

State of Arizona
COMMISSION ON JUDICIAL CONDUCT

Disposition of Complaint 25-545

Judge: Donald Watts

Complainant: Michael Jacobson

ORDER

The Complainant alleged a justice of the peace was demeaning toward litigants in eviction cases.

On September 18, 2025, Maricopa County Justice of the Peace Donald Watts conducted an eviction docket. During several hearings, Judge Watts was short-tempered and appeared frustrated, often raising his voice towards mostly self-represented litigants. He periodically interrupted litigants and chastised them for not listening. The recording showed that Judge Watts did not go over any procedural expectations with the litigants prior to calling their cases. There were several examples of improper comments made by Judge Watts in an improper tone, including, but not limited to the following:

- “Listen to what I am saying folks. I don’t have all day for this. You need to answer the question that I asked.”
- “Well, I’ve got like 10 cases here, and you don’t even know what you’re here for or what you’re representing.”
- “Folks, life is so much easier than you’re making it.”
- “If I don’t call your name, don’t talk. Listen to what I am saying. It’s so simple.”
- “. . . I don’t care. He’s not answering me. He’s not following the directions. You guys are really making this difficult.”
- “Would you acknowledge me? . . . Stop talking on top of me. Why are you being like this? . . . Would you answer what I’m talking about? Why do you keep talking while I’m talking. . . . No. You answer the question because I’ve answered it. I’ve asked it several times, and you, young lady, you’re not running my courtroom. You don’t tell me that I can go ahead and speak. You need to answer the question, or I’ll dismiss the case, and you can leave. You need to start showing some manners. Answer the question.”

- “Don’t sit here and argue the law with me. I probably know a little bit more about it than you do.”
- “Do you have questions for her? Listen to what I am saying. Do you have any questions? Why are you guys being like this? I can’t make it any simpler. Do you have any questions for her? How, how simple is that? Well, listen.”
- “Let me ask the question before you answer the . . . Why is this concept so hard? . . . Just listen to what I’m saying. Do you want me to listen to you, or do you want me to just make a decision and ignore you?”
- “. . . Oh my goodness. The question is, do you want me to listen to what you guys have to say, or do you want me to just make decisions? . . . You’re killing me here.”
- “So neither one of you are paying attention to the law, but yet you want me to figure out your cases, and now you want me to make a decision. But neither one of you have read what the law says.”
- “. . . I don’t know why you’re acting like this. You better not act like this in person because I’ll just dismiss your case. You guys expect me to treat you a certain way, but then you guys just walk all over me like I’m nothing.”

The Commission requested a response from the judge, specifically noting that the recording had been reviewed by Commission staff, and the judge should address his comments during the eviction hearings. In his response, Judge Watts did not address any specific comments, however, he apologized for his actions and agreed that a judge should be patient, dignified and courteous. He also reported that he has not been on the bench for several months for medical reasons.

After reviewing all the evidence of the case, the Commission finds that the judge violated the following provisions of the Code of Judicial Conduct:

- Rule 1.2 which states: “A judge shall act at all times in a manner that promotes public confidence in the independence, integrity, and impartiality of the judiciary, and shall avoid impropriety and the appearance of impropriety.”
- Rule 2.8(B) which states: “A judge shall be patient, dignified, and courteous to litigants, jurors, witnesses, lawyers, court staff, court officials, and others with whom the judge deals in an official capacity,

and shall require similar conduct of lawyers, court staff, court officials, and others subject to the judge's direction and control."

The Commission found no clear and convincing evidence to support the remaining allegations of the complaint.

Accordingly, Maricopa County Justice of the Peace Donald Watts is hereby publicly reprimanded for the conduct described above and pursuant to Commission Rule 17(a). The record in this case, consisting of the complaint, the judicial officer's response, and this order shall be made public as required by Commission Rule 9(a).

Commission member Christopher P. Staring did not participate in the consideration of this matter.

Dated: April 1, 2026

FOR THE COMMISSION

/s/ Joseph C. Kreamer

Hon. Joseph C. Kreamer

Commission Vice-chair

Copies of this order were distributed to all appropriate persons on April 1, 2026.

Monday, October 27, 2025

Complaint Outline — Arizona Commission on Judicial Conduct

Complainant Information

Name: Michael Jacobson

Address:

Phone:

Email:

Judge Information

Name: Hon. Donald Watts

Court: Manistee Justice Court, Maricopa County, Arizona

Date of Incident: September 18, 2025

Opening Statement

I have appeared before the Manistee Justice Court for approximately twenty-five years as a property owner handling eviction cases.

I am filing this complaint after taking more than a month to reflect on my experience in Judge Donald Watts' courtroom on September 18, 2025.

I deliberately waited to see whether time and perspective would change my view of his conduct. The truth is, it did not.

What I witnessed that day was inconsistent with the standards of dignity, patience, and professionalism that I have long associated with this court.

After multiple follow-up interactions with his staff—which only reinforced my concerns—I am convinced that what occurred was not an isolated lapse but part of a deeper problem in the court's culture and leadership.

1. Improper Conduct on the Bench

During the 1:30 p.m. docket on September 18, Judge Watts repeatedly spoke to litigants in a demeaning and discourteous manner.

He raised his voice, interrupted speakers, and ridiculed people who were clearly unfamiliar with courtroom procedure.

All participants were self-represented citizens facing stressful situations; they deserved patience and respect.

This conduct appears to violate:

- **Rule 1.2** – Judges must promote public confidence in the integrity and impartiality of the judiciary.
- **Rule 2.8(B)** – Judges must be patient, dignified, and courteous to litigants and others in court.

2. Inflated Recording Fees

After the hearing, I requested the official recording for that docket.

Instead of the standard \$33 fee listed on the Maricopa Justice Court fee schedule, I received the attached invoice (**Exhibit A**) totaling **\$429**, broken into six “recordings” and six “electronic case files.”

This was for one continuous docket session. The clerk questioned me as to why I wanted the records, I told her I needed them for my own review and that I wanted all cases on the 1:30 pm docket. The clerk then told me she doubted the judge would **ALLOW** it. She told me it would take a week to 10 days. When I returned the day before my October 2, 2025 continued date I asked for the transcript I was told that it was not ready. After the hearing as I was leaving the clerk called me over and explained that as I had filled out the form sloppily they were unable to send me an email telling me the transcript was ready.

When the clerk handed me the invoice, she smiled and laughed, suggesting they did not expect a citizen to challenge it. The form I was handed is **Exhibit A** was for **\$429. I was certain that this inflated price was to deter me from receiving the transcripts and cover up for the fact that the judge knew that he had behaved badly during the hearing.**

This inflated fee obstructs access to a public record and undermines transparency in violation of the court’s obligation to maintain open proceedings.

3. Mishandled Mileage Fees

A week or so later, I filled out a writ of Restitution I also paid \$26 in mileage to the constable for an eviction that was never executed.

The clerk overlooked an incomplete phone number on the writ, yet the fee was retained. She glanced at the form without checking that the info was correct. She had no issues taking my fees.

When the constable never contacted me I was able to get the tenant to move by paying her a fee. The constable a week or so later called me to set a date for the eviction. I informed the constable that that was already completed and since she did not have to make the thirteen mile journey to my rental that I was due a refund for the mileage. She said no. I requested a refund, the clerk refused, stating the court "does not refund monies already paid."

Under **A.R.S. § 11-445**, mileage fees may be collected only for **actual miles traveled**. **Since no miles were driven the actual miles are zero!**

Retaining payment for services never performed demonstrates disregard for statutory requirements and fairness to the public.

4. Court Culture and Leadership Failure

The unprofessional behavior within this court appears to stem directly from its leadership.

Judge Watts' own conduct has set a tone of impatience and contempt that his clerks now mirror.

Staff routinely treat citizens as adversaries rather than as people seeking service, reflecting an "us versus them" mentality.

This erosion of professionalism originates at the top and damages public trust in the judicial process.

5. Contrast with Prior Judicial Standards

I have appeared in this court for roughly twenty-five years.

Earlier judges displayed compassion and professionalism.

One, for example, during a hearing the judge talked with a thirteen-year-old hispanic boy who had stopped attending school. His mother was in the gallery crying. The judge, also a justice of the Peace, spoke to him for nearly twenty minutes trying to guide him back onto a better path.

That act of humanity left a lasting impression.

By contrast, Judge Watts' courtroom now operates with impatience, ridicule, and a complete absence of empathy—a stark departure from the court's once-respected standards.

6. What I Am Requesting

I respectfully request that the Arizona Commission on Judicial Conduct:

1. **Review the complete recording of the September 18, 2025, 1:30 p.m. docket** at the Manistee Justice Court to independently assess the conduct and tone of Judge Donald Watts toward the litigants appearing before him.
2. **Evaluate whether his actions and courtroom demeanor** on that date were consistent with the Arizona Code of Judicial Conduct, particularly Rules 1.2 and 2.8(B).
3. **Investigate the administrative management** of his court, including the billing practices that led to the \$429 charge for a single hearing recording and the refusal to refund mileage not incurred.
4. **Take whatever corrective or disciplinary action** the Commission deems appropriate to ensure that the Manistee Justice Court meets the standards of dignity, fairness, and transparency owed to the public.
5. **Recommend administrative review or training** for both Judge Watts and his staff to restore professionalism and public confidence in that courtroom.

7. Conclusion

I did not file this complaint immediately because I wanted time to verify my facts and give the court a chance to correct its course.

More than a month later, the same problems persist.

I therefore request that the Arizona Commission on Judicial Conduct review Judge Watts' behavior and administrative management of the Manistee Justice Court.

This complaint is not motivated by personal grievance or financial interest, I won my case and received my writ, but by a sincere concern for the integrity of a public office that directly affects the lives of ordinary citizens.

Exhibit List

- **Exhibit A:** Manistee Justice Court Invoice for 1:30 p.m. Docket Recording (dated September 18, 2025) — **Total \$429.**

Closing Statement

I submit this complaint respectfully and in good faith. My only goal is to help restore professionalism, transparency, and public confidence in the Manistee Justice Court.

I respectfully request to be copied on all correspondence and notified of all actions, findings, or determinations made in connection with this complaint.

I appreciate the Commission's time and consideration in reviewing this matter and trust that the facts and documentation will speak for themselves.

Sincerely



Mike Jacobson

Kim Hassel (MJC)

From: Manistee Justice Court
Sent: Wednesday, September 24, 2025 6:02 PM
To: 1
Subject: Record & Recording Request

Greetings Mr. Jacobson,
Manistee Justice Court is in receipt of your records request for the cases on the 1:30pm court docket for September 18, 2025.

The total cost to fulfill your request is as follows:

CC2025217289 recording of hearing \$33.00 electronic case file \$33.00
CC2025217320 recording of hearing \$33.00 electronic case file \$33.00
CC2025217636 recording of hearing \$33.00 electronic case file \$33.00
CC2025217855 recording of hearing \$33.00 electronic case file \$33.00
CC2025218585 recording of hearing \$33.00 electronic case file \$33.00
CC2025219906 recording of hearing \$33.00 electronic case file \$33.00
Clerk Service Fee \$33.00
Total: \$429.00

We can process this request once payment has been received. You can call the court at 602-372-2000 with that payment.

Once payment is received, we will need 5-7 business days to fulfil the request.

Thank you,

Manistee Justice Court
14264 W. Tierra Buena Lane
Surprise, AZ 85374
602.372.2000, option 3
ManisteeJusticeCourt@JBAZMC.Maricopa.Gov



CONFIDENTIAL

Hon. Donald Watts

Maricopa County Justice Court

Manistee Precinct

14264 W. Tierra Buena Ln.

Surprise, AZ 85374

Resp (Watts)

FEB 13 2026

25-545

Commission on Judicial Conduct

1501 W. Washington Street, Suite 229

Phoenix, AZ 85007

RE: Response to notice of complaint (Case No. 25-545)

February 10, 2026

Dear Commission,

Thank you for allowing me the opportunity to respond to this complaint.

I have addressed Mr. Jacobson complaint below.

Item One: Improper Conduct on the Bench

Mr. Jacobson alleges the on 9-18-25, I violated Rule 1.2 Judges must promote public confidence in the integrity and impartiality of the judiciary and Rule 2.8(B) Judges must be patient, dignified and courteous to litigants and others in court.

I apologize to the commission and fully agree that judges should comply with Rules 1.2 and 2.8(B) at all times. Additionally, I apologize to Mr. Jacobson for not meeting his expectations in my courtroom. I am only able to respond in general as specific examples were not provided in the complaint. To lay a little context but, not an excuse at the time of the eviction hearing I was going thru some extensive and complicated medical testing and I was not feeling up to par. I don't think this is the proper time to discuss the test results so

let's just say the results were very serious. To that end and with the recommendation of my Doctor I have not been at work for several months while testing continues. It is my hope that I can return to the bench.

Item Two: Inflated Recording Fees

Mr. Jacobson states he was quoted \$429.00 for six copies of the FTR, I do not dispute this. However, it is unclear to me why he requested six different cases when he was the plaintiff in only one.

He further alleges that my bailiff said she "doubted" the Judge would allow it. I don't know if this was said. There are eleven bailiffs in my court, and I am not sure who he spoke with. What I do know as a fact is that no bailiff asked me to grant or deny this request. If I had been asked, I would have granted it because there is no basis to deny it. At no time did any member of my staff or myself intentionally try to prevent Mr. Jacobson from obtaining copies of documents or the FTR, except for the case that was sealed.

Additionally, the bailiff that quoted \$429.00 was trained incorrectly and misquoted the price. This was not intentional and simply a mistake that was corrected through training. That cost has been revised and the proper quote provided. Additionally, because of new technology Mr. Jacobson has been offered an opportunity to accept a link instead of a link to the FTR at no charge. As of today, Mr. Jacobson has not accepted either.

Item Three: Mishandled Mileage Fees

Mr. Jacobson states my bailiff failed to catch that a phone number was incomplete. Which resulted in the writ not being processed in a timely manner. Bailiffs do not typically review filings for completeness and accuracy; this is the plaintiff's responsibility. Mr. Jacobson states he was able to have the tenant move out by paying them a fee; the court played no part in this agreement. Mr. Jacobson states that since no mileage was driven, he is entitled to the mileage fee he paid. Mr. Jacobson has overlooked ARS 12-302(A) which states the court may not refund any fees paid. It should also be noted that the constable reached out to Mr. Jacobson via email to resolve the service issue. Please note that the Constables office does not report to my office and I have no supervisory role over the Constable.

Item Four: Court Culture and Leadership Failure

Mr. Jacobson states my court has a “us versus them” mentality.

This is a perception based on his experience in one case. What has happened here is the exception and not the norm for this court.

Item Five: Contrast with Prior Judicial Standards

Mr. Jacobson states that my court lacks empathy.

I disagree, I can relate a story when a defendant literally danced out of the courtroom because I was able to reinstate their license as he left he sang a song “step aside licensed driver coming thru” or when the defendant after losing his case saw me at lunch and asked if I would join them, I politely declined. This perception is also the exception and not the rule for my court.

Conclusion:

In closing I am very proud to be a Justice of the Peace. Additionally, it is very important for Judges to reflect positively on the bench and provide trust in the bench for the citizens in which it serves. Perhaps in this one case we missed the mark. We have learned from Mr. Jacobson’s comments and wish him the best in the future. Lastly, since becoming a Justice of the Peace in 2014, I have supported the process of litigants having the ability to make a complaint against a Judge. I feel it is important to learn from this experience and become an even better court than we already are.

Sincerely,

~~Donald Watts~~

Justice of the Peace