

In Our Own Words: Living on Docket Clerk Pay

Statements by Current Docket Clerks About Living on the Pay They Receive From the Judiciary:

"I've been employed with the Judiciary since August 2011. My position is Docket Clerk B.... When I first started almost five years ago, I made \$13.24 an hour. I currently make \$16.70 per hour. I am a single mother and sometimes have difficulty making ends meet based on my pay. I worked full time and had a great part time job for many years before I came to the Judiciary. The then Court Clerk told me I could not continue the part time job as it would be a conflict with the Court. I sadly had to resign from my part time job after over ten years as a dispatcher."

.....

"I work forty hours a week and am a single mom to 2 twelve year olds. I cannot afford the cost of the medical insurance premiums through work. Due to my low income, my children qualified and I enrolled them in Dr. Dynasaur for health coverage."

.....

"When I started work with the Judiciary as a Docket Clerk B at Pay Grade 15 I found it extremely difficult to support my family. I am married with two children. During this period my wife worked intermittently, but it was very difficult for her to find employment that made sense considering the extremely high cost of childcare, even despite the fact that she has a Master's Degree. While receiving the low pay of a Docket Clerk B, my family found it necessary to seek State assistance just to be able to feed our family. We received food benefits which we relied on, both through EBT and through WIC, heating assistance, and other forms of assistance. Without those benefits I don't know how we would have survived. In fact, we even had to go beyond those benefits at a couple of points and visit the local food shelf just so that our children would have enough to eat."

.....

"I was hired four and a half years ago for the full time position of Family Docket Clerk. Like so many other families with children, we struggle every month to pay our bills and sustain a household. Due to a severe back injury, my partner is only able to part-time for now, which makes our lives even more stressful. I am grateful to have a full-time job that I enjoy, yet we always seem to be treading water and juggling our bills... Two years after starting my job, I qualified for a Habitat for Humanity home. I qualified because I fell into the poverty bracket. I put 250 hours of sweat equity into our home in addition to my regular work week. I am grateful to have my own home, but again I was reminded that my family and I are living barely above poverty level."

"I am a docket clerk.... I started working here in November of 2014, and I have one more day left with the Judiciary before I begin work at another State office. I have found the courthouse to be a wonderful place to work, I enjoy my job and my coworkers are great people. However, I cannot afford to stay here."

I live a simple life, and count myself lucky as compared to other recent college graduates who may be struggling more than I am. Still, by the time I pay all of my bills, I have almost nothing left over at the end of the month, and I am gradually burning away my savings to make ends meet. Please understand that when I say bills I am speaking of only necessities. My expenses can be broken down as follows:

- Rent: \$750
- Electric: \$75
- Laundry: \$20
- Car payment: \$209
- Car insurance: \$75
- Phone: \$50
- Medication not covered by insurance: \$25
- Groceries: \$200 (imagine living on \$7 worth of food a day)
- Total: \$1554

I make \$1572 a month, giving me \$18 left over at the end of the month. In February, I had to be taken to the emergency room, costing me \$50. Last month I needed to go to the doctor's, which is a \$20 co-pay. It was pretty embarrassing when I was unable to come up with the money at the counter. Last weekend, I went to the store to pick up groceries and my card was declined. This month, my care needs to be inspected... Then things people do for fun, such as going to the movies, going clothes shopping, going out to eat, visiting museums and art centers are not options."

.....

"I am employed by the Vermont Judiciary as a Docket Clerk... where I have worked since 2004. Over the past nine years, while working full time for the Vermont Judiciary I have maintained a second job at Walmart. For several years I worked approximately twenty hours per week at Walmart, in addition to my role as a Docket Clerk, only within the past year reducing that to about 8 hours per week. I have worked this second job because I do not make enough money in my job as a Docket Clerk to be able to cover my expenses."

"I started work for the Judiciary four years ago. My starting wage was \$13.24 an hour. I was a single mother of two minor children in the process of divorce. Even with the child support I was receiving at the time, my children qualified for free hot lunches and Dr. Dynasaur. As the divorce became finalized, my income was such that I was awarded alimony. Between alimony, child support and my wages, my children then qualified for reduced lunches and Dr. Dynasaur, without a copay on my part. This

was embarrassing to my children and emotionally hard on me. No parent wants their child to be embarrassed at school for any reason, especially because she does not make enough money to buy their lunches. Even though no one knew for sure that my children received free or reduced meals, they often chose not to eat. After the first two years, I no longer applied for the reduced meals benefit but my children continued to qualify for Dr. Dynasaur.

If I had not been awarded spousal support, I would have lost my house. This is not an exaggeration. I live in a very modest home and live a very modest life but I still struggle to pay my monthly bills, especially in the winter. I stop paying my electric bill after November 1st because if the temperature stays below a certain degree for a certain length of time, Green Mountain Power cannot turn off your electricity. I do this so that I am able to afford my heating fuel for the winter.”

.....

“I am a single mother with three children and I earn \$15.76 per hour as a Docket Clerk B... In the almost two short years that I have been in my position, I have seen this docket almost double in size... Every day is a struggle to meet the statutes and reasonable time frames that are outlined by the State’s laws... I work hard every day to keep some semblance of reason and cohesion within this complicated court docket.

With all that said I again want to point out that I am a single mother with three teenage children. Their father lives in Texas with his family. He does not pay child support although there is an order in place. Due to my low wages, I attempted to take on a part time job, but that left absolutely no supervision for my children. In order to work enough hours, I had to be away from home on weekday evenings and sometimes on weekends. I did not see my children at all. We went from having sit-down family dinners to not seeing each other more than two nights a week. My children’s grades suffered. My boys began to display very challenging behaviors. So I left my part time job. I qualify for the IFP to file paperwork with the court. I also qualify for food stamps/3 squares VT (even if it is only a little, it helps), and I also qualify for fuel assistance, without which it would have been a very cold winter. I work full time, sometimes more.... I can’t even buy fuel and barely scrape by.... I am very good at my job and I work hard... and I can’t even afford groceries on my own. I pay more than \$300 per month to VSAC for my student loans, I can barely pay the rent.”

Statements by Current Employees About The Impact of Low Pay on the Service Provided to the Public:

“All of us are overworked and underpaid. It sounds like complaining, but the reality is, we are doing our jobs to the best of our ability. The judicial system runs because we work extra hard. The stress creates tension in the workplace, and can affect customer service. We are all good about handling it, but when you are doing the work of two people it can get to you. Outside stress from the lack of a livable wage factors into that and people get sick more often. We end up behind because we are understaffed. It’s a cycle...”

.....

“Low pay can feel self-demeaning. That, in turn, can lead to not going the extra mile, or not being as professional in outlook as possible. Even when a docket clerk does go out of his/her way to help someone (which I’ve seen several times), low morale returns on pay day. The “docket clerk” position is tremendously undervalued, and probably should be re-named to reflect the numerous responsibilities which actually comprise the position. It is MUCH MORE than clerical work.”

.....

“The skilled staff have left because of low pay...this stresses the entire remaining staff’s workload. Then a new person has to be trained by the short staff. This burns out the staff who have to pick up when staff leaves. Once trained, those individuals leave for better paying jobs, and the circle begins again. The stress and lack of skill impacts the consumers...always!”

.....

“We are dedicated individuals who give the best possible service to the public both at the counter and over the phone. We go above and beyond in our jobs every day. We ensure that the courts run smoothly and process judges’ orders. We should be paid more simply because of our demanding workload and stress that we deal with on a daily basis. The judiciary needs to rethink our pay grade. We make the same amount in wages as an information center ambassador who is also pay grade 15. Seriously? Personally with a young child my expenses are only going to increase in the years to come.”

.....

“I think docket clerks have the integrity to provide outstanding service, even though they are underpaid. Two surveys done a couple of years ago showed that public satisfaction with the court system was one of the highest in the nation, while staff satisfaction was one of the lowest in the nation.”

"People sometimes have negative attitudes because we are overloaded with work. It is frustrating to be overwhelmed and working very hard for the judiciary, when in reality, we are just keeping our heads above water."

"I really enjoyed working for the Judiciary. I liked being busy and I couldn't have had a better COM plus the health benefits and retirement plans were wonderful. Unfortunately, I could not afford to pay my monthly expenses without going negative every month. I wish I could have worked my way up to another position with more compensation but there is nowhere to go after docket clerk. The only other position would be a COM or clerk and those positions are held until retirement, at which point everyone applies for them. If the Judiciary could have (at the very least) provided raises then maybe employees could justify staying but the only raises I received were COLAs and even then the Union had to fight for them every year. I would gladly go back to the Judiciary if they could compensate me enough to make getting a four year paralegal degree worth it."

Statements by Former Docket Clerks:

"I left a job that I loved. I mean really and truly I loved my job. I loved the people that I worked with and other colleagues throughout the Judiciary. I loved the Judges that I worked with. It was a very difficult decision for me to actually decide to leave. There was a lot of unknown with a new place not knowing whether or not I would like it but I owed it to myself to take this incredible opportunity and see what could come of it. I would without hesitation, consider a job in the future with the Judiciary if and when the time is right. I really enjoyed my job and the opportunities that it brought me. Some of the best relationships I have are from those that I have met through the Judiciary and I am forever thankful for that chance. I would like to say that I wish upper level management would communicate better with those on the front lines. I also wish they would consult with front line workers more about matters that directly affect the workers and the work that they do."

.....
"I loved my job as a docket clerk and was very sad to leave but I couldn't be a docket clerk for the rest of my life and survive on the salary with not much hope for changes in the future. The only potential job advancement is the operations manager which doesn't become open often and they would prefer someone with a law degree."

.....
"On more than one occasion throughout my career as a docket clerk, both in the Lamoille Unit and the Chittenden Unit, I went to work when I was sick because the staffing was so low and the work load was so high that I felt I had no choice but to go in. Each time it resulted in me being sicker for longer and having to incur medical bills as a result of the prolonged illness. In the Lamoille Unit, after the restructuring, the people that received a significant pay increase seemed to undergo a significant decrease in the amount of work and responsibilities that they undertook on a daily basis, while my pay decreased and my workload increased dramatically (with little to no guidance or training). The Lamoille Unit was very poorly managed and any success rates and docket flow are testaments only to the Docket Clerks, and are done so in spite of, not because of management. In the Chittenden Unit I found a well-oiled machine when I entered into the team there. It was well-run, well-managed and lead by someone that cares about the employees as well as the docket flow and making sure that staff, the Judge and the public all have their needs met in a timely and professional manner. It was very difficult to leave the Chittenden Unit and the Judiciary in general, but my husband and I are trying to have a child and I need to be sure that I can provide financially for a growing family. Thank you for your time."

.....
"There was no way to "move up" and advance in the Clerk position. I have two college degrees and want the opportunity to move and advance. The Clerk position is underpaid, under-trained and under appreciated"