



Summit County Domestic Relations Court

Administrative Judge Katarina Cook

Judge Kani H. Hightower

For Immediate Release

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SUMMIT COUNTY DOMESTIC RELATIONS COURT HIGHLIGHTS INNOVATION AND COMMUNITY IMPACT AT 2025 ANNUAL BENCH-BAR CONFERENCE

Akron, Ohio — At last Friday’s Inaugural Bench-Bar Conference, hosted by the Akron Bar Association and Foundation, the Summit County Domestic Relations Court presented its 2025 “State of the Court” update, showcasing new initiatives, expanded services, and its vision for the year ahead.

The **1st Annual Bench-Bar Conference**, held at Guy’s Party Center in Akron, convened judges, magistrates, attorneys, and community agencies for a seminar. Featuring sessions on **AI ethics, municipal court updates, appellate practice, alternative dispute resolution, and a judicial panel discussion.**

During the **State of the Courts Luncheon Session**, Administrative Judge Katarina Cook underscored the Domestic Relations Court’s ongoing commitment to access, innovation, and family-centered justice.

Presiding Judge Kani H. Hightower provided an overall picture of the state of the Summit County Common Pleas Court which includes General Division, Domestic Relations, Juvenile, and Probate Court.

Key 2025 Court Highlights

- **Free Family Law Clinics:** Partnering with the Ohio Justice Bus and Community Legal Aid, more than **500 residents** have received free legal help since 2023. In 2025 alone, nearly 200 Summit County residents were served, with a projected 287 by year’s end.



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- **Specialized Custody Support:** Through the **Legal Aid for Legal Custody Clinic**, Parties seeking custody of children with no responsible parent to enroll them in school now leave with clear answers and often temporary custody orders, providing stability and access to school, health care, and safety.
- **Quiet Space**, initiated in 2025 this multi-use space is designed to serve Court users with trauma histories, sensory processing challenges, and mental health needs, as well as nursing mothers in need of a private and calming environment. The project is supported by community partners including the Summit County Developmental Disabilities Board and the Akron Bar Foundation.
- **Aver Health – On-site/same day Drug and Alcohol Testing** – In conjunction with the Common Pleas General Division, SCDRC contracted with Aver Health to offer parties significantly lower cost drug testing which provides quick, reliable results.
- **Two Part-time Domestic Violence Magistrates-** for the first time in its history, dedicated solely to hearing domestic violence and dating violence civil protection order cases. While all magistrates will still hear these cases on a rotating basis, the addition of a part-time magistrate expands the Court’s capacity to manage the caseload more efficiently which is especially important given the uptick in CPO filings.
- **Summit County Fatherhood Collaborative – Established in 2024**, Administrative Judge Katarina Cook and Magistrate Rebecca DiDonato are inaugural board members. The purpose of SCFC is to empower fathers to positively impact families by providing resources and activities that strengthen our community and promote fatherhood. For the past several years, court staff have volunteered at primary schools for the Annual Fatherhood Walk to support this important mission.
- **Law or Legend: A Judicial Scavenger Hunt:** In partnership with the Summit County Historical Society, SCDRC launched an interactive scavenger hunt exploring the legal history and landmarks of Summit County. Using the Goosechase app, participants complete self-paced “missions” by answering questions, checking in at sites, or uploading photos and videos tied to local judicial history and historical points of interest. Designed to coincide with the nation’s semiquincentennial, the project engages residents and visitors throughout the year and includes opportunities for prize drawings for those who complete a set number of missions thanks to a grant from **America 250-Ohio**.

Looking Ahead: 2026 Settlement Week

The Court announced plans to launch a **Settlement Week in 2026 which is scheduled to take place the last week of July**, modeled after successful programs across Ohio. The initiative will



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provide concentrated mediation opportunities to reduce backlogs, lower costs, and minimize the stress of prolonged litigation.

The Court will also engage Summit County high school students in “**Children: In Their Best Interest Art Exhibition.**” This project enhances emotional well-being in the Court by showcasing artwork created exclusively by students. Representing a diverse group from public, private, and home schools, **the exhibition will highlight youth perspectives on the theme Children: In Their Best Interest.** A selection of pieces will be added to a permanent public art collection at the Court, this project was made possible by ArtsForward funding via ArtsNow Grant.

Quote from Judge Cook:

“This Bench-Bar Conference reminds us that collaboration between the judiciary and the bar strengthens our justice system. At Domestic Relations Court, our work is driven by compassion, innovation, and a belief that families deserve both fairness and support as they navigate difficult times.”

About the Summit County Domestic Relations Court

The Summit County Domestic Relations Court serves families in matters of divorce, custody, visitation, support, and civil protection orders. Through community partnerships, innovative programming, and a commitment to access and fairness, the Court continues to expand its reach beyond the courtroom to meet families where they are.

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