

BECOMING A NEUTRAL:

GUIDANCE FOR JUDICIAL OFFICERS CONSIDERING WHAT'S NEXT

By: Hon. Marla O. Anderson (Ret.)

JAMS Neutral

Transitioning from a judicial officer to a neutral working with an alternative dispute resolution organization can be a fulfilling way to continue contributing to the legal field while enjoying a different pace and focus.

Alternative dispute resolution is a spectrum of non-judicial alternatives to litigation where a neutral third party assists the disputing parties in reaching a resolution. The role of the neutral can involve mediation, arbitration, neutral evaluation, mock trials, special master, referee or temporary judge. Whether you are interested in becoming a neutral in the near future or down the road, here are a few tips to prepare for this new role:



First, understand that parties choose neutrals based on qualifications, experience, training, subject matter knowledge, and reputation. Begin developing these now by committing to excellence and broadening your judicial experience-regardless of your current assignment. Complacency is not an option. Think long-term; your cumulative service matters more than any one role. Consider cultivating a niche that brings you fulfillment and fuels your enthusiasm, whether it is family law, complex civil, probate or international arbitration. A clear focus enhances your appeal to clients and providers. Ask yourself: how would you recommend yourself as a neutral?

Second, building a network and reputation within the dispute resolution community is also important. Attending bar association events or writing articles offering practical tips

for navigating the courts can assist not only to improve trust and confidence in the courts but can increase name recognition and keep you in touch in a constructive way with those you will reach out to once a neutral. In Addition, become involved in some way in your court, the judicial branch and your community. Your involvement in the legal and court community will keep you well-informed of current trends and expand your knowledge base.

Third, seek out mentor opportunities with those currently serving as neutrals. There is no better way to learn about a field than to talk with someone in the trenches. Approximately two years before retirement, I spent time with a seasoned neutral gathering information to ascertain whether I would enjoy being a neutral and, if so, which organization I should consider. After thoughtful consideration, I chose to join JAMS, an organization known for its integrity and commitment to providing world-class dispute resolution services.

Lastly, and perhaps most importantly, take the time to appreciate where you are in your career today- tomorrow will unfold in its own time. By building networks, deepening your skills and knowledge, and seeking mentorship opportunities, you can position yourself for a successful transition from a judicial officer to work as a neutral and continue to make a meaningful impact in the legal community.

[Hon. Marla O. Anderson \(Ret.\)](#) is a JAMS arbitrator, mediator and neutral evaluator. She joined JAMS after nearly three decades as a judge, having served on the Monterey County Municipal Court and the Monterey County Superior Court, as well as having served a decade on the Judicial Council of California. She is a Life Member of AAACJO, Inc.