

What's in the Database

Before www.tripsforjudges.org, it was very difficult to obtain basic information about privately funded judicial education and travel. How many organizations conduct seminars for federal judges? How many judges attend? What precisely was being presented to judges at these seminars? Are the seminars having any impact on the rulings of the attending judges? To try to answer these questions, Community Rights Counsel (CRC) conducted, to our knowledge, the most comprehensive review of judges' financial disclosure forms ever conducted. Each year, every federal judge is required to file a financial disclosure report. Among other things, a judge must report as a gift any travel expenses exceeding \$250 that were paid for by a private organization; this includes the tuition, free travel, food and lodging associated with educational seminars. The U.S. Courts' Administrative Office holds these records for the public for six years. Beginning in 1998, CRC submitted periodic requests to review the financial disclosure forms held by the Administrative Office for all Article III judges, excluding bankruptcy and magistrate judges, and all judges on the Court of Federal Claims from 1992 through 2004. CRC has conducted these investigations in four periods; (1) 2002 through 2004, (2) 1999 through 2001, (3) 1998, and (4) 1992 through 1997. In response, the Administrative Office produced over 13,200 financial disclosure forms, over 102,000 pages of material.

For each review we identified gifts or reimbursements and copied the relevant information listed by the judge into our database, including the location, date, subject matter, and the source of funds where provided. For the initial review period from 1992 through 1997, the criterion for the review was extremely inclusive. The data collected during that investigation included virtually every trip listed in every form reviewed with very few exceptions. Beginning in 1998, CRC adopted additional criteria, excluding more results than the all inclusive 1992 through 1997 data set. At the end of each review process, information was recorded in the tripsforjudges.org database. To date, the database contains information on almost 9800 trips taken by 1172 federal judges.

Disclaimers

We note that it is not CRC's intention to criticize judges for taking all or even most of the privately-funded trips listed in our Trips for Judges database. We believe it is commendable for judges to find time in their busy schedules to give speeches and impart wisdom to students, lawyers, etc. We have included in our database comprehensive information about reported trips primarily because we feared that otherwise we would be criticized for selectively posting only those trips we found problematic. In addition, it is sometimes hard based on the available information to ascertain whether the privately-funded trip was problematic or not. Rather than making this determination for users of the site, we have erred, if at all, in being over-inclusive.

There are certain trips that are, as a general rule, excluded from data collection. For example, many judges accept travel reimbursements to give graduation speeches and to judge law school moot court competitions. These trips were so frequent and so clearly unobjectionable that we did not include information on these trips in our database. We also caution the users of the database that data on gifts for 1998 through 2004 is less comprehensive than is data for 1992-1997. For example, starting in 1998, we generally excluded trips that did not involve at least one overnight stay. Finally, we note that we are only human. CRC staff reviewed and recorded a massive amount of information in a relatively short period of time. We were careful, but no amount of care can guarantee 100% accuracy in a project like this. We are sure that there are instances in which we made mistakes in recording information into the database. We thus urge users of the database to double check our work by obtaining judges financial disclosure forms (visit www.uscourts.gov/forms/reginstr.htm for instructions) or by contacting the judge in question.