



Administrative Judges

Committee on Adjudication

Proposed Recommendation for Committee | April 30, 2018

1 In Recommendation 2016-4,¹ the Administrative Conference offered best practices for
2 structuring the increasing number of legally required evidentiary hearings in administrative
3 adjudications not subject to the adjudication provisions of the Administrative Procedure Act
4 (APA).² Those hearings are usually not presided over by administrative law judges (ALJs)
5 appointed under 5 U.S.C. § 3105,³ but instead by agency employees often known as
6 “administrative judges”⁴ (although they often go by any number of other names).⁵ For purposes
7 of this Recommendation, all adjudicators who are neither ALJs nor agency heads are referred to
8 as “administrative judges.” This Recommendation addresses an important subject not addressed

¹ Admin. Conf. of the U.S., Recommendation 2016-4, *Evidentiary Hearings Not Required by the Administrative Procedure Act*, 81 Fed. Reg. 94,314 (Dec. 23, 2016).

² See 5 U.S.C. §§ 554, 556–557.

³ If an agency’s authorizing statute requires an adjudication “on the record after opportunity for an agency hearing,” the formal adjudication provisions of the APA apply. *Id.* § 554(a). The presiding official in an APA hearing must be an ALJ (or “the agency” or “one or more members of the body which comprises the agency”). *Id.* § 556(b). “In the absence of a statute requiring formal APA adjudication, agencies have broad discretion to fashion their own adjudicatory procedures.” Matthew Lee Wiener et al., Office of the Chairman, Admin. Conf. of the U.S., Equal Employment Opportunity Commission: Evaluating the Status and Placement of Adjudicators in the Federal Sector Hearing Program 6 (March 31, 2014), <https://acus.gov/report/equal-employment-opportunity-commission-evaluating-status-and-placement-adjudicators-federal>. Agencies generally use their discretion to appoint administrative judges to preside over non-APA hearings, rather than ALJs. *Id.* On the circumstances under which Congress may consider converting certain administrative judge positions to ALJ positions, see Admin. Conf. of the U.S., Recommendation 92-7, *The Federal Administrative Judiciary*, ¶ I.A, 57 Fed. Reg. 61,760 (Dec. 29, 1992).

⁴ Administrative judges far outnumber the approximately 2,000 ALJs in federal service. See Kent Barnett, Logan Cornett, Malia Reddick & Russell Wheeler, Non-ALJ Adjudicators in Federal Agencies: Status, Selection, Oversight, and Removal 17 (Feb. 14, 2018) (draft report to the Admin. Conf. of the U.S.), <https://acus.gov/report/non-alj-adjudicators-federal-agencies-status-selection-oversight-and-removal> [hereinafter Barnett et al.] (accounting for 10,831 administrative judges among fifty-three agencies and components of agencies).

⁵ Titles used by agencies that employ administrative judges include “Hearing Officer,” “Immigration Judge,” “Veterans Law Judge,” “Administrative Patent Judge,” and “Administrative Appeals Judge.” “Administrative Judge” is also an official title held by some non-ALJ adjudicators.



ADMINISTRATIVE CONFERENCE OF THE UNITED STATES

9 by Recommendation 2016-4: the selection, oversight, evaluation, discipline, and removal of
10 administrative judges.

11 In contrast to hearings over which ALJs preside, which are regulated by the adjudication
12 provisions of the APA, hearings over which administrative judges preside do not share a uniform
13 statutory framework. Instead, they are governed by procedures, norms, and practices specific to
14 each administrative judge’s employing agency and relevant governing statutes.⁶ Administrative
15 judges oversee enforcement, benefits, licensing, and other classes of hearings situated within a
16 wide variety of substantive areas. Hearings may be adversarial or inquisitorial, and may involve
17 disputes between private parties or between private parties and the federal government. Hearings
18 outside the APA also contrast widely in their procedural complexity, ranging from those that are
19 similar in formality and procedure to APA hearings to those that are procedurally minimal and
20 informal.⁷

21 As with the nature and procedural complexity of hearings outside the APA, the policies
22 and procedures pertaining to the selection, oversight, evaluation, discipline, and removal of
23 administrative judges are necessarily diverse and not governed by a specific framework. In
24 regard to hiring in particular, administrative judges are typically attorneys in “schedule A” of the
25 excepted service, which means they are hired under agency-specific procedures without a
26 competitive civil service examination and their qualifications are set by their hiring
27 agencies.⁸ Further, attorney hiring is not subject to Office of Personnel Management rules on
28 rating applicants for excepted service positions, and veterans preference is required only as far as
29 administratively feasible.⁹ Once hired, attorneys are generally subject to a longer trial period

⁶ All adjudication proceedings are also subject to baseline requirements imposed by the APA at 5 U.S.C. §§ 555 (addressing “ancillary matters”) and 558 (relating to licensing) and constitutional due process.

⁷ Recommendation 2016-4, *supra* note 1; *see also* Michael Asimow, Evidentiary Hearings Outside the Administrative Procedure Act 7–9 (Nov. 10, 2016) (report to the Admin. Conf. of the U.S.), <https://www.acus.gov/report/evidentiary-hearings-outside-administrative-procedure-act-final-report>.

⁸ *See* 5 C.F.R. §§ 6.2, 6.3(b), 213.3101.

⁹ *See id.* § 302.101(c).



ADMINISTRATIVE CONFERENCE OF THE UNITED STATES

30 before they acquire statutory rights in removal proceedings.¹⁰ However, they are subject to
31 generally-applicable civil service laws, rules, and regulations, such as those related to
32 background investigations, job classification, compensation, and performance management.

33 In contrast, the policies and procedures pertaining to the selection, oversight, evaluation,
34 discipline, and removal of ALJs are prescribed by the APA. These policies and procedures are
35 largely designed to promote ALJ independence. Among other things, they establish a merit-
36 based system for selecting ALJs, prohibit ALJs from engaging in investigation or prosecution or
37 from reporting to officials with such duties, limit the ability of ALJs to engage in *ex parte*
38 communications, and exempt ALJs from performance appraisals and bonus eligibility.¹¹ In
39 addition, ALJs may only be removed or disciplined “for good cause established and determined
40 by the Merit Systems Protection Board.”¹²

41 While the Administrative Conference does not believe it is possible or desirable to
42 recommend uniform policies or practices governing the selection, oversight, evaluation,
43 discipline, and removal of administrative judges, it does believe that agencies should consider
44 the policies and practices employed by other agencies, federal and state judicial systems,¹³ and
45 the ALJ system with respect to these and related matters when designing or evaluating
46 adjudication programs. The Administrative Conference also believes that agencies should
47 consider the ethical standards of the Office of Government Ethics (OGE),¹⁴ which agencies may

¹⁰ See 5 U.S.C. § 7511.

¹¹ See *id.* §§ 554(d), 556(b), 557(d)(1); 5 C.F.R. §§ 930.206(a)–(b).

¹² 5 U.S.C. § 7521(a).

¹³ See, e.g., 28 U.S.C. § 455(b) (prescribing the conditions for which justices and judges of the United States must disqualify themselves); *id.* § 631(b)(5) (directing the Judicial Conference of the United States to promulgate regulations that provide for the establishment of merit selection panels to advise in the selection of federal magistrate judges); JUD. CONF. OF THE U.S., REGULATIONS OF THE JUDICIAL CONFERENCE OF THE UNITED STATES FOR THE SELECTION, APPOINTMENT, AND REAPPOINTMENT OF UNITED STATES BANKRUPTCY JUDGES ch. 3 (authorizing the use of merit selection panels to advise in the selection of bankruptcy judges); see also Barnett et al., *supra* note 4, at 61–62 (remarking on the use of state and federal merit selection panels and commissions to advise in the selection of some state judges and federal bankruptcy and magistrate judges).

¹⁴ 5 C.F.R. part 2635.



ADMINISTRATIVE CONFERENCE OF THE UNITED STATES

48 supplement pursuant to executive order and OGE regulation,¹⁵ and governing conflict-of-interest
49 laws¹⁶ that are applicable to administrative judges. This Recommendation identifies practices
50 that may promote (1) the objectives of competence, integrity, impartiality, and the degree of
51 independence¹⁷ appropriate for a system in which decision-making and policy-making authority
52 ultimately lies in the agency head; and (2) clarity and transparency with respect to the policies
53 and practices governing the selection, oversight, evaluation, discipline, and removal of
54 administrative judges.

RECOMMENDATION

Selection

- 55 1. When practicable and permitted by law, agencies should consider using merit selection
56 panels or commissions to select or recommend administrative judges for positions whose
57 principal duties are adjudicative. Models for the use of such panels or commissions could
58 include those used by some state governments to advise those who select judges and by
59 the federal courts to advise in the selection of United States bankruptcy and magistrate
60 judges.
- 61 2. Agencies that use such panels or commissions should establish rules and requirements for
62 membership on them and identify categories of individuals who are eligible to serve on
63 them. Membership could consist of one or more of the following categories of
64 individuals:
- 65 a. current or former administrative judges from within or outside the agency;
 - 66 b. other federal employees with relevant expertise from within or outside the
67 agency; and

¹⁵ Exec. Order 12,674, § 301, 54 Fed. Reg. 15,159, 15,160 (April 14, 1989) (as amended by Exec. Order 12,731, 55 Fed. Reg. 42547 (Oct. 17, 1990)); 5 C.F.R. § 2635.105.

¹⁶ 18 U.S.C. §§ 201–209.

¹⁷ “Impartiality” relates to the adjudicator’s ability to issue fair, neutral decisions. *See* Barnett et al., *supra* note 4, at 1–2 n.3.



ADMINISTRATIVE CONFERENCE OF THE UNITED STATES

- 68 c. if legally permissible, representatives of parties with experience in the agency’s
69 adjudicatory proceedings.
- 70 3. Agencies should identify the duties and responsibilities of merit selection panels or
71 commissions and determine whether they will offer recommendations to an appointing
72 authority or make final selection decisions.¹⁸
- 73 4. Recommendations and selections should be based on criteria set by the agency that take
74 into account the specific responsibilities for each administrative judge position. Such
75 criteria could include factors used in the selection of United States bankruptcy and
76 magistrate judges, as well as other relevant factors, such as:
- 77 a. professional credentials, including experience and education;
78 b. diversity of background and experience;
79 c. subject-matter expertise;
80 d. litigation or adjudication experience;
81 e. professional reputation, as ascertained by references;
82 f. organizational and time-management skills;
83 g. case-management abilities;
84 h. temperament;
85 i. decisiveness;
86 j. ethics and integrity; and
87 k. analytical and writing ability.

¹⁸ A merit selection panel’s authority to select administrative judges may be contingent on the outcome in *Lucia Cos. v. SEC*, 832 F.3d 277 (D.C. Cir. 2016), *petition for en banc rev. denied*, 868 F.3d 1021 (D.C. Cir. 2017), *cert. granted*, 138 S.Ct. 736 (Jan. 12, 2018) (concerning whether ALJs of the Securities and Exchange Commission are “officers of the United States” within the meaning of the Constitution’s Appointments Clause). If the Supreme Court in *Lucia* determines that ALJs are “inferior officers” under the Appointments Clause, ALJs will be required to be appointed by the “heads of departments.” See U.S. CONST. art. II, § 2, cl. 2. If such a holding is applied to administrative judges who perform duties that are sufficiently analogous to those performed by ALJs, merit selection panels could make recommendations but would be prohibited from making final selection decisions regarding such positions.



Assignment of Adjudicative Functions

- 88 5. To the extent feasible, agencies should consider assigning all adjudicative functions to
89 employees who serve exclusively as administrative judges, rather than to administrative
90 judges who also have significant non-adjudicative duties. Occasional cross-over of duties
91 may be appropriate to meet agency objectives, including professional development.

Physical Separation

- 92 6. To the extent feasible, agencies should physically separate administrative judges and their
93 support staff from other agency personnel to maintain appropriate levels of independence
94 and impartiality. Physical separation occurs when administrative judges' offices and
95 other agency employees' offices, respectively, are located in different physical spaces,
96 even if such spaces are located in the same building or premises.

Ethics and Disqualification

- 97 7. Agencies should consider providing guidance and educational resources to administrative
98 judges on the applicable requirements of the criminal conflict-of-interest laws, contained
99 in 18 U.S.C. §§ 201–209, and the Office of Government Ethics's (OGE) standards
100 governing the disqualification of federal employees from participating in particular
101 matters due to the appearance of impartiality, contained in 5 C.F.R. §§ 2635.501–
102 2635.503.
- 103 8. Agencies should consider developing procedures for assigning cases to administrative
104 judges that are aimed at preventing them from presiding over hearings in which they have
105 conflicts of interest.
- 106 9. When appropriate, agencies should consider exercising their authority under Executive
107 Order 12,764 (as amended by Executive Order 12,731) and 5 C.F.R. § 2635.105 to adopt,
108 subject to OGE's approval, supplemental regulations pertaining to the disqualification of
109 administrative judges from particular hearings that augment OGE's standards in 5 C.F.R.
110 §§ 2635.501–2635.503, which govern the disqualification of federal employees from



ADMINISTRATIVE CONFERENCE OF THE UNITED STATES

111 participating in particular matters due the appearance of impartiality. Any supplemental
112 regulations adopted should be tailored to the particular needs of the adopting agency's
113 adjudication program.

114 10. Agencies should establish procedures that explain when and how parties may seek an
115 administrative judge's disqualification and how agencies and administrative judges
116 should resolve such claims.

Performance

117 11. Evaluations of administrative judges' performance and potential eligibility for bonuses
118 should be based on the following factors derived, in part, from Recommendation 92-7:
119 case processing guidelines; appropriate case volume goals and requirements; adjudicative
120 comportment and demeanor; adherence to governing ethical requirements; adherence to
121 properly articulated and disseminated rules, procedures, precedents, and other agency
122 policy; and all other relevant considerations. Agencies should not consider the outcomes
123 of particular cases when evaluating administrative judges' performance of adjudicative
124 functions.

Transparency

125 12. Agencies should, to the extent appropriate and practicable, make generally applicable
126 policies and procedures governing the selection, oversight, evaluation, discipline, and
127 removal of administrative judges available to the public.