

Florida's State Courts Administrators: 1972-2022

Background

In 1972, Florida's voters overwhelmingly voted to reform Article V of the Florida State Constitution to ensure unity and consistency throughout the judicial branch. The revisions in Article V identified the need for administration at every level of the judicial branch. It designated the chief justice as the chief administrative officer of the State Courts System and created the position of the chief judge as administrator of their own courts. As a result of the additional responsibility, the chief justice created the role of the State Courts Administrator to assist the chief in fulfilling administrative duties and ensuring access to justice statewide. Thus, the Office of the State Courts Administrator (OSCA) was born.

In 1998, Florida voters passed an additional revision to Article V, section 14 of the Florida State Constitution, commonly called "Revision 7." This revision, implemented in 2004, unified the budget of Florida's courts and sought to relieve budgetary strain from local governments. The main goal of Revision 7, which is covered in more detail in a separate article in this issue, was to ensure equity statewide so all citizens, regardless of their location, could have the same access to court services.

Since OSCA's formation, there have been 8 State Courts Administrators.

James B. Ueberhorst: 1972-1974

Florida's first State Courts Administrator was James B. Ueberhorst. Ueberhorst had a background that made him an excellent candidate to lead the State Courts System. His experience as assistant general counsel for the Central Intelligence Agency provided a legal backdrop to uplift Florida's State Courts System and, through the beginning of the Article V reform, begin improving the efficiency of the courts. Ueberhorst's term as Florida's State Courts Administrator was followed by 4 years working in administration for the U.S. Supreme Court and 17 years running his consulting firm specializing in foreign trade law and business management analysis until his death at age 67 from a heart attack in May 1996.¹

John F. Harkness Jr.: 1974-1981

During John F. Harkness's time as State Courts Administrator, he oversaw the implementation of revisions to Article V of the Florida State Constitution. He built the foundation on which the State Courts System depends today. While Article V reorganized Florida's court system, it took leadership to unify the judiciary. Harkness filled that role. After serving as staff director of the House Judiciary Committee, Harkness practiced law with his father in Miami. Because of his past collaboration with the judiciary, he was a clear choice to fill the vacancy left by Ueberhorst. His leadership through the challenge of Article V's implementation was integral in setting up the State Courts System for success for many years.

¹ James B. Ueberhorst Dies, WALL STREET J. (1996), <https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/local/1996/05/20/james-b-ueberhorst-dies/edeb1d7b-4e6e-408c-b800-f3679c776dc4/>

His impact remains evident throughout OSCA today. Harkness left OSCA in 1981 to become the Executive Director of The Florida Bar, where he served until his retirement in 2017.²

Donald D. Conn: 1981-1985

Donald D. Conn joined OSCA with a Master of Science in Public Administration and a Juris Doctorate from Florida State University. He served in several positions to prepare him for his role in the State Courts System, such as General Counsel for Tampa Bay Water, an Administrative Law Judge with the Division of Administrative Hearings, and General Counsel to the Department of Business Regulation. Conn's time with OSCA saw some improvements in technology that catapulted the State Courts System into the extensive advancements to come. He left OSCA to start a private practice in Tampa.³

Kenneth "Ken" R. Palmer: 1985-2001

For 16 years, Palmer oversaw the State Courts System as State Courts Administrator. Palmer showed his passion for access to justice as an OSCA employee for 25 years, including 5 years as Deputy State Courts Administrator. He experienced vast improvements in technology and led the growing OSCA staff through the beginning stages of the Revision 7 implementation. Courage defined his time as State Courts Administrator as he implemented innovative policies, practices, and court initiatives that continue to help Floridians access justice today. Among his numerous accomplishments, Palmer implemented the family court initiative, treatment-based problem-solving courts, alternative dispute resolution, and statewide interpreter testing. His invaluable impact on the State Courts System remains evident today. Palmer remained State Courts Administrator until his death at age 54 in 2001 from cancer.⁴

Robin L. Lubitz: 2002-2003

Armed with years of practice in judicial administration, Robin Lubitz was an experienced candidate ready to continue the implementation of Revision 7. Directly before his post at OSCA, he was a deputy administrator of the U.S. Department of Justice's Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention and executive director of both North Carolina's Sentencing and Policy Advisory and Governor's Crime Commissions. He left OSCA in 2003 to become the Director of Juvenile Justice Services at the Arizona Supreme Court and, in 2009, retired from the judicial system. He has since published three nonfiction novels.⁵

² Jan Pudlow, *John F. Harkness, Jr.: The Heart of the Florida Bar*, THE FLA. BAR (2017), <https://www.floridabar.org/the-florida-bar-journal/john-f-harkness-jr-the-heart-of-the-florida-bar/>.

³ *Attorney Bios*, CONN & BUENAVENTURA, P.A. (2016) <http://cbflalaw.com/attorney-bios/>.

⁴ *Cancer Claims State Courts Administrator Ken Palmer*, THE FLA. BAR (2001), <https://www.floridabar.org/the-florida-bar-news/cancer-claims-state-courts-administrator-ken-palmer/>.

⁵ *Lubitz Named State Courts Administrator*, THE FLA. BAR (2002)

<https://www.floridabar.org/the-florida-bar-news/lubitz-named-state-courts-administrator/>

Elisabeth “Lisa” H. Kiel (née Goodner): 2003-2014, 2019-2021

Kiel served at the helm of OSCA for a total of 14 years. She first served, as State Courts Administrator for 11 years from 2003 to 2014. Then, she came out of retirement in 2019 to serve as interim State Courts Administrator until 2021. Her experience as the Assistant Personnel Director at the Department of Corrections prepared her for 3 years as OSCA’s Chief of Personnel before stepping into her role as State Courts Administrator. Kiel saw the last of the Revision 7 implementation through and guided the State Courts System into an increasingly digital world defined by immediacy and emerging media. Building on the foundation of OSCA’s past leaders, Kiel was responsible for beginning the implementation of technology such as e-filing, which is commonplace now. Kiel returned as interim State Courts Administrator and led OSCA through the beginning of the Covid-19 pandemic. Although retired, she is now a private consultant on judicial administration and justice-related matters.

Patricia “PK” Jameson: 2014-2019

Patricia “PK” Jameson joined the judicial branch after many years of experience in the executive and legislative branches. Jameson has a Juris Doctorate from Florida State University and worked as an attorney in private practice. Before coming to OSCA, she was General Counsel and Deputy Chief Financial Officer of the Florida Department of Financial Services. She also served as Chief of Staff to the Speaker of the Florida House of Representatives and senior policy adviser to the Senate President, Policy Chief of Health and Human Services for former Governor Jeb Bush, General Counsel for the Florida Chief Financial Officer, and Staff Director for a number of legislative committees. Her 5 years as State Courts Administrator are defined by significant advancements in technology, including ongoing initiatives such as virtual remote interpreting and Uniform Case Reporting. Jameson returned to the legislature in 2019 as Staff Director to the Senate Subcommittee on Criminal and Civil Justice Appropriations. She now serves as the Office of Program Policy Analysis and Government Accountability’s Coordinator.

Alison Sackett: 2021-Present

Succeeding Lisa Kiel in her post as interim State Courts Administrator, Alison “Ali” Sackett joins OSCA with 14 years of experience at The Florida Bar, where she served as both the Associate Director of Lawyer Regulation and most recently as the Director of the Legal Division, among other roles. Before her time at The Florida Bar, she worked for Legal Services of North Florida. Sackett is also an attorney, earning her Juris Doctorate from the Mississippi College School of Law. Sackett comes to OSCA prepared to face persistent challenges and continue to improve the administration of Florida’s judiciary.