



DRS DIALOGUE

VOLUME 3, ISSUE 4 • SPRING 2026

DISPUTE RESOLUTION SERVICES
OFFICE OF THE EXECUTIVE SECRETARY
SUPREME COURT OF VIRGINIA

A NEW SPECIALIST IN TOWN



My tenure at the Supreme Court of Virginia thus far has been a time of rapid progress (which isn't always something we associate with big bureaucracies like this!)

Since I first took the 9th Street elevator up to the Third Floor, I've been fortunate to participate in some major projects that have had a tremendous impact on Virginia's judiciary. In the past few years, I've served as an active contributor in creating Official Policies that govern our statewide Parent Education Program. I've participated in a complete overhaul of our post-mediation evaluations, which will soon take effect. I've helped to write policy, sat on various interview panels, and executed form revisions to increase accessibility for judges referring litigants across Virginia to our programs. To my surprise, I was even blessed to have received one of OES's Annual Awards, due to these efforts.

Even after all this, the fun is just beginning as I take on the role of ADR Program Specialist!

I'm very excited by the opportunities, and challenges of serving in this new position. To be clear, I will continue to support our mediators, coordinators and judges in the work that they do for courts across the state. However, I'll now be devoting more time to analyzing our data, developing policy solutions, managing DRS's various programs, and advising internal and external stakeholders on our policies and procedures.

J.T. Blackstone
ADR Program Specialist

Since the first keystroke, things have moved at breakneck speed. In just the past few months, I've revised the solicitations for prospective JSC judges, written some introductory essays for an exciting new Supreme Court Civics project on the Rule of Law in Virginia, and spearheaded the Mediation Coordinator Contract Process initiated by my predecessor and good friend, Jon.

While these projects require lots of time, careful attention, and sufficiently caffeinated coffee- I am never too busy for questions and concerns from those who matter the most to us here at DRS: Virginia's ADR Community and the parties it serves.

This office is a special place to me for many reasons, but primarily because of the immeasurable impact that dispute resolution has on litigants and courts throughout the Commonwealth. To be part of that work, especially in this new way, is the utmost privilege.

J.T. Blackstone

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THANK YOU, ADR COMMUNITY



When I joined DRS in 2016, I was still in college and knew nothing about Virginia's court system or ADR. I was mostly just happy to not be working night shifts anymore, and to be working a job with a stable schedule and holidays off.

As time passed, though, I learned more about the court system, about ADR, and about how people's lives are impacted by both every day. Each year, I'd hear more stories of people that had been helped by ADR, and stories of practitioners going above and beyond to help people that had been referred to them.

I, myself, felt welcome and supported from when I started (even when I had made mistakes that delayed someone's payment, sorry!)

Jon Lamp,
Court Data Analyst, CPSS

Much has changed in DRS since I started. There are all new staff, the office handles a fraction of the amount of physical paper that it did, and there are so many more meetings on Webex.

What hasn't changed is the support, the dedication, and the care that those who are in the ADR community have for each other and for the work that they do. I am happy to have had the chance to support such an impactful program in Virginia, and I appreciate all the help I have gotten over the years. While I'm no longer with DRS, I hope to team up with them on future projects and to continue to support ADR in Virginia's courts. Until then, I know dispute resolution is in good hands with the current DRS team!

STAY TUNED FOR MORE!

As Jordan steps in to fill the Program Specialist role, and Jon transitions to a new position within the Department of Judicial Services, that left us with a vacancy to fill. Who is our new DRS Administrative Assistant? Be sure to watch your email for the answer to that question coming soon, along with more details in the next edition of DRS Dialogue.

CHIEF JUSTICE HIGHLIGHTS THE WORK OF DRS

Dan Wassink,
DRS Manager

The State of the Judiciary address is always one of the highlights of the annual Judicial Conference of Virginia. Delivered by the Chief Justice of the Supreme Court of Virginia, the address highlights the court-related services and major accomplishments from the previous year.

At this year's Conference in Roanoke in May, Chief Justice Cleo Powell devoted a significant portion of her nearly 40-minute address to the work done by mediators, parent educators and Judicial Settlement Conference judges in Virginia.

Emphasizing that our courts must pursue ways to expand access to justice for everyone, Chief Justice Powell said sometimes that means not rendering a verdict, but helping litigants mutually agree to a resolution. She followed up with the statistic that more than 9,000 mediations were conducted in Virginia's district courts in 2025, with an agreement rate of more than 64%. In circuit courts, the Chief Justice shared that more than 1,000 judicial settlement conferences were held, with nearly $\frac{3}{4}$ of them resulting in an agreement.

Chief Justice Powell also highlighted the DRS-administered Parent Education program and the work of parent education seminar providers who served approximately 7,200 parents last year.

The Chief Justice praised these efforts for not only reducing the burden on courts, but for giving litigants meaningful opportunities to resolve disputes in ways that are less adversarial, and more collaborative and satisfying.

INAUGURAL CONTRACT CYCLE FOR COORDINATOR RFAS

J.T. Blackstone,
ADR Program Specialist

Both myself and our prospective coordinators, are breathing a sigh of relief as the 2026 Mediation Coordinator Contract Process comes to a close this week. Every two years, individuals and organizations with mediation and court experience apply to serve as Mediation Coordinators for various courts throughout our state.

In past years, this process was facilitated under a Request for Proposals (RFP), and the formula for calculating awards left many with questions about how contract values were determined by our office. To promote greater transparency and ease the burden on potential coordinators, we have adapted this process to a Request for Applications (RFA) structure – with gratifying results.

Because 2026 was the inaugural cycle for this new process, new formula, and a new leader for the program (*wipes sweat from forehead*), there were adjustments to be made and many questions to answer, as expected. However, I am thrilled to say that the 2026 Contract Cycle got off to a successful start and Coordinators should be receiving notice regarding their applications in the coming weeks.

MEDIATION EVALUATIONS ROLLOUT

As some of you may know, DRS recently concluded a pilot period for its newly redesigned Mediation Evaluation (ADR-1002).

After helpful testing from various mediators and coordinators, DRS is preparing to debut its new evaluation. This revised Mediation Evaluation includes an online option to be used by mediators in court-referred cases.

I will soon be hosting live training sessions where mediators can log on for a detailed walkthrough on how to navigate form fields, distribute to parties, and direct them to our new virtual component.

Additionally, we'll have several "guided forms" on our website with detailed descriptions on how to properly complete the new ADR-1002. We are looking forward to launching our new eval and hope that it provides an efficient, easy-to-use way of evaluating mediations going forward.

DRS PARENT EDUCATORS' SYMPOSIUM 2026 REVIEW

Terry Dysick,
Parent Education Coordinator

"Beyond the Gates - Expanding Perspectives"

The annual DRS Parent Educators' Symposium, held on May 15, 2026, was an inspiring and highly engaging event centered around the theme, "Beyond the Gates." The theme encouraged providers to think beyond the parameters in which they have routinely operated and to continue expanding collaborative efforts that strengthen families, children, and communities across Virginia.

One of the most celebrated developments highlighted during the Symposium was the implementation of twice-monthly webinars beginning in October 2025. Since the launch, providers and instructors have voluntarily presented on a variety of topics related to promoting healthy relationships and families. The webinars have become a meaningful platform for professional growth, collaboration, and resource sharing, and the unified effort continues to evolve with tremendous success.

The educational presentations throughout the day were informative, practical, and well received by attendees. Parent Education providers shared their expertise on several important topics impacting families today.



Dr. Eric McCaskill and Dr. Linda McCaskill presented on Positive Communication with Children, emphasizing healthy interaction strategies that strengthen parent-child relationships.

Eric Carlson delivered a compelling presentation on The Effects of Separation and Divorce on Children, helping attendees better understand the emotional and developmental impact family transitions can have on youth.

Lillian Arevalo and Dixie Aiken shared valuable insight regarding Working with the Hispanic Population, highlighting cultural awareness, communication approaches, and community support strategies.

Josie Rowe presented information on Family Engagement Services (DCSE) and provided eye-opening child support statistics, noting that approximately 60% of fathers and 40% of mothers pay child support according to the information shared.

The final portion of the Symposium featured an energetic and informative panel discussion composed of respected professionals from the judicial system, law enforcement, social services, and domestic violence advocacy. Panelists included Honorable Judge Lucas from Prince William County Juvenile and Domestic Relations Court; Honorable Judge Overbey from Newport News Juvenile and Domestic Relations Court;

and Natacha Ascasio from the Caroline County Sheriff's Department Domestic Violence Division. The panel discussion reinforced the tremendous value of Parent Education seminars and the importance of referring parents/legal guardians to these services when filing for custody, visitation, and child support matters. Strong emphasis was placed on encouraging participation in Parent Education seminars prior to mediation so parties can be better informed, prepared, and equipped to make decisions in the best interests of their children.

Beyond the educational value of the Symposium, the atmosphere throughout the day was warm, uplifting, and enjoyable. Participants appreciated the relaxing increments of jazz music played during breaks and lunch, the opportunity to dine outdoors on the patio, and the afternoon sweets that added a special touch to the event.



The celebration of fellowship and unity continued as attendees and staff enthusiastically participated in upbeat music and creative two-step dancing, bringing energy and joy to the close of a memorable day.

DRS IN THE FIELD

TOUCHING BASE WITH JSC JUDGES

Dan Wassink,
DRS Manager

Each year, the Judicial Conference of Virginia gives DRS a chance to check in with our Judicial Settlement Conference (JSC) judges. This year's Conference took place in mid-May at the historic Hotel Roanoke and Conference Center.

JSC judges are retired from the circuit court (CC) bench, but have chosen to enter "recall status" to mediate CC civil cases at no cost to the parties. There are currently 27 judges in the JSC program handling more than 1,000 cases per year that range from custody and visitation to commercial contract disputes.

Nearly 20 of the judges attended the JSC session in May. The highlight was a dual presentation by judges James Hawks and Gary Mills.

The pair contrasted JSC work with more traditional mediation, shared tips for writing agreements and handling domestic relations cases, and offered advice for securing a voluntary agreement even when the parties appear stuck.

Michael and Jordan joined me at this year's meeting with the JSC judges. Michael shared statistics with the group, including the fact that in 2025, 70% of all JSC cases resulted in an agreement on at least some of the issues.



DRS is grateful for the service of its JSC judges, who have decided to use their retirement years to continue assisting parties in reaching agreement, while avoiding the time and expense of formal litigation.

DRS IN THE FIELD (CONT.)

VISITS WITH SOUTHWEST VA MEDIATORS

Before DRS's annual meeting with the Judicial Settlement Conference judges, I met up with long-time mediators in the area, Kim Kristensen and Eddy Smart.

We met for lunch and then I got a tour of the Bridge Institute that Eddy leads. After light talk about the beauty of the Roanoke region, they both shared freely about the value of their work to parties and their community, and the challenges they face. Kim is well-known as a trainer of both CME and Core courses and is recently involved in the training for the grant-funded police referred mediation initiative. Eddy's work with Bridge encompasses restorative processes, racial justice, ombuds, parent education, and family mediation. As it works to provide training that is culturally responsive, Eddy is also involved in the committee discussions organized by Resolution Virginia to increase funding for mediators.

Michael Barr,
ADR Analyst



*From Left to Right:
Laura Spafford, Eddy Smart, Michael Barr*

He shared an anecdote I found compelling: a gentleman came to Bridge for training and after not hearing back with respect to the mentorship, they followed up to see if it met his expectations. To their surprise, he responded it was a great training and he was putting what he learned into practice almost every day from his front stoop for neighbors and kids on his block! So, if you're a trainer, never underestimate the value of the ideas, strategies, and techniques designed to provide alternatives to a contentious legal process.

DRS IN THE FIELD (CONT.)

Michael Barr,
ADR Analyst

PREVIEW OF NEW JUDGE ORIENTATION

A team from DRS will present in early June for the New Judge Orientation Program, organized each year by the Educational Services Department at OES.

While these judges are not necessarily new to the bench, they are to the courts where they are appointed so it is a prime opportunity to talk with them about the value of mediation and requirement of parent education in contested cases.

We have a time slot for each court level: General District Court, Juvenile and Domestic Relations District Court, and Circuit Court and will be joined by a veteran judge for each who can speak with an understanding of the pressures they will face and the good they have seen mediation do in practice.

We will supplement with advantages from the perspective of DRS, the high quality of mediator training, and how they can connect with us, and most importantly, work with you.



DRS IN THE FIELD (CONT.)

COLLABORATING WITH DISTRICT COURT CLERKS

Terry Dysick,
Parent Education Coordinator

In mid-April, DRS supported the Association of Clerks of the District Courts of Virginia by participating in the event with a table exhibition and delivering a brief lunchtime presentation.

Over the course of two days, Dan, Terry, and Michael had the pleasure of meeting clerks from multiple districts and sharing additional educational information regarding referrals, mediation, and parent education classes.

Many clerks expressed appreciation for being able to see the actual documents used to refer parties to these services.

It was also helpful to learn that, in some districts, referrals are made prior to the initial preliminary hearing, and that parents benefit greatly when parent education classes are completed before the mediation orientation. Early completion provides clarity on court language, expectations, and the overall process.

Additionally, it was valuable to finally connect faces with the names that appear on notifications sent to the courts regarding newly approved mediators and parent education providers. We remain available and eager to support any court in need of mediation coordinators or additional parent education providers within their district. Both services are offered virtually, ensuring continued access when in-person options are limited. We look forward to receiving more referrals and providing quality service.



Thank You for All You Do....

STAFF

DRS Manager: Dan Wassink

ADR Analyst: Michael Barr

ADR Program Specialist: Jordan "J.T." Blackstone

Parent Education Coordinator: Terry Dysick

DRS Administrative Assistant: Vacant

SHARE YOUR THOUGHTS!

Have an idea for a DRS Dialogue article?
We regularly feature guest articles in our
newsletter

Submit your ideas for consideration to:
disputeresolution@vacourts.gov

QUICK REFERENCE

Need to Contact Us?

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DRS TRAINING CALENDAR

