

The Georgia Statement

News, policies and trends for all state government employees and agencies, published quarterly by the Georgia Merit System.

VOLUME 8, NO. 2

SUMMER 2005

GOVERNMENT SPOTLIGHT

The Office of State Administrative Hearings



The Office of State Administrative Hearings (OSAH) provides an independent forum for resolving disputes between the public and state agencies. OSAH was created in 1994 as a quasi-judicial body within the executive branch of state government. Its purpose is to help insure the integrity of decisions made by state officials regarding the rights,

benefits or privileges of private citizens, such as the denial of food stamps, the suspension of a driver's license, or the issuance of a land-fill permit. The OSAH administrative appeal process is designed to confirm that State agency decisions are in compliance with applicable statutes and rules. Before OSAH, agency decisions such as these were reviewed by the agency decision makers. With the creation of OSAH, the state legislature provided Georgia with a structure for independent and impartial review of disputed agency decisions.

OSAH receives over 300 types of cases from agencies through state government. Some examples of the cases decided by OSAH Administrative Law Judges include environmental permits, professional licensing complaints, special education matters, labor and employment issues, election disputes, real estate, tax and consumer fraud issues as well as appeals for matters relative to public assistance determinations and child support commitments. Once a case is referred to OSAH, a hearing is scheduled immediately and a notice is sent out to the complainant within 24 hours. The average case is scheduled for hearing and resolved by the issuance of a written decision in less

than five (5) weeks.

With an average caseload of two thousand cases monthly, OSAH administrative law judges conduct hearings in each of the state's 159 counties. Chief State Administrative Law Judge Lois Oakley says the hearings are best described as an opportunity for the State of Georgia to listen to citizens with complaints about State agency decisions. Hearings are conducted in generously donated space in county courthouses, municipal buildings and State agency offices. When circumstances dictate, hearings are also held in unconventional locations such as a bedroom or a nursing home bedside. Many of the cases before OSAH judges involve parties who are not represented by counsel, and OSAH judges are skilled at creating an environment so that both parties can explain their case.

Georgia is one of twenty-six (26) states with the central panel model of administrative adjudication. Although the very first central panel model was created by California in 1945, Georgia has one of the largest central panels in the country as measured by the breadth of case types. Since Georgia passed its legislation in 1994, several other states have followed suit. In the next few years, it is anticipated that most, if not all, of the states will employ the central panel model because of the efficiency and impartiality it contributes to the provision of due process for citizens. The breadth of OSAH's jurisdiction continues to grow as state agencies discover the value of the independent, impartial reviews provided by the OSAH administrative hearing process.

Georgia has received national recognition for its innovative approaches to administrative adjudication. The Office of State Administrative Hearings is nationally

recognized for its performance excellence and for the professionalism of its staff. In 2004, OSAH was the recipient of Focus Recognition and the Jim Kelly Leadership Award for leadership in the use of the Georgia Oglethorpe (Baldrige) Criteria for Performance Excellence from the Georgia Oglethorpe Award Process.

Judge Oakley has served as the chief state administrative law judge for OSAH since 2000. She has more than 30 years of legal experience in both public and private sectors.

The Office of State Administrative Hearings

www.osah.georgia.gov OR 404-657-2800

Chief State Administrative Law Judge: Lois F. Oakley

Number of Employees: 40

Mission: To enhance public trust in the integrity of state government by providing an independent forum for resolving disputes between the public and state agencies in a fair, respectful, timely, and professional manner.

Recognition and Accomplishments:

Featured in the Georgia Bar Journal, "Administrative Law Judges 'Ride the Circuit' to Provide Georgians with a Day in Court"

Recipient of Georgia Oglethorpe Award Focus Recognition

Highlighted in the Journal of Organizational Excellence, "From Bureaucracy to Meritocracy and Customer Focus: A Georgia State Agency Reinvents Itself"

Recipient of the Jim Kelly Leadership Award, presented for leadership in using the Georgia Oglethorpe (Baldrige) Criteria for Performance Excellence