



DRS DIALOGUE

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



Homebound Musings for the Holidays

Like most people in our world of deadlines and distractions, I don't take nearly enough time to sit and think, to reflect and contemplate the world around me.

Well, it's funny how a little thing like surgery can change that!

After hip replacement surgery (hip arthroplasty to be medically correct) in early November, I suddenly found myself with plenty of time to sit and think. And while my thoughts ranged from the mundane (how will I put on my socks after my caretaker leaves?) to the delusional (I'll bounce back better than Bo Jackson after he got a new hip!), I also found myself reflecting on my time as DRS Manager - specifically, this past year.

If you didn't know already, 2025 marked the 40th Anniversary of mediation in Virginia's courts. Court Service Unit managers and other stakeholders met in May 1985 in Petersburg to explore the use of mediation in JDR courts. These pioneers saw the potential of mediation to benefit court users (particularly divorcing and separating parents), and the courts themselves. Their vision quickly began to take shape, with the creation of the Joint ADR Committee, the Virginia Mediation Network, and our very own DRS - all within 6 years.

Of course, we've accomplished much more since then, with structured court-referred mediation programs in many of our district courts; along with a stable of dedicated individuals and organizations offering mediation, and other ADR services, within their communities. Our field has blossomed in ways those 1985 pioneers never dreamed possible.

But there is so much more to do.

Dan Wassink,
DRS Manager

As we enter Year 41 of mediation in Virginia, what are your dreams and aspirations for the important work that we do? How can we work together to accomplish those goals?

Here at DRS, we do our best to look to the future and explore how we can improve our programs and services for mediation practitioners and court users. In fact, in this edition of DRS Dialogue, you will find several examples of that. But nothing we have accomplished - and nothing we will ever accomplish - would be possible without your help.

So, share your ideas with us. This is the perfect time to do so, as DRS is currently planning its annual strategic planning session for March of next year. We'd love to add your suggestions to our agenda. Just like those mediation pioneers in 1985, there is no limit to what we can accomplish if we work together and refuse to take No for an answer.

In the meantime, HAPPY HOLIDAYS!

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MAINTAINING A VITAL LINK BETWEEN COORDINATORS AND DRS

Dan Wassink,
DRS Manager

For several years, I've made it a point of emphasis to preserve and enhance the connection between our office and Mediation Coordinators throughout the Commonwealth. Coordinators are our 'eyes and ears' so to speak, keeping us abreast of the court-referred mediation landscape and allowing us to respond to emerging problems before they spin out of control.

That connection was strengthened in October when DRS hosted a virtual meeting with both GDC and JDR Coordinators.

- The work of the committee reviewing the Standards of Ethics and Professional Responsibility for Certified Mediators
- The Court Referrals Task Force's past and future plans to visit GD courts in an effort to boost referrals to mediation
- Successful initiatives by DRS (led by Michael Barr) and its partners to modify the Guidelines for the Certification of Court-Referred Mediators, particularly a new eight-hour child support course which will be required of family mediators starting in 2026
- Mandatory electronic voucher submission (via EVPS) by all mediators seeking payment for court-referred mediation cases.

In addition, Parent Education Coordinator Terry Dysick provided a program report, including her ongoing visits to observe PE providers "in action" and provide them feedback. Terry also updated the group on a committee's work to create a new PE workbook (curriculum) that will eventually be required of all new providers.

In addition, Parent Education Coordinator Terry Dysick provided a program report, including her ongoing visits to observe PE providers “in action” and provide them feedback. Terry also updated the group on a committee’s work to create a new PE workbook (curriculum) that will eventually be required of all new providers.

DRS Program Specialist Jon Lamp also put on a show for the Coordinators, giving a live demo of new court data reports (aka, Power BI reports). Jon explained how Coordinators might use the data (case filings and disposition reports, clearance rate and case aging reports, etc.) to highlight the benefits of mediation in local courts using up-to-the-minute statistics. Jon is available for more in-depth, private demos of the Power BI reports at no charge!

In the Spring of 2026, DRS will gather virtually with Mediation Coordinators again, this time in two separate meetings – one with GDC Coordinators and one with their JDR counterparts.

MEDIATION COORDINATOR REMINDER

Jon Lamp,
ADR Program Specialist

To help district courts manage the workload associated with an active mediation program, our office enters contracts with vendors to coordinate custody, visitation, and support (CVS) and General District Court (GDC) mediation programs. Each year, our office contacts courts to review their program and see if they’d like to discuss any changes. Now is the time to plan for the spring contract season and reach out to any court you are interested in coordinating! A list of courts that currently have an OES-contracted coordinator can be found [on our website](#).

Note that a coordinator contract is not necessary to mediate cases referred from a court. If you are interested in mediating or coordinating, it is a good idea to reach out to the court first!

COLLABORATIVE EFFORTS TO CONTINUE TO BOOST GDC MEDIATION REFERRALS

Dan Wassink,
DRS Manager

The COVID pandemic was a watershed moment whose impacts are still being felt. That is true for court-referred mediation in Virginia as well.

In many of our courts, the number of mediation referrals – along with case filings in general – naturally declined sharply during the pandemic. Unfortunately, those numbers have not rebounded to pre-COVID levels.

To address this problem in our GD courts, DRS convened a Court Referrals Task Force in 2023. Task force members have accomplished a great deal (see the Task Force's excellent subcommittee report on the VA Mediation Network website: Virginia Mediation Network Inc – Helpful Links), including a series of visits with GDC judges and clerks of court.



To date, Task Force members have visited 3 GD courts: Lynchburg, Virginia Beach and, on December 12, Winchester/Frederick. The data shows that these courts enjoyed a robust, pre-COVID referral program, but have since struggled to re-capture that success.

In Winchester, I was joined by Mediation Coordinator Bob Carpenter and Piedmont Peace Center Executive Director Brandon Bastian. We sat down with the Honorable Mary Louise Costello Daniel, as well as staff from the local Clerk of Courts office, to discuss options for boosting mediation referrals. Special thanks also to Chesapeake GDC Coordinator Doreene Thomas for helping us prepare for the visit.

Judge Daniel was extremely receptive and supportive of our efforts, and Bob Carpenter is already eagerly planning changes that he believes will increase the workload for the certified mediators on his roster. In fact, if you are a certified mediator in the Winchester/Frederick region and are looking for additional cases, give Bob a call. We expect he may soon have some work for you!

DRS IN THE FIELD

CONFERENCE FOR VIRGINIA CLERKS

In early December, DRS had the privilege of presenting at the Conference for Virginia District Court Clerks. Joining forces with Andrea Palmisano, mediator-mentor in the Virginia Beach area, Terry Dysick and I shared on a subject that clerks are all too familiar with – conflict. Tapping into our specialty – resolution, we offered tips and strategies to approach conflictual interactions or disputatious situations with a little more grace and possibly grit.

For the presentation entitled, “Don’t Panic, De-Escalate: Tips for Managing Conflict at the Courthouse,” all the clerks in attendance would probably agree that Terry and Andrea stole the show with their inimitable role-play at the top. With Terry playing the clerk, perturbed that Andrea, as the customer, would dare to ask about what form to use in court, all the clerks seemed able to relate. In the pressure of their work to manage dockets and judges, it is sometimes the simplest request of their duty to provide customer service that goes too far.

Michael Barr,
ADR Analyst

The clerks responded with both laughter and good questions to let us know we were on the right track. We described customer service as an art, and conflict as a difference in goals, expectations, or values in situations where one feels their interest or needs are misunderstood or not respected.

In addition to taking a deep breath, we offered steps to show compassion, to separate the person from the problem, and helpful phrases to regain control. Customers are treated as neighbors in the community of court, and clerks can then advise on what may or may not be done to answer the question or settle the anxiety.

With over 200 clerks gathered from around the state, dozens raised their hand to the question of their court having a mediation coordinator. So, if you’re a coordinator, we hope our little presentation shed light for them on what each of you, and the mediators on your roster, do every day. Thank you for your service, too!

DRS IN THE FIELD

(CONT.)

Terry Dysick,
Parent Education Coordinator

PARENT EDUCATION COMMUNITY INFO SESSIONS

The last Parent Education Symposium in April 2025 yielded interests in webinars and sharing of information between symposia. Effective October 2025, Parent Education Community Info Sessions began with providers signed up to present every third Thursday at 2:00pm until 3:30pm to other approved parent educators, mediators and family service entities. As of December 2025, a second info session was added: every first Tuesday. The twice per month info session is scheduled through December 2026! Twenty participants responded to the initial session.

Topics relate to obtaining community resources, leaving a legacy, support for CS payers, understanding grief, dealing with trauma issues, self-care, supporting children with special needs, mental health, child studies, domestic violence awareness, cultural diversity; etc. The info sessions have encouraged positive networking among parent education providers and enhanced knowledge of services and quality of deliveries in seminars.

JUDICIAL CONFERENCE FOR DISTRICT JUDGES

Terry Dysick,
Parent Education Coordinator

Dan Wassink and Terry C. Dysick participated as exhibitors for the district judges conference held October 6-8, 2025, in Virginia Beach. We experienced great opportunities to converse with many new and senior judges from all regions. Judges shared their lack of awareness and/or accessibility to services in addition to interest in statistical outcomes, regarding mediation. We emphasized the benefits of parent education seminars in conjunction with mediation referrals and the relativity of potential reduction in recidivism. Statistically, we emphasized approximately 70% of all mediations reach a full or partial agreement.

Conversations also included the need to offer more virtual and in-person opportunities for these services in the rural areas. We were amazed that many judges were not aware on the Parent Education component. Efforts are currently in place to increase awareness and in-person service ability throughout the state.

THE JUDICIAL SETTLEMENT CONFERENCE: MORE THAN TWO DECADES OF SERVICE

The Hon. Walter J. Ford
Retired Circuit Court Judge

For more than twenty years, the Judicial Settlement Conference (JSC) program has played a vital role in helping courts, attorneys, and clients efficiently resolve disputes. More than 20,000 Circuit Court civil cases have been settled through this initiative, which continues to thrive and remain as busy as ever.

I was among the first group of retired, recalled Circuit Court judges to join the JSC program when it launched in November 2003. To qualify, we completed Basic Mediation training, along with specialized JSC training taught by U.S. Magistrate Judges.

The primary purpose of the settlement conferences is simple but significant: to free up trial judges to hear other cases, helping to manage the increasingly heavy dockets faced by our courts.

To evaluate the program's effectiveness, JSC judges distribute exit surveys to attorneys or their clients. The feedback has been overwhelmingly positive, with nearly 100% of respondents indicating the process was very appropriate for their case. The most frequent comment I have noted is surprise that the case actually settled, particularly when parties had previously been unable to reach agreement on their own.

Over the years, I have personally mediated hundreds of cases, covering a wide range of issues. The majority have been divorce cases, many in the early stages of litigation. I often shared with the parties an estimate of the future costs if their case proceeded to a contested trial—costs that could easily reach into the thousands of dollars. Understanding those potential expenses frequently motivated parties to find common ground and resolve their disputes during the conference.

It is worth emphasizing that the JSC program is a FREE service. This accessibility makes it an invaluable resource for litigants, offering an opportunity to resolve disputes efficiently, respectfully, and without additional financial burden.

GUIDELINES UPDATES

Michael Barr,
ADR Analyst



In case you missed it, DRS has one major and one minor update to the Guidelines to share. Over the past couple decades, the basic requirements to become a family mediator have remained stable while DRS has fielded reports of mentees and the newly certified having difficulty calculating child support. It is one thing to talk with parties about their finances, and it is quite another to put the numbers all together, compare them with the statutory schedule, and find the right balance for the parental arrangement and number of children.

It is a different skill set than mediators typically provide, and with increasingly complicated family separations the practice can also be intimidating. Yet mediators offer a unique service for parties in these dilemmas, having both a sensitivity to the emotions, and the time and tact to get all the details and craft a more nuanced and durable agreement than may be achieved through statute alone.

It is with these considerations in mind that DRS is now requiring an 8-hour training on Support Matters in VA Family Courts as a core course. While open to all, it is intended for those starting the process toward certification in January 2026. The mentorship will now include two support worksheets that must be submitted, yet without the 'by hand' requirement. The course is a recommendation of the Child Support Committee – composed of JDR coordinators and attorneys with DCSE, which met monthly for over a year.

The second minor change is a clarification on the specific number of hours that a mediator may use from a core course to partially fulfill their CME requirements. It is set at a maximum of eight (8), or most of the credits one would need to recertify. We believe this awards those who wish to advance their certification level, become a mentor, or refresh their skills and limits the use of a long core course for an excess of CME. Thank you to all who participated in surveys on these subjects.

RECERTIFICATION UPDATE

The season to recertify has come and gone and if you are reading this, it means you are likely in good standing. In 2025, there were 266 mediators eligible to recertify and, so far, 203 (possibly including you) have carried on. For 27, this was their first recertification. If you are in that number, or if you have suggestions for DRS, tell us how it went. Were you able to find the courses you needed? Are there courses you would like to see offered in 2026? Thanks for your commitment to the process of resolving party disputes in a way that is both mutual and hopefully satisfying for everyone involved.

DRS'S 2025 FISCAL YEAR REPORT IS OUT!

A graphic of the year '2025' in a bold, blocky font. The numbers are yellow with dark blue outlines and are slightly offset from each other, giving a 3D or layered effect.

Jon Lamp,
ADR Program Specialist

I am happy to announce that we have just released our annual report for fiscal year 2025! Each year, DRS makes available a document that highlights the activity of court-referred ADR programs in the field. In this report, we share updates from the year, events that our office held, program statistics, and more.

As we continue to improve our ability to collect and analyze data, we will tweak the format of the report. This year, we started reporting on the ratio of filings to payment volume for the Judicial Settlement Conference Program, the Custody, Visitation, and Support Mediation Program, and the General District Court Mediation Program. Additionally, for these two district court mediation programs, we were able to add a section dedicated to the amount of time reported by mediator in and out of mediation.

To the right is the executive summary from the report. We encourage you to check out the full report [on our website!](#)

"This fiscal year, DRS welcomed a new staff member. In early 2025, Terry Dysick joined as the new Parent Education Coordinator, taking over for Ann Warshauer. DRS also saw its programs grow, as three new judges joined the Judicial Settlement Conference program, 37 mediators were newly certified, and 11 new providers joined the Parent Education Program. DRS also started several new initiatives this year aimed at ensuring the quality of its programs, including convening a committee to review the current Standards of Mediator Ethics and Professional Responsibility for Certified Mediators, convening a Child Support Committee to address concerns raised by mediators, and a creating a program that calls on the new Parent Education Coordinator to observe the seminars of approved providers. With this growth, however, came a decline in invoices from district court mediations. DRS is working with courts and mediation coordinators across the Commonwealth to investigate and address any issues that could be causing these declines."



THANK YOU

for all you do!

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SHARE YOUR THOUGHTS!

Have an idea for a future article?

Submit your ideas to

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As always, thank you for all you
do for ADR in Virginia.

