷

The violations do not stop there. Judge Williams also had the duty to “make provision to promptly notify” the other party. It is implicit in this rule that the other party actually receive notice of the *ex parte* communication.

Even if we believe that Judge Williams instructed her staff to notify opposing counsel, there is no evidence that Judge Williams told her staff the content of her conversation so that they could then properly disclose it to opposing counsel. Judge Williams instructed her staff to move the case from the

²⁶ Judge Williams explains that the exception applies, just as exceptions apply to the hearsay rules. (HT I-175). She then claims, “it was not an improper *ex parte* communication because we only talked about scheduling and logistics.” (HT I-175). This testimony was addressing footnote 1 on p. 3 of Judge Williams’ Order on Respondent’s Motion for Recusal in which Judge Williams denied that she engaged in an improper *ex parte* communication with Ms. Alexander on October 18, 2022. We recognize the 2022 date as a scrivener’s error.

²⁷ The case would have gone before a JO otherwise.

mass calendar, which was done, but her staff did not notify the opposing party *why* the case was moved, even after inquiry from them.

Any claim by Judge Williams that she thought her staff had notified opposing counsel is belied by Petitioner-Father’s counsel, who said at the rescheduled hearing: “Well, your Honor, this is the first I’ve learned of that. I did send an e-mail to your staff attorney when the case was pulled from the original 30-day conference asking why was this case being diverted from the normal course, and I didn’t get a response to that.” (P-1, p. 8). Instead of disclosing the *ex parte* conversation, she remained silent.

For these reasons, we find by clear and convincing evidence that Judge Williams violated CJC Rule 2.9(A).²⁸

Count 4

The Director asserts in this count that Judge Williams violated CJC Rule 1.2(A), which provides that “Judges shall act at all times in a manner that promotes public confidence in the independence, integrity, and impartiality of the judiciary” by making statements concerning how she would rule in a particular case.

This count alleges that Judge Williams said to Ms. Aaron that she would “show [Ms. Alexander] personal when she took her child away and gave her to the father.” Judge Williams denies making this statement to Ms. Aaron or anyone else.

Having weighed the credibility of Judge Williams, Ms. Aaron, and Ms. Alexander on this count, we find it more likely than not that Judge Williams

²⁸ Judge Williams must also comply with the Uniform Superior Court Rules (“USCR”). USCR 4.1 also prohibits *ex parte* communications, “[e]xcept as authorized by law or by rule.” The Director did not charge Judge Williams with violating this rule, but we find by clear and convincing evidence that by violating CJC Rule 2.9(A), Judge Williams violated USCR 4.1 as well. On that basis, we could have found that Judge Williams violated CJC Rule 1.1 – “Judges shall respect and comply with the law.”

made the offending statement to Ms. Aaron and that Ms. Aaron relayed that to Ms. Alexander.

While “more likely than not” is appropriate as an evidentiary standard in some proceedings, it is not the appropriate evidentiary standard we use here. As noted previously, it is the Director’s burden to show by clear and convincing evidence that Judge Williams violated the particular CJC rule. With Count 4, the Director has not met her burden.

Count 5

The Director asserts in this count that Judge Williams violated CJC Rule 2.10(B), which provides that “Judges shall not, in connection with cases, controversies, or issues that come before the court, make promises or commitments that are inconsistent with the impartial performance of the adjudicative duties of judicial office.”

This allegation rests on the statement that Judge Williams made to Ms. Aaron that in child custody cases, she starts from a place of joint physical custody and wants the parties to move her away from that. Judge Williams admitted that she made some version of this statement to Ms. Aaron during their now-remembered telephone call.

At issue here is whether Judge Williams violated CJC Rule 2.10(B) when she discussed her general philosophy in child custody cases with Ms. Aaron. While the statement Judge Williams made concerning custody is not a correct statement of law,²⁹ we recognize that she was then relatively new as a judge and to the Family Division, and perhaps not as well versed in the particulars of

²⁹ O.C.G.A. § 19-9-3(a)(1) provides in pertinent part: “In all cases in which the custody of any child is at issue between the parents, there shall be no prima-facie right to the custody of the child in the father or mother. There shall be no presumption in favor of any particular form of custody, legal or physical, nor in favor of either parent.” O.C.G.A. § 19-9-3(a)(2) further provides that “[t]he duty of the judge in all such cases shall be to exercise discretion to look to and determine solely what is for the best interest of the child and what will best promote the child's welfare and happiness and to make his or her award accordingly.”

family law. We find that she offered the statement not as her intent to rule a certain way in a particular case, but rather in response to Ms. Aaron's comment that some people believed Judge Williams to be a father-friendly judge. For this reason, we find that the Director did not prove by clear and convincing evidence that Judge Williams violated CJC Rule 2.10 (B) as Count 5 alleges.

Count 6

The Director alleges in Count 6 that Judge Williams violated CJC Rule 2.5(A), which provides that "Judges shall perform judicial and administrative duties competently, diligently, and without bias or prejudice."

The misconduct alleged in this count involves the entry of the Order on Respondent's Motion for Recusal followed immediately by the *sua sponte* Voluntary Recusal Pursuant to Uniform Superior Court Rule 25.7.

We are not clear on the nexus between the conduct and the rule violation that the Director alleges. For this reason, we find that the Director did not prove by clear and convincing evidence that Judge Williams violated CJC Rule 2.5(A) as Count 6 alleges.

Having said that, Judge Williams should not construe our position on this count as approval or endorsement of her conduct. Even under the most generous reading, the optics of her recusal order, which is the subject of this count, are clearly self-serving and indicate a level of pettiness not befitting a judge at any level.

Summary of Violations

We find that the Director has proven Counts 1 through 3 by clear and convincing evidence but that she has not proven Counts 4, 5, or 6. On that basis, we next consider the grounds for discipline on the first three counts.

Grounds for Discipline

The Director asserts that Judge Williams is subject to discipline on two separate constitutional grounds. The first is "willful misconduct in office," and

the second is “conduct prejudicial to the administration of justice which brings the judicial office into disrepute.”³⁰

To recommend discipline for a judge on the first – “willful misconduct in office” – we must find that the judge was acting in her judicial capacity and that she took those actions in bad faith. *Inquiry Concerning Peterson*, 319 Ga. at 328.

To recommend discipline on the second – “conduct prejudicial to the administration of justice” – we must find either that the judge was acting in her judicial capacity, in which case, bad faith need not be shown, or, that the judge was acting outside her judicial capacity and that she took those actions in bad faith. *Inquiry Concerning Coomer*, 316 Ga. 855, 861 (2023).

On both grounds, the standard of proof is “clear and convincing.”

We find that Judge Williams was acting in her judicial capacity in Counts 1 through 3. To sustain a recommendation of discipline for willful misconduct in office, we must also find that Judge Williams acted in bad faith.

Our Supreme Court has provided the following guidance:

[T]he concept of bad faith in th[e] context [of this constitutional provision] generally encompasses at least two general characteristics: that the duty breached by the actor was known to that actor, and that the actor was acting with some self-interest or ill will. It certainly must involve something more than negligence ... [B]ad faith is not simply bad judgment or negligence, but it imports a dishonest purpose or some moral obliquity, and implies conscious doing of wrong, and means breach of known duty through some motive of interest or ill will.

Id. at 866.

We believe the factual overlap between Counts 1, 2, and 3 allows us to consider them together.

The question is whether Judge Williams’ conduct was “more than bad judgment and negligence.” This question is easy to answer – it was.

³⁰ These constitutional grounds for discipline are also recognized in JQC Rule 6(A)(1) and (A)(5).

Judge Williams acted with a dishonest purpose by calling Ms. Alexander instead of returning the call to Ms. Franklin. This dishonest purpose is magnified when we consider that Judge Williams' own staff, who recognized the improper *ex parte* call for what it was, advised her not to call Ms. Alexander. We have no trouble finding that by moving the case to a different calendar, as Judge Williams told Ms. Alexander she would, that Judge Williams provided Ms. Alexander with an improper strategic and tactical advantage. Finally, we find that by telling Ms. Alexander that "she was her soror and had her back[,]” Judge Williams engaged in the very essence of conduct [that is] prejudicial [to the opposing party] and to the administration of justice.

It is not a good faith argument, especially for someone empowered with the ability to interpret and apply the laws of this State, to suggest that the conversation she initiated was allowable. Yet even now, Judge Williams maintains that it was allowable as an exception. Her defense merely underscores that she fails to understand or care about the limitations on *ex parte* communications despite her admitted familiarity with the CJC and the additional training that she has taken to become a better judge.

CJC Rule 2.9 presents a clear duty that any judge who engages in an *ex parte* communication, when required, must disclose it. It also imposes a duty on the judge to then disclose the conversation and give the opposing party the opportunity to respond. She breached that duty by willfully choosing to engage in an unnecessary and improper *ex parte* and by failing to disclose it to the opposing party. The duties imposed by the CJC for both counts are quite clear. And she knowingly breached those duties.

We also find that by allowing her relationship with Ms. Alexander to affect how she procedurally handled the case that Judge Williams again acted with a dishonest purpose. That she did not explain the reason for moving the case off the mass calendar, even when opposing counsel inquired as to why, is a conscious doing of wrong.

For these reasons, we find by clear and convincing evidence that Judge Williams is subject to discipline on the constitutional ground of willful misconduct in office.

The second potential ground for constitutional discipline – “conduct prejudicial to the administration of justice” – does not require the finding of bad faith given that the misconduct for each count occurred while she was acting in her judicial capacity.

It is not required, but neither should it be ignored. We begin with the finding of bad faith from above and conclude that acting in bad faith is *prima facie* evidence of prejudicial conduct.

Relying on the facts as more fully set forth in the Findings of Fact and the findings from our earlier analysis in this section, Judge Williams engaged in an improper *ex parte* conversation, treated Ms. Alexander’s case procedurally differently than she treated other cases, failed to disclose the *ex parte* conversation, and attempted to mislead anyone who questioned what happened, from the parties to the Investigative Panel to this Hearing Panel. Her actions were prejudicial to the administration of justice in that they demonstrated bias and favor. It naturally follows that such conduct undermines trust in the court system and therefore brings her judicial office into disrepute.

In summary, on these counts, we find by clear and convincing evidence that Judge Williams’ actions provide a constitutional basis for discipline on the grounds of willful misconduct in office and conduct prejudicial to the administration of justice which brings the judicial office into disrepute.

Failures to Timely Rule (S24Z1139 – Counts 7-17 and
S25Z0722 – Counts 6-15)

Proof of Violations

Across the two sets of charges, these counts allege that Judge Williams either violated CJC Rule 1.1, Rule 2.2, or both.

CJC Rule 1.1 provides that “Judges shall respect and comply with the law.” “Law” includes the Official Code of Georgia Annotated, and in this instance specifically, O.C.G.A. § 15-6-21(b), which provides in relevant part:

In all counties with more than 100,000 inhabitants, it shall be the duty of the judge of the superior, state, or city court, unless providentially hindered or unless counsel for the plaintiff and the defendant agree in writing to extend the time, to decide promptly, within 90 days after the same have been argued before him or submitted to him without argument, all motions for new trials, injunctions, demurrers, and all other motions of any nature.

Fulton County has a population that exceeds 100,000 inhabitants, so Superior Court judges on the Fulton County bench have 90 days to rule.

CJC Rule 2.2 states “Judges shall dispose of all judicial matters fairly, promptly, and efficiently.”

Count 15 from the 2024 charges and Count 6 from the 2025 charges allege the same conduct, so the Director has withdrawn Count 6 from the 2025 charges, and we make no findings as to the withdrawn count.

Judge Williams admitted to most, but not all, of the late ruling charges through her testimony and Stipulations and Admissions to Formal Charges. She took exception to Counts 7 and 10 from the 2024 charges, and her counsel moved for directed verdict as to those counts. (HT III-115). The motion was denied, and Judge Williams, in her Amended Admissions and Stipulations to Formal Charges admitted to every count against her in both sets of charges. Although the Amended Admissions are not sworn, we accept them as at least some evidence that she admits she violated the CJC as the Director alleges.

Combining those admissions with her testimony and other evidence presented by the Director, we find that Judge Williams failed to respect and comply with O.C.G.A. § 15-6-21(b) on the following counts:

- S24Z1139: 7, 10, 13, and 16
- S25Z0722: 10

We further find that Judge Williams failed to dispose of all judicial matters fairly, promptly, and efficiently on the following counts:

- S24Z1139: 8, 9, 11, 12, 14, 15, and 17
- S25Z0722: 7, 8, 9, 11, 12, 13, 14, and 15

Based on these collective findings, we find by clear and convincing evidence that Judge Williams violated CJC Rules 1.1 and 2.2 as the Director alleges.

Grounds for Discipline

We now consider whether the Georgia Constitution permits Judge Williams to be disciplined for conduct comprising Counts 7-17 in S24Z1139 and Counts 7-15 in S25Z0722.

The Director asserts that Judge Williams is constitutionally subject to discipline on two grounds: willful misconduct in office and conduct prejudicial to the administration of justice. We agree.

Beginning with conduct prejudicial to the administration of justice, this ground does not require a showing of bad faith because the misconduct occurred in a judicial capacity, which includes even inappropriate actions taken in good faith.

Here, we find that Judge Williams is subject to discipline on this constitutional ground.³¹ O.C.G.A. § 15-6-21(b), provides an express time to rule on matters before the Court. Additionally, CJC Rule 2.2 similarly requires matters to be heard and ruled on promptly and efficiently. Judge Williams utterly failed to follow either of these rules on these counts. Orders did not exceed the statutorily prescribed deadline by mere weeks or even a few months. In most, if not all of these counts, they were issued years after the final hearing. And in at least four of those cases, the JQC had to notify Judge Williams on two

³¹ We recognize that O.C.G.A. § 15-6-21 also provides a statutory process that could result in removal from office through impeachment proceedings. That sanction is purely legislative and is outside the scope of this Report and Recommendation.

separate occasions in a six-month period of her failure when once should have sufficed to prompt Judge Williams to issue the identified missing rulings.

Returning to the specific ground – conduct prejudicial to the administration of justice – we consider the nature of the prejudice to these parties.

The testimony of the affected parties shows the prejudice they suffered from the extraordinarily long time it took for Judge Williams to provide various orders: health problems, severe financial strain, emotional duress, uncertain custody arrangements, unnecessary and wasteful expenses, an inability to move on, and, for some, abject desperation. But we recognize this list is incomplete. We will never know the full impact on those who did not testify, nor will we ever know the full impact to those who did. We will also never know the second and third order effects of these delayed rulings on the many others affected in domestic cases. What we will also never know is the extent of damage to the trust in the judicial system she caused.

In consideration of the above, we find by clear and convincing evidence that Judge Williams’ conduct (delayed rulings) was prejudicial to the administration of justice (resolution of the cases) and that her conduct brings the judicial office into disrepute (through among other things, loss of trust) on Counts 7-17 in S24Z1139 and Counts 7-15 in S25Z0722.

The harder question is whether any of these late rulings amount to “willful misconduct in office,” which requires clear and convincing evidence of bad faith.

The JQC first notified Judge Williams of the complaints on late rulings by letter that was dated July 20, 2023. (P-11). In that notice, the Director identified eleven cases that were awaiting orders. Judge Williams responded in writing that she would have some of the orders completed by the middle to end of August, 2023.

The question that we now consider is at what point, if at all, a late ruling becomes *de facto* bad faith. To the extent Judge Williams was unaware of her obligations under O.C.G.A. § 15-6-21 and failure to rule in the enumerated cases, the first letter certainly served as notice thereof. By the time she received it, Judge Williams was not slightly or modestly behind the statutory deadline on these cases, she was substantially behind.³² The letter also notified Judge Williams that she was subject to JQC oversight until the orders were prepared, filed, and served on the parties. Yet, in at least four of those cases, the Director had to send a second notice on January 9, 2024.

It is at this point that we find bad faith. It is concerning that the first letter had to be sent, but it is inexcusable that the second was required.³³ By that notice, an additional 173 days – nearly six months – had passed. Through the first notice, she had been alerted and reminded as to what her duties were under the CJC and O.C.G.A. § 15-6-21. Judge Williams continued to violate a known statutory duty, despite notice and a generous amount of time to cure. She knew the law and was willful in not complying with it, despite the oath she took to uphold the law. On these facts, we find that Judge Williams acted in bad faith.

For that reason, we find by clear and convincing evidence that Judge Williams is subject to discipline for willful misconduct in office on Counts 7, 8, 12, 13, 14, and 15 in S24Z1139, given that she violated a known statutory duty and acted in bad faith on those counts.

In summary, on these counts, we find by clear and convincing evidence that Judge Williams' actions provide a constitutional basis for discipline on the grounds of willful misconduct in office for Counts 7, 8, 12, 13, 14, and 15 in

³² By way of example, in Count 8 from S24Z1139, twenty-two months had passed from the final hearing, which means that the order was nineteen months in arrears. This case is one of the four that required a second notice from the Director.

³³ It is just as inexcusable that Judge Williams also failed to meet the deadline she herself set in her first response to the JQC Investigative Panel.

S24Z1139 and conduct prejudicial to the administration of justice which brings the judicial office into disrepute on Counts 7-17 in S24Z1139 and Counts 7-15 in S25Z0722.

The Illegal Jailing of Molly Dennis – (S25Z0722 – Counts 1-3)

Proof of Violations

These counts allege that Judge Williams violated CJC Rules 1.1, 1.2(A), and 2.8(B).

CJC Rule 1.1 provides that “Judges shall respect and comply with the law.”

CJC Rule 1.2(A) provides that “Judges shall act at all times in a manner that promotes public confidence in the independence, integrity, and impartiality of the judiciary.”

Finally, CJC Rule 2.8(B) provides in relevant part that “Judges shall be patient, dignified, and courteous to...witnesses...with whom they deal in their official capacity, and shall require similar conduct of all persons subject to their direction and control.”

We find that the Director has proven Counts 1-3 by clear and convincing evidence. It is undisputed that Molly Dennis was jailed at the express direction and order of Judge Williams. It is also now undisputed³⁴ that there was a complete absence of authority for Judge Williams to do so.

Regardless of her characterization of the incident as a good faith attempt through a “scared straight” tactic to show Molly the error of her ways, and despite her offer of an apology long after the incident, Judge Williams cannot erase the experience and impact to Molly. Nor can Judge Williams convert the incident to anything other than what it was – an illegal arrest and false

³⁴ As the transcript reflects, Judge Williams initially defended her conduct as poor judgment, but not illegal.

imprisonment. Finally, it has not gone unnoticed that the primary purpose of calling Molly's father as a witness was to provide some justification for her arrest and to show that even Molly's father felt like Molly was out of control.

Quite simply, Judge Williams broke the law. Therefore, we find that the Director has proven by clear and convincing evidence that Judge Williams violated CJC Rule 1.1.

Given that Judge Williams has failed to comply with the law, it is no stretch to find by clear and convincing evidence that Judge Williams also violated CJC Rule 1.2(A). The public will not have confidence in a judge who is unable and unwilling to comply with the law, especially one who has specialized training and experience in the area of the law she so flagrantly violated.

CJC Rule 2.8(B) requires that judges exhibit patience, dignity, and courteousness to witnesses. Judge Williams' conduct that day fell well outside of that standard. She was frustrated with Molly, a 21-year old who had never interacted with the court system before, and Judge Williams let her impatience affect her judgment.

The trial transcript shows that Judge Williams treated Molly very differently than other witnesses. Judge Williams interrupted, lectured, interrogated, and criticized Molly throughout the proceeding, which is the very opposite of acting with dignity and courteousness. Filing her nails and taking a phone call during the proceeding does not improve this picture. Finally, Molly was needlessly humiliated when Judge Williams ordered her arrest. Discourteous, impatient and undignified are mild descriptions of what happened during this trial.

We find by clear and convincing evidence that Judge Williams violated CJC Rule 2(B) as the Director alleges.

Grounds for Discipline

The Director seeks discipline for these instances of misconduct on two constitutional grounds: willful misconduct in office and conduct prejudicial to the administration of justice which bring the judicial office into disrepute.

In this matter, Judge Williams was acting in her judicial capacity, so we must find that she acted in bad faith to find that she is subject to discipline for willful misconduct in office. Bad faith is not required to find that Judge Williams' conduct was prejudicial to the administration of justice which bring the judicial office into disrepute.

Beginning with willful misconduct, trained prosecutors have expertise that other legal practitioners generally do not. Prosecutors possess specialized knowledge of what is required to effectuate a legal and constitutional arrest. Yet, despite her extensive training, experience, and expertise from years of serving as a prosecutor, Judge Williams commanded her courtroom deputy to "put Molly in custody for me." She offered Molly's father as a witness to cast the incident as an intervention because he agreed that Molly was out of control. To suggest that she did not know her action was illegal is beyond the pale, and her attempts to portray it as anything other than an arrest are offensive.

We also find that Judge Williams acted in self-interest or ill will. Given these facts, we find that she acted with both. She wanted to teach Molly a lesson she was not asked, nor authorized, to teach. And the only lesson it taught Molly is not to trust the court system.

Finding that Judge Williams violated a known duty and acted with self-interest and ill will, we also find that Judge Williams acted in bad faith.

Finding that Judge Williams acted in her judicial capacity and in bad faith, we find by clear and convincing evidence that the Director has proven willful misconduct in office by Judge Williams as to these counts and that she is therefore constitutionally subject to discipline for willful misconduct in office.

Turning now to conduct prejudicial to the administration of justice,

Judge Williams implored us to focus on her intent, which was not to arrest Molly but instead to help her by employing a “scared straight” tactic. She claimed she wanted to show Molly, in a shocking way, the error of her ways.

Judge Williams, having been called to task for that conduct, now admits that her actions were wrong and inappropriate. She testified, upon further reflection, that she would not do it again and has not since then jailed anyone without legal cause to do so. That Judge Williams felt it necessary to tell us that she has not illegally jailed anyone else since that incident is the lowest of low bars that she could meet.

Judge Williams’ motives then and her regret over the incident now do not excuse her from being subject to discipline as to her wrongful (and illegal) conduct on these counts. Even inappropriate actions taken in good faith are subject to discipline if they are prejudicial to the administration of justice and bring the judicial office into disrepute.

In this case, Molly said it best,

“So my view of the court system and the justice system together just had already been low after watching the way that my mom was treated and that people with money can do basically whatever they want, is what I learned. And it just was reaffirmed to me that the justice system doesn’t actually care about you as a person. They care about like what you can do for them.” (HT III-79).

We find by clear and convincing evidence that her actions provide a constitutional basis for discipline on the ground that her conduct was prejudicial to the administration of justice which brings the judicial office into disrepute.

In summary, on Counts 1-3, we find by clear and convincing evidence that Judge Williams’ actions provide a constitutional basis for discipline on the grounds of willful misconduct in office and conduct prejudicial to the administration of justice which brings the judicial office into disrepute.

Personal Call on behalf of Uncle – (S25Z0722 – Counts 4 and 5)

Proof of Violations

Counts 4 and 5 allege violations of CJC Rules 1.2(B) and 1.3.

Rule 1.2(B) provides that “Judges shall participate in establishing, maintaining, and enforcing high standards of conduct, and shall personally observe such standards of conduct so that the independence, integrity and impartiality of the judiciary may be preserved.”

Rule 1.3 mandates that “Judges shall not lend the prestige of their office to advance the private interests of the judge or others.”

The conduct alleged here involves the improper call on behalf of her uncle in his pending case.

Judge Williams admits to talking to Ms. Stinson on the phone, but she denies that she said what the Director has alleged. She also, after in-depth questioning by us, finally admitted her involvement in authoring the email.

We first consider the suspicious nature of Judge Williams’ call to the firm representing the opposing party in her uncle’s case: a message left for a very inexperienced associate; an instruction to the young associate—and only that associate—to call Judge Williams after 5:00 p.m.; and an instruction for that associate to call Judge Williams on her personal cell phone.

It does little to negate the inappropriateness of the situation to begin the call by saying I am not calling as a judge when you are, in fact, a judge who is calling an attorney who has a pending case in front of you. One might argue the only purpose in making the statement was to manufacture plausible deniability of the very conduct in which she was actively engaged. In other words, I am not calling as a judge, but don’t forget I’m a judge, and I would have dismissed the case.

Judge Williams’ attempt to clarify her previous testimony by testifying again on day five was not helpful to her or us. While she was still reluctant to admit that she said what Ms. Stinson reported, she acquiesced to the possibility.

By materially altering her own testimony to conform more closely with the evidence against her, she inflicted her own wound.³⁵

We first find that Judge Williams was acting outside of her judicial capacity when she made the call and prepared (or assisted with preparing) the email. We also find that it makes no difference as far as Rules 1.2(B) or 1.3 is concerned whether she wrote the email or dictated to someone else what to write, in whole, or in part.

We therefore find by clear and convincing evidence that Judge Williams did not exhibit the high standards of conduct required of judges under this rule when she called and improperly discussed her uncle's case – one that was assigned to a different judge on her own bench – or by actively participating in preparing the email to ask for a continuance. In so doing, she failed to personally observe the high standards of conduct that preserve the independence, integrity, and impartiality of the judiciary. In short, she violated CJC Rule 1.2(B), as the Director alleges.

In speaking to the merits of the case, and by stating that she would dismiss the case, Judge Williams lent the prestige of her office to advance her uncle's, and by extension, her own, interests. For that reason, we find by clear and convincing evidence that Judge Williams violated CJC Rule 1.3.

In summary, we find that the Director has proven Counts 4 and 5 by clear and convincing evidence.

Grounds for Discipline

This conduct occurred outside of Judge Williams' judicial capacity, so the only available constitutional ground for discipline is conduct prejudicial to the administration of justice which brings the judicial office into disrepute.

³⁵ The credibility problem was not helped by Judge Williams' explanation for this shifting story, wherein she blamed the Director for not providing her a statement or transcript of what the witness would testify to ahead of time.

“Conduct prejudicial to the administration of justice refers to inappropriate actions taken in good faith by the judge acting in her judicial capacity, but which may appear to be unjudicial and harmful to the public's esteem of the judiciary.” *Coomer I*, 315 Ga. at 859. “Prejudicial conduct may also refer to actions taken in bad faith by a judge acting outside her judicial capacity.”

To be sure, Judge Williams displayed poor judgment in making the call to Ms. Stinson, and Judge Williams eventually admitted as much and professed that she has not and would not do it again. Her actions demonstrate, however, that her conduct went beyond simply poor judgment.

To discern intent, we consider the circumstances surrounding the conduct. The evidence shows that she sought out, and asked to speak only to the least senior, and probably, the easiest to influence, attorney on the case. Judge Williams left a message for Ms. Stinson asking to be called after hours on her personal cell phone. It is hard to conclude anything other than Judge Williams was well aware of the impropriety of what she was doing.

Additionally, Judge Williams was dishonest when she initially testified. She unequivocally denied the material and damaging parts of the call. It is only after she recognized the strength of the evidence against her that she offered a different version of events. And, it was only after Ms. Stinson very credibly testified to exactly the opposite that Judge Williams attempted to walk back her denials. Her evolving and evasive testimony served only to underscore that she knew and appreciated that her conduct was wrong and improper and that she acted with the belief that no one would discover her involvement.

Relatedly, Judge Williams did not want to admit that she was involved with the email that was sent to her uncle (from somewhere or somebody) and then forwarded to Ms. Stinson. Her initial position to us was that she did not write it. That then evolved to “I helped him craft a response,” which then later evolved to “I dictated it.”

Her lack of candor on these counts shows us that Judge Williams knew she had a duty to not to take the actions she took, yet she did so anyway, and she did it out of self-interest (to help a close family member) and ill will (toward the opposing party in her uncle’s suit). We further find Judge Williams acted with a “dishonest purpose” and “conscious doing of wrong.”

We find by clear and convincing evidence that Judge Williams acted with more than negligence and that her conduct meets the standard for bad faith.

By finding that Judge Williams was acting outside her judicial capacity and that her actions were conducted in bad faith, we find by clear and convincing evidence that her actions provide a constitutional basis for discipline on the ground that her conduct was prejudicial to the administration of justice which brings the judicial office into disrepute.

RECOMMENDED SANCTION

We recommend that Judge Williams be subject to discipline by the Supreme Court for her multiple violations of the CJC, which the Director has proven by clear and convincing evidence constitute willful misconduct in office (Counts 1-3 and 7, 8, 12, 13, 14, and 15 in S24Z1139 and Counts 1-3 in S25Z0722), conduct prejudicial to the administration of justice which bring the judicial office into disrepute (Counts 1-3 and 7-17 in S24Z1139 and Counts 1-5 and 7-15 in S25Z0722) or both (Counts 1-3 and 7, 8, 12, 13, 14, and 15 in S24Z1139 and Counts 1-3 in S25Z0722).

The Director contends that Judge Williams’ removal from office is the only appropriate sanction given the seriousness of the violations, the pattern of repeated misconduct, and her lack of candor.

Judge Williams seeks something short of removal, although it is not entirely clear what alternative sanction she is seeking. Her counsel argued for “a private reprimand up to and including a suspension of no greater than 30 days.” (HT VI-84).

Judge Williams testified that she believed that a private reprimand “doesn’t even make sense” because “the cat’s out of the bag, right?” (HT V-1492). She suggested a public reprimand was the appropriate sanction, “even though clearly this has been publicized everywhere. So functionally, I’ve already had that, right?” (HT V-1489). Additionally, she asked that in lieu of a suspension that we take into account the fact that she has been paying her own legal fees and “Mr. Banks and Ms. McFadden are not cheap...the purpose of the suspension is to impute a financial penalty to the judge. Well I’ve endured that financial penalty.” (HT V-1490-1491). However, in her Answers to Formal Charges on both cases, Judge Williams asked “[t]hat all costs be assessed against the JQC.” She clarified that those costs should be assessed against the Director and the Investigative Panel and wants them to pay her legal fees “because I am here because the JQC has stayed steadfast to nope, removal is the only answer.” (HT I-282). Eventually, she landed on a public reprimand and the financial penalty she has already paid (to her lawyers) as “tantamount to a fine, so to speak[,]”³⁶ but if we were not inclined to agree, then no more than a thirty-day suspension. (HT V-1492).

In making our recommendation, we turn to Comment 6 from JQC Rule 6, which provides guidance on what we may consider:

“[w]henver the...Hearing Panel determines there has been a transgression, it should consider whether disciplinary action is appropriate and the degree of discipline to be imposed through a reasonable and reasoned application of the text of the Code, taking into account such factors as *the seriousness of the transgression, whether there is a pattern of improper activity, and the effect of the improper activity on others or on the judicial system.*” (emphasis added).

³⁶ This begs the question: How many criminal defendants or civil litigants were given credit against any fine assessed by Judge Williams for payment of their legal fees?

Beginning with the seriousness of the transgressions, we find that they fall on a continuum. The illegal jailing of a witness is the most egregious. In a vacuum and viewed in context of her total caseload, the late rulings appear to be the least serious of the transgressions. However, to say that any of these transgressions are less serious than others should not be construed to suggest that they are not all serious in and of themselves.

For example, we recognize that even though the late rulings were certainly a small percentage of her overall caseload, it does not mean that it was of little impact to the affected individuals. From a man who was hungry and homeless and could not get necessary medical treatment, to a mother who mightily struggled financially for almost three years awaiting a child support ruling, to a father whose entire relationship with his children for years was a single ten-minute FaceTime call per week, the consequences were significant and outsized. These parties were denied the certainty, stability, and relief that they deserved from the judicial system.

As for Molly Dennis, the outrageousness of Judge Williams' conduct speaks for itself. She broke the law in a way that is inexcusable and which has left an indelible impression upon Molly. If the public cannot trust the person who has taken an oath to uphold the law to actually do so, the public's perception of the judiciary as a competent, neutral and equitable body is severely damaged.

The improper *ex parte* call and using the prestige of her title to further her and her uncle's interests are also very serious. Both instances of misconduct erode public confidence in the impartiality and integrity of the judiciary. They leave the public with the image of a judge who allows personal, social, or family connections to influence her judgment and actions. In addition, as discussed previously and below, Judge Williams lied about what happened in both of these instances.

Next, we examine whether there has been a pattern of improper activity. There certainly has been in this case. The JQC Investigative Panel opened their first investigation of Judge Williams in February of 2022, concerning the improper *ex parte* call. Before that could be resolved, the Investigative Panel began its next investigation concerning multiple complaints of failures to timely rule, which the Director wrote her about not once but twice. Then came the illegal jailing of Molly Dennis and later, the improper use of her position on behalf of her uncle. These last two incidents occurred at times when she knew she was already under investigation by the JQC for the previous complaints: a time when most judges would be on their best behavior. This leads us to one of two equally concerning conclusions: either she just did not care, or that was her best behavior.

We also consider the effect of her improper activity on others and on the judicial system. It requires little effort to find that her improper conduct has had a substantial effect on every person involved with Judge Williams' acts and failures to act. Beginning with the late rulings, as mentioned above, the percentage of late rulings may have been small against the whole of her caseload, but to the litigants, the costs were immeasurable. Relief that is so late in coming was quite possibly no relief at all to those parties and directly reduced the faith of those parties in the court system and likely did the same for anyone with whom they shared their experiences. This creates a ripple effect that further reduces faith in the judiciary.

Likewise, both the improper *ex parte* conversation and the inappropriate use of her position on behalf of her uncle, erode public trust in the judicial system. These two incidents, in actuality and in appearance, demonstrate for the public a judge who moves behind the scenes and in secret to manipulate case outcomes.

As for the illegal arrest of Molly Dennis, the ramifications are undeniable. Public trust in the judicial system is annihilated when judges do not comply

with the law and an individual's liberty is taken as a result. It cannot be put any more plainly than when Molly publicly said, "it just was reaffirmed to me that the justice system doesn't actually care about you as a person."

In addition to the factors contemplated in the JQC rules, we also evaluate other mitigating and aggravating circumstances presented. Judge Williams' counsel highlights several factors in mitigation including her lack of prior disciplinary history as a judge or a lawyer; her acknowledgement of misconduct and remorse, her inexperience and growing pains as a new judge, her willingness to take corrective actions and additional training; her community support and re-election despite the pending formal charges; and her personal family circumstances. (HT VI-81-82). Taking these at face value, they each amount to some evidence of mitigation.

However, a closer examination reveals that at least some of them are also not as meaningful as Judge Williams suggests. For example, the many hours of National Judicial College training that she presented in R-6 and her willingness to attend future training as required, appear mitigating on their face. We note, however, that many of the would-be helpful classes ("Mindfulness for Judges" in 2022, "Decision Making" in 2023, and "Enhancing Judicial Bench Skills" in 2023) had already been attended by Judge Williams prior to at least two of the instances of misconduct here. They did not prevent the misconduct that occurred and do not provide us any level of comfort they will prevent future misconduct. Instead, they illustrate for us that this is not simply an issue of re-training.

Similarly, Judge Williams asserts that she has a lack of any disciplinary history with either the State Bar of Georgia or with the JQC. That is a factor to consider and helpful for her generally but does not take into account the fact that though she has never been formally disciplined by the JQC, this is also not a case that presents a singular instance of misconduct before this body. Rather,

there were multiple instances of misconduct which span the majority of her first term in office.

Finally, she contends that she has accepted responsibility for most of the misconduct. This presents the murkiest of the mitigation evidence because it is still far from clear what Judge Williams has really admitted to, given that as readily as she admitted to certain violations, she just as quickly retracted them, even contradicting at times what her own lawyers stated on the record to us.³⁷ This confusion was created by nobody but her. She wishes to appear cooperative and receive the benefit of admitting: “I am admitting my wrong. I am taking responsibility, and I tried to take responsibility from day one. But when you're told the only thing that's on the table for you is removal, I don't have a choice but to come to you-all.” (HT I-281). But she also wants us to ignore her other words and actions throughout this entire process that indicate otherwise, starting with how she behaved when she received her first complaint. The Director asked, “Do you remember calling the main line of the JQC, speaking to Ms. Burshe and immediately saying, “This is BS?”” Judge Williams admitted, “I probably did.” (HT I-299).

The Director and Judge Williams both urge us to look at recent decisions for guidance, and they have identified those which they each contend are the most similar to this matter. Judge Williams offers *Inquiry Concerning Norris*, 314 Ga. 10 (2022) as the most similar and insists it is on all fours with this case.

³⁷ A truly bizarre example of this is her Amended Admissions and Stipulations to Formal Charges that was presented on July 14, 2025. Though she couched it as being prepared “at the Hearing Panel’s request,” it is a not so veiled attempt by Judge Williams, even after evidence was closed, to get the last word. As an initial matter, we merely asked the attorneys to clarify for us *in closing arguments* where we stood on admissions. We did not ask for this document, which is fraught with problems. It is glaringly obvious that *only* Judge Williams signed this document. Neither of her attorneys did, as doing so would contradict the previous representations they had made as officers of the court. The Director certainly was not invited to review or sign it, despite the fact that it negates their previous stipulations and attempts to bind her to the new ones. The only clarification this document provides is that we are correct in our credibility assessment of Judge Williams.

While it is true that her case and the *Norris* case bear some similarities, they are not identical. The case before us involves a witness being needlessly humiliated, handcuffed and placed in a holding cell for a period of 15-45 minutes based on a directive from the judge. The citizen in *Norris* endured a similar and humiliating berating from the judge; felt as though he was not free to leave; was told no when he asked to leave; and an armed deputy was standing at the door to the judge's office. However, he was never physically placed in handcuffs, escorted from the courtroom, and locked in a jail cell.

Moreover, the illegal jailing — albeit the worst misconduct alleged — is not all that has been alleged and now proven here. Perhaps if our illegal jailing incident existed in isolation, a different result *might* follow. It does not. Here, there has been a pattern of misconduct alleged and proven by the Director. The Director asserts that this case much more closely aligns with the multiple CJC violations and evasive, disingenuous, and dishonest testimony displayed in *Inquiry Concerning Peterson* 319 Ga. 316 (2024). We agree.

Aside from the proven misconduct, what is equally, if not more distressing is Judge Williams' sometimes outright dishonesty and other times evolving testimony during these proceedings. Judge Williams gave false testimony regarding some allegations and was evasive and deceitful on others. We should not have to ask questions multiple times or ask the exact right question to get an accurate, clear and complete answer. Moreover, she should not have to clean up her testimony between hearing sessions to make it sound better after an adverse witness testifies. Of all the witnesses who come before us, the one who is expected to be the *most* forthright and the *most* candid is the judge. In the matter before us, unfortunately, that was not the case.

Coomer II, 316 Ga. at 866 provides us with our North star on this particular issue:

“The rule of law depends on such public trust. We do not expect judges to be perfect; judges are human. But we can and do expect

them to be honest. **The judiciary has no place for dishonest persons.** And public confidence that judges are honest is particularly important given the place of the judiciary in our system of government: The judiciary's authority depends in large measure on the public's willingness to respect and follow its decisions. As Justice Frankfurter once put it, 'justice must satisfy the appearance of justice.'”

(internal punctuation and citation omitted).

We do not expect Judge Williams to be perfect. However, we did expect her to be honest during her testimony to us. On that front, Judge Williams fell woefully short. As discussed throughout this recommendation, Judge Williams' answers evolved throughout the hearing depending on what answer she believed helped her defense the most. At times, her responses were incomplete and required intense, probing questions by us in order to obtain a clear picture of what had actually transpired. Her stunning lack of candor to us was disappointing (if not unsettling), to say the least, as we hold judges to a higher standard. Given the level of untruthful testimony Judge Williams offered throughout, we are left with little option but to seek the ultimate sanction of removal. A judge that cannot be trusted to tell the truth cannot be trusted to remain in office.

We have approached our task with the solemnity and seriousness it is due. We do not take this responsibility lightly and do not make this recommendation without the full knowledge of what this means for Judge Williams, personally and professionally.

However, “[t]he object of proceedings such as this one is not to punish the individual judge, but to maintain the honor and dignity of the judiciary and the proper administration of justice.” *Matter of Inquiry Concerning a Judge*, 265 Ga. 843, 848 (1995) (internal punctuation and citation omitted). As our Supreme Court has explained, “[t]he judiciary’s judgment will be obeyed only so long as the public respects it, and that respect will not long survive judges who act in a

manner that undermines public confidence in their judgment and integrity.”
Coomer II, 316 Ga. at 855–56.

We unanimously recommend that Shermela J. Williams be removed from her position as Fulton County Superior Court Judge.

Upon the filing of this Report and Recommendation, the Director shall transmit the record to the Supreme Court of Georgia.

[Signatures follow on next page]

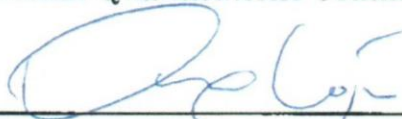
Respectfully submitted this 2nd day of October, 2025.



Judge Alison T. Burleson
Presiding Officer, Hearing Panel
Judicial Qualifications Commission



Richard L. Hyde
Citizen Member, Hearing Panel
Judicial Qualifications Commission



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