

TELEGRAPH NEWSLETTER

Employee Spotlight: Lisa Harris



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Project Advisor-HRL

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Juvenile court referee supervisor has had a diverse law career.

Lisa Harris has had a varied and satisfying career during her years working as an attorney in the legal system.

"I've been a defense attorney, a prosecutor and I've dealt with numerous criminal and civil matters representing plaintiffs, defendants, parents and juveniles," Harris said proudly. "I've sat in every legal chair in the courtroom."

She has been with the county for 17 years, since 2009, and has been with the juvenile court for 14 years, since 2012. Before moving over to the Juvenile Division, she was an assistant prosecutor for Oakland County, serving under former Prosecutor Jessica Cooper.

Before Harris came to the county, she was in private practice specializing in family, real property, estate planning, small business development and general litigation. She was an associate at Warner, Norcross and Judd and an attorney at Legal Aid and Defender Association (LADA)

Oakland County.

She has been a lawyer since 2000 and previously worked for GM and Saturn Corp in dealer network planning and was director of Habitat for Humanity-Albion.

The Juvenile Court Referee Supervisor now manages a staff of seven other referees who deal with child protection, delinquency and adoption matters.

"We're not elected, we're appointed to make recommendations to family court judges," she noted. "We are all part of the Juvenile Division of the Family Court of Circuit Court."

Harris noted that the Division particularly is working on Juvenile Justice reform and is also partnering with the Oakland County office of Michigan Department of Health and Human Services to improve the outcomes for families for reunification, which is when services were provided because of a child protection matter and the youth is placed back in his home.

"In June we will observe Reunification Day – celebrating the families that have been reunified," she said. "Our goal is to be able to return kids home safely."

The Division currently has about 500 active cases and is constantly turning over that number, ending one case and starting another.

Harris said her Unit also works with two specialty courts, Juvenile Drug Court and juveniles who may have mental health issues. There is one referee from the group assigned to these courts.

She said her Division is also doing more community outreach work.

"I work with other community partners to make the programs more community-based for our kids," she said. "For example, we work with such agencies as the Oakland Community Health Network, Oakland Schools and the Clarence E. Phillips Ascend Foundation.

Harris' dedicated and expert service has not gone unnoticed.

Hon. Nancy L. Thane, Tuscola County Probate & Presiding Family Court Judge, recently said this about Harris.

"...I am the lead judge for the QIC-EY Youth Advocacy Project at the state level. I have been working on a project to have children's voices heard in abuse and neglect matters. Over the past two years, we have had some pilot counties that are using the YAP and Oakland County is one of them. Your point person has been Referee Harris. And, she has been WONDERFUL!!!

"Referee Harris has been positively invested in this endeavor. She has brought to the table her years of experience, as well as an open mind. She has been an excellent facilitator of the open discussions that have been necessary to advance this program.

"...Without Referee Harris' commitment to this project and initiative, we would not be where we are. This is a federally recognized program, wherein Michigan is one of eight states that was chosen to participate. And Michigan is leading the way!!

What Scott Hamilton, Manager Judicial Support Judicial Assistant, Circuit Court, Harris' supervisor said:

"Referee Supervisor Harris is an indispensable member of the juvenile court's leadership team. I can't imagine doing my own job effectively without her skillset and partnership. She leads, she inspires, she motivates, and she dreams big for the children and families of Oakland County. I rely on her intellect and wisdom to guide our team's efforts as we build trust with our community. We are truly blessed to have a person with Lisa's integrity and work ethic on our team."

What Harris said:

"What motivates me in my job is being able to help families heal. That's a great outcome for me. Making the community safe."

"What people, particularly county employees, should know about my job is that the Juvenile Family court is very concerned about making things better for families in our community. Our goal is to try to make things better, not worse."

"What I like best about working for the county and my job is helping children and families realize their potential."

'I went into this area of county work because it was an area where I felt I could make the most meaningful impact as a lawyer."

Some Personal Information:

"I am married to Tony, a retired principal from Avondale Public Schools. We have an adult son, Tony. We are all involved in youth development either professionally or through volunteer work.

"I was born and raised in Albion, Mich., where I went to Albion College as an undergraduate and then went to Michigan State University for my law degree.

"My hobbies include traveling. I like to go anywhere in the United States, and I've been to almost every state.

"I also love to read – particularly fiction and romance novels.

"I'm a runner and I've participated in 5 K, 10 K races and half marathons.

"I enjoy teaching the youth and women at my church; Trinity Missionary Baptist Church in Pontiac."

"Generally, my mission in life is to help empower women and children and I'm able to do that through this job."