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General Sessions Court

Dear Reader:

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We hope this information will be useful to you; reference to it will assist you with many of the questions that will arise in your tenure with county government. However, the *Tennessee Code Annotated* and other relevant laws or regulations should always be consulted before any action is taken based upon the contents of this document.

Please feel free to contact us if you have questions or comments regarding this information or any other CTAS website material.

Sincerely,

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General Sessions Court	3
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Reference Number: CTAS-494

General sessions court judges must be 30 years old, a Tennessee resident for five years, a resident of the county for one year, and licensed to practice law in Tennessee. T.C.A. §§ 16-15-201, 16-15-5005, Tenn. Const., art. VI, § 4. A judge is elected to an eight-year-term. T.C.A. § 16-15-202. A non-attorney may serve as a general sessions judge only in very limited situations. T.C.A. § 16-15-5005. A county legislative body may not establish and fund additional part-time general sessions judges. The code simply allows private acts that would establish part-time general sessions judges in class 1, 2 or 3 counties. Op. Tenn. Att'y Gen. 93-52 (August 9, 1993). The circuit court clerk acts as a general sessions clerk, unless a separate clerk is created by a private act. T.C.A. § 16-15-301.

Salaries are set by general law according to population class, which differs from the population class set forth for county officials. Judges in certain classes may receive additional compensation for additional jurisdiction. However, no general sessions judge shall receive a salary greater than that of a circuit judge. T.C.A. § 16-15-5003. While annual salary adjustments are built into the law, the general salary structure for judges may not be altered during their term. Tenn. Const., art. VI, § 7. A new term began September 1, 2006.

The compensation of the judges of courts of general sessions is determined by the administrative office of the courts (AOC) in accordance with the provisions of T.C.A. § 16-15-5003, as amended by 2006 Public Chapter 957. On September 1, 2006, each judge received an increase in the amount of \$10,000 or 20% of their total annual compensation as of August 31, 2006, whichever is less, and the compensation of judges in each population classification were to be equalized in accordance with their jurisdictional supplements. In Class 1 the equalization is accomplished by raising the compensation of all judges to the salary of the highest paid judge in Class 1 who is paid under this general law. In Classes 2–7, judges with maximum supplements are raised to the compensation of the highest paid judge in that class with maximum supplements, and all other judges are grouped by jurisdiction and paid the same as the highest paid judge with the same jurisdiction in the same population class. On or before July 15, 2006, each general sessions judge was required to certify to the AOC the total amount of compensation received by the judge as of August 31, 2006, the jurisdictions exercised by such judge and the legal basis therefor, and whether the judge is compensated under the general law or a private act. The AOC thereupon reported to each judge the amount of compensation to be paid to such judge beginning September 1, 2006.

A county, by public or private act in effect on September 1, 2006, may compensate its judges in excess of the amount required under T.C.A. § 16-15-5003 (but not above state judges), but a judge is not to receive compensation based both on this general law and a private act or other public act. No judge is to be paid a salary reflecting jurisdictional supplements the judge is not entitled to exercise. No general sessions judge who engages in the private practice of law will receive any increase under this law if such judge is prohibited by law from engaging in private practice. Judges in Knox County are compensated the same as those in Davidson County under a special provision in this law. T.C.A. § 16-15-5003.

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