

Longtime Court Administrator and Clerk of the Court to Retire in December

David Weaver Served in that Role for 21 Years



David Weaver has operated with a simple philosophy during two decades as administrator of the U.S. District Court for the Eastern Michigan -- hire good people, chart their course, and let them do their jobs. Pay attention, but for the most part stay out of everyone's way.

That approach has fostered good morale and earned him the respect and admiration of the Court's 350 employees, supervisors, and judges.

"David Weaver has been an indispensable part of the U.S. District Court for the Eastern District of Michigan for more than two decades," said Chief U.S. District Judge Denise Page Hood. "He's smart, sensitive to the needs of the Court, and knows how to get things done."

"We are going to miss him," she added.

Weaver, 57, plans to retire in late December after more than 33 years of service to federal district courts in Ohio and Michigan – 21 years of it as Court Administrator and Clerk of the Court in the Eastern District of Michigan. He said he has no immediate plans, except to relax and for he and his wife to welcome their first grandchild in April 2021. The Court is interviewing candidates for his position.

"Change is good," Weaver said in a recent interview. "The job has an incredible amount of pressure and you never really turn it off."

Weaver was born in Toledo, the fifth of six children, His father made windshields at a Libbey-Owens-Ford plant in neighboring Rossford, Ohio. His mother was a homemaker who eventually became a regional manager for Weight Watchers.

When Weaver was three, the family moved to nearby Temperance, Mich., where he attended elementary, middle, and high school. He graduated from Bedford High School in 1981.

“I knew I was going to college, but I wasn’t entirely sure what I wanted to become,” Weaver said. “In my younger days, I always thought I would become a lawyer.”

Weaver enrolled at the James Madison College at Michigan State University and earned a spot in the MSU marching band as a trombone player. He received a degree in international relations in 1985 with plans to enroll in law school.

While waiting to be accepted to law school, Weaver took a job at a law firm in Toledo.

“I did anything they asked – research, deliveries but I basically was a runner who did some research,” Weaver said. “At some point, I realized that I didn’t want to become a lawyer, but I still liked the legal community.”

Around September 1987, he applied for a job as an electronic court recorder at the U.S. District Court for the Northern District of Ohio in Toledo. He didn’t get the job, but the court hired him a month later as an intake worker in the Clerk’s Office.

That’s where he met Case Manager Patricia McBride, whom he married in November 1989. They have two adult children, Ellen and David Jr.

Ten months after Weaver arrived at the Toledo courthouse, he trained as a case manager for then-U.S. Magistrate Judge James G. Carr. The next year, he was appointed as case manager to U.S. District Judge Richard B. McQuade.

Federal courts were starting to automate during that period and Weaver, who was interested in computing, started working long distance with the information technology (IT) manager at the federal courthouse in Cleveland. In March 1989, he joined the IT staff there.

“It was an exciting time to be in information technology in the courts because it was a very new thing and starting to explode,” Weaver said. “There were a lot of opportunities and I decided to take advantage of them.”

Weaver said the court’s IT manager, Mike Chagnon, kept giving him assignments, which Weaver carried out successfully. In 1991, Weaver was promoted to Assistant Systems Manager and elevated again in 1995 to Operations Manager – essentially running the Clerk’s Office in Cleveland.

Around that time, the Northern District experienced an explosion in asbestos exposure litigation which at times flooded the court with 10,000 court documents per week. Beleaguered court officials turned to the Administrative Office of the U.S. Courts in Washington, D.C. for help automating the docketing process.

The result was the forerunner of CM/ECF (Case Management/Electronic Case Files), the computer docketing system now used by every federal district, bankruptcy, and appellate court in the nation. The Northern District of Ohio was the first to use it.

“Within six months, they had a system up and running and it solved our immediate problem,” Weaver said. “It wasn’t anywhere as smooth as CM/ECF is today, but it worked and got us through the crisis.”

In 1998, Weaver was selected to become Deputy Court Administrator for the U.S. District Court for Eastern Michigan, working for John Mayer, then-Court Administrator and Clerk of the Court.

But adjusting to the Eastern District was challenging.

“When I came to Detroit, I thought it was going to be a very easy transition,” Weaver recalled. “But things here were completely different.”

For one thing, the staff was larger than Northern Ohio. There also were more judges and the organization was structured and operated differently among the court units, making it harder to manage.

When Mayer retired in 1999, the judges selected Weaver to replace him. Weaver is believed to be one of the first clerks of court appointed who had a significant background in the burgeoning information technology programs within the Federal Judiciary.

Weaver said it took several years to get comfortable as Court Administrator and eventually start fine-tuning the operation.

Serving as court administrator and clerk of the courts is difficult, said Weaver’s former boss, John Mayer, who served in that role for 20 years.

Besides running the court, managing the staff, and keeping an eye on court operations, including the budget, court administrators must cultivate a productive working relationship with the chief judge as well as individual district judges, for whom the administrator works. There are 22 federal district judges in Eastern Michigan.

Getting on the wrong side with only three or four of them can doom a court administrator, Mayer said. He said the job requires patience, diplomacy, a thick skin, and the ability to occasionally tell judges that their ideas are impractical.

“The court administrator walks a very fine line, but David has done an excellent job,” said Mayer, one of several former and current court administrators whose advice Weaver has sought over the years.

Unlike Mayer, Weaver stepped into the job without a law degree. But he brought other important skills, including a knowledge of federal court operations and automation.

“Dave does everything with the finesse and tact of a diplomat,” then-Chief U.S. District Judge Gerald Rosen told the Detroit Legal News in 2011. “Dealing with life-tenured judges is not easy, and dealing with 400 staff is not easy, yet he is always calm, reasonable and able to navigate sometimes roiled waters with great finesse.”

“We couldn’t function without him,” Rosen added.

Weaver has served four chief judges and oversaw the appointments of 13 district judges and 12 magistrate judges.

Today’s Eastern District has about 350 employees, including law clerks, secretaries, pre-trial and probation agents, and district and federal magistrate judges. They work in Detroit and satellite courthouses in Ann Arbor, Bay City, Flint and Port Huron. The court operates on a \$30-million-plus annual budget and, as Weaver points out, “I’m responsible for every dime of it.”

During Weaver’s tenure, the Court has:

- Eliminated duplication of services that had existed between different departments which had their own information technology and human resources staffs.
- Expanded the Court’s electronic filing system, which has virtually eliminated paperwork in the district and radically changed how judges and law clerks work.
- Improved racial diversity in the federal jury pool and the method for selecting jurors.
- Worked with the General Services Administration to carry out a \$140 million project to upgrade mechanical, electrical and other systems in the Theodore Levin U.S. Courthouse in Detroit.
- Adopted methods to keep the Eastern District functioning despite the 2020 COVID-19 pandemic that closed the all five courthouses. The Court has continued conducting arraignments, plea hearings and other functions – but not jury trials – through Zoom video conferencing.

Weaver is modest about his role in those achievements, saying they came about through the initiative and hard work of the Court’s staff.

But current and former staffers say otherwise and praise him for his leadership and management style.

Instead of launching major initiatives to increase his profile upon becoming Court Administrator, they said he focused on making sure the court continued to run efficiently. They also praise him for treating court employees with fairness, dignity, and respect, including some who had performance issues. And he led with a calm demeanor, keeping inevitable problems in perspective.

They also said he had a good sense of humor, especially when two University of Michigan season ticket holders on his administrative staff would tease him whenever UM of defeated MSU's football team.

"I think Dave adjusted to us more than we adjusted to him," said Ray Vance, the court's former budget administrator who retired in 2016 after 31 years with the court. He said Weaver was fun to work for.

Jerri Torolski, Weaver's former Management Analyst, said his management style, especially his refusal to micromanage his staff, helped them work more productively.

"The thing I most appreciated about him is that he let me do my job," she said.

"Some leaders focus on changing people's shortcomings," added Elizabeth (Libby) Smith, Circuit Executive at the U.S. 9th Circuit Court of Appeals and who served as Weaver's deputy from 2006-2010. "David Weaver focuses on strengths. He's an exceptional leader and that's one of the reasons he is so well respected across the judiciary."

"He's going to be a tough act to follow," Smith added.

Asked how he would like to be remembered, Weaver said simply: "First and foremost as competent... And as someone who left the Court better off than when I arrived."

Researched and written by Public Information Officer David Ashenfelter