

Heather J. Darling, Esq., Surrogate
Christopher Luongo, Esq., Deputy Surrogate



ANNUAL REPORT 2021

Office of the Morris County Surrogate

Email: surrogate@co.morris.nj.us
Website: www.morrissurrogate.com



973-285-6500
10 Court Street
Morristown, NJ 07963-0900

MESSAGE FROM SURROGATE DARLING

As I reflect upon my journey after serving two years as the Morris County Surrogate, it is crystal clear the work of my team plays an important role in the lives of every person in Morris County. The clients of this office are really like no other. Our clients have in most instances lost someone they love; Our clients are guardians for someone they love who is incapacitated; Our clients are minors, for whom we are protecting assets; Our clients are attempting to adopt someone they love or want to love; Our clients are professionals representing people in need. Here in the Surrogate's Office, we serve the most vulnerable citizens of Morris County.

My vision for this office is to be kind, understanding, efficient and easy to do business with during a most difficult time for our clients. So, what have we done? Beyond the human side, we leveraged technology. As reported in the 2020 Annual Report, I introduced our electronic application to file for both the probate and administration of estates on-line with *e Probate* in the fall of 2020. During 2021, we continued to streamline the efficiency of *e Probate* and I am happy to report that one-third of our estate work was probated/administered using *e Probate*.

My team, throughout the year remained resilient with our office fully staffed in person and open every day so that peoples' lives did not have to stop and wait for us. With the efficiency of *e Probate*, a full-schedule calendar of appointments, and a mail option, we processed over 3,700 cases, more than ever before. We did this with less resources, in terms of both staff and tax dollars than prior years, which we attribute to innovation with both technology and a streamlined process.

This year I introduced "The Personal Record" booklet for Morris County citizens. This booklet provides the opportunity to organize and record important personal information that may serve as a roadmap for family members in the event of an emergency or for gathering information in preparation for making a Will. This was in response to the many stories I heard about family members not knowing the details of bank accounts, property, and passwords. This book is in addition to the Morris County Surrogate's Handbook which continues to be a welcomed addition to many homes. Both booklets are available on my website in downloadable format at www.morrissurrogate.com or by contacting my office.

On a personal note, I am proud to report that I am currently serving as both Secretary of the Constitutional Officers Association of New Jersey (COANJ) and Section Chief of the Surrogates. COANJ is comprised of Sheriffs, County Clerks, Surrogates and Registers of Deeds and Mortgages representing each County throughout the State of New Jersey. Collaboration among Surrogates has led to improvement in policy, procedure and general knowledge of all Surrogate's for the benefit of New Jersey residents.

Community Outreach - I was proud to serve as the Honorary Chair of the Employment Horizons Annual Dinner and honored to be the recipient of their Government Advocacy Award. I have continued personal appearances and on-line appearances throughout 2021. Additionally, I have offered on-line educational sessions with guest speakers who discussed various topics of interest including Trusts and Estate Planning, Adoptions and Drafting a Will. I have had discussions on various topics as a guest speaker with organizations such as the Rotary, Kiwanis, Chambers of Commerce and Senior Citizens groups across Morris County. We are available to speak to religious organizations, business organizations, clubs, and community-based organizations within Morris County. We have had very positive feedback and welcome invitations to speak with groups.

Financial Highlights - Due to our staff's dedication again in 2021 as the pandemic continued, the Surrogate's Office fees transacted were the highest ever at \$659,712. The fees generated by the Surrogate's office for work performed are applied to Morris County's revenues and help to provide valuable services to Morris County residents while our subsidies to the County decrease costs to the taxpayers.

Operating Highlights - Together with my Deputy Surrogate, Christopher Luongo, and our command staff, we have focused on continuous improvements in our operations, which create efficiencies for both the public and our team. Buildings & Grounds redesigned our offices collaborating with us to create an efficient workflow with easy, welcoming access with an added layer of safety and security for both the public and our staff based on my review and the application of the U.S. Marshall's assessment for courthouse security. We have introduced our new credit card application which was designed to further enhance *e Probate*. This new option makes the process of probating an estate faster and more convenient. We continue moving files off-site for safeguarding in accordance with the Superior Court's Document Retention Guidelines and we have modernized our Research area, making it convenient and comfortable for searchers to do business with our office.

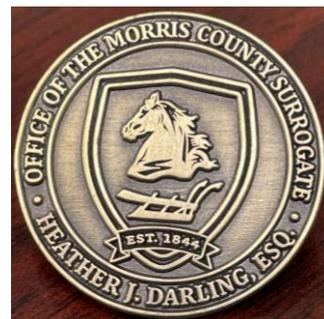
Looking Ahead - I look forward to introducing more efficient business practices in 2022. Because of the success of our online probate platform, we are now in the process of expanding the features to offer more opportunity to enjoy remote access in a streamlined format that is entirely contact free. Some include the expanded use of credit cards for transactions and making appointments with our office on-line through our website. These enhancements provide easy, convenient 24-hour access to our service. We are investigating document storage options for ease of access and compliance with new legislation, i.e., Daniel's Law. I will continue to serve Morris County with the highest level of customer service and respond to the needs of the community.

I invite you to review this 2021 edition of the Morris County Surrogate's Annual Report.

I extend to you my wishes for a healthy and blessed year, and I thank the people of Morris County for the continued opportunity to serve.



Heather J. Darling, Esq.
Morris County Surrogate
June 2022





OUR TEAM

Annual Report 2021 – Morris County Surrogate

Financial Summary

Surrogate’s Operating Account Revenues from Fees in 2021: **\$659,712**

Surrogate’s Intermingled Minors & Guardianship Accounts Year End 2021: **\$19,441,944**

Note: The Surrogate’s Intermingled Minors & Guardianship Accounts fluctuate throughout the year and averaged \$20M in managed money during 2021

Guardianships of Incapacitated Persons

In addition to guardianships for people suffering from Alzheimer’s and dementia, guardianships were critical during lockdown periods that brought about isolation leading to physical and mental health issues with addiction and overdoses rising.

As Deputy Clerk of the Superior Court, in 2021 our Superior Court Clerk processed 199 new Guardianship/Incapacitated Person cases filed and 133 Cases issued.

The Superior Court Clerk participates in the New Jersey State Guardianship monitoring program, providing essential information for both guardians and state monitoring representatives.

Additionally, Guardianships of Minor Persons are filed and issued through the Superior Court Clerk and the Surrogate’s Office oversees these guardianships as they proceed through Superior Court.

Probate

In 2021, **3,745** cases were filed with our Probate Division as compared to 3,646 filed in 2020.

This is an increase in cases over the prior two years. As in 2020, this office has processed more cases with fewer people in 2021 due to personnel changes and use of technology. We did conduct business throughout 2021 fully staffed with the options of in-person appointments and on-line filing of probate cases.

Adoptions

In 2021, the Surrogate's Office handled 56 adoptions resulting in the unification of 54 forever families. Our adoptions clerk continues to work with family courts, attorneys, adoptive parents, and child advocates to ensure the adoption process for each family is successful.

Adoption Day

The Morris County Surrogate's Office joined the Morris and Sussex Vicinage of the Superior Court of New Jersey to celebrate Adoption Day on Friday, November 18th, 2021, in a virtual courtroom. Together with key stakeholders we spoke in honor of adoptive families and children across the country. The event is part of a national effort to raise awareness of the more than 400,000 children in foster care waiting to find permanent, loving families and to encourage others to adopt. "Family by adoption is about the joy of being included in something because of who you are and how special you are to be chosen 'Forever Family' - it is a special blessing for all involved. From today forward, you are a family unit like any other, without distinction," said Surrogate Darling in her remarks. There were four forever family adoptions that took place at the event.

Adoption Seminar

Surrogate Darling hosted a special seminar "Navigating the Process of Adoption" for Morris County residents in March of 2021 with guest panelists representing the Superior Court and Adoption Law Bar. The seminar was widely viewed and provided an inside look at the process.

Serving our clients with convenient, easy access, caring service is our priority

Surrogate's Intermingled Trust Fund

In 2021, our Minors Account Management team oversaw the administration of minors and incapacitated persons bank accounts totaling over \$19 million dollars; with deposits of over \$4 million, withdrawals of \$5.4 million and investments of \$1.7 million, ending the year with 391 accounts. The money deposited with the Surrogate's Office is statutorily required in the event of inheritance, insurance proceeds, or monies awarded through judgments or settlements of lawsuits to minors or incapacitated persons.

There were 79 guardianships of minors filed in 2021 and 55 minor guardianships added during 2021. Our office processed 69 requests for final withdrawal of funds by persons turning 18 and older and 48 petitions for partial withdrawal of funds from minors' accounts. We have incorporated notice into our administrative procedures to minors upon turning 18 to avoid unclaimed funds as these minors begin adulthood. We continue to distribute partial withdrawal of funds to incapacitated persons as directed by the Superior Court.

Records Management

Our team has scanned thousands of closed dockets as required by the Judiciary of the State of New Jersey in compliance with the records retention schedule governing the Courts of the State of New Jersey.

Our Records Clerk works with searchers and genealogists at in-person appointments to review probate records that date back as far as 1804.

We continue to work to convert paper records to film for storage while observing document retention requirements. In accordance with the New Jersey Courts, we are working cooperatively for the electronic conversion of Guardianship Records and transfer to the Judiciary in Trenton for management.

We are investigating new document storage methods to ensure compliance with new legislation, i.e., Daniel's Law.

Administration

Finance

Our 2020 annual audit was successful with no recommendations for improvements. Our 2021 annual audit is now complete with no recommendations for improvements by the auditors.

Office Modernization



We introduced *e Probate* in the fall of 2020. This modernization was designed specifically to make the Probate process easy to access from the convenience of our client's homes or attorney's offices. Due to the pandemic, this process became even more important to our clients by allowing them to provide the necessary

probate information including wills and death certificates by uploading these documents directly to the Surrogate's Office without physical contact. The *e Probate* system also allows documents to be easily forwarded to our clients via email, saving time and adding convenience. The use of *e Probate* has also led to internal innovation which streamlined our processes and ensures that all members of the public have the same positive experience with our office during a most difficult time for them. Approximately one-third of the probate cases processed in 2021 were done through our *e Probate* online platform. We have enhanced *e Probate* with the addition of the credit card payment option making the process faster and more convenient. We will continue to make improvements with applications that enhance our processes such as electronic signatures planned for introduction in 2022.

The Surrogate's headquarters was renovated beginning in 4Q'21 and completed in 1Q'22. This was done as part of Morris County's on-going building maintenance plan. Our suite was one of last to be completed after 30 years in its prior state. It was modernized to provide clients and staff with a more secure, comfortable, and productive environment reflective of changes in our operations over the past 30 years and into the future.

Personnel

Our team has experienced minimal change in 2021. We continue to provide on-going training and support with focus on our client interactions and an efficient, easy to access process.

Community Outreach

We have made the Surrogate's Office available to community and business organizations in live format and on-line throughout 2021. We have met with Chambers of Commerce, Rotaries, Kiwanis Clubs, Public Library Forums, Funeral Directors, Special Needs Organizations and Senior Citizen groups. For the first time the Surrogate's team participated in the Annual Fall Festival in Morristown, where our office is located, greeting thousands of participants. The Surrogate's Session which was introduced in 2020 continued in 2021; a one-hour seminar on important related topics once a month which is available complimentary to all Morris County residents and posted on the Surrogate's website for view on demand. In addition to the Citizen's Guide to Wills, Trusts, and Estates, we introduced "The Personal Record," designed to help organize important personal information.



Surrogate Darling served as the Honorary Chair of the Employment Horizons' Annual Recognition Dinner. The Surrogate was the recipient of Employment Horizons' Government Advocacy Award and recognized as an ardent supporter of EH for many years dating back to her time as a Morris County Freeholder and now as Surrogate. Employment Horizons provides job training and placement services to people

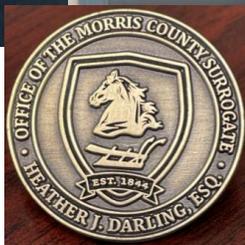


with disabilities and other barriers to employment in greater Morris County.

Professional Activities

Surrogate Darling was selected as both Secretary of the Constitutional Officers Association (COANJ) and the Section Chief of the Surrogate's Division of COANJ. COANJ includes Surrogate's, County Clerk's, Sheriff's and Registers of Deeds and Mortgages from all 21 New Jersey Counties. She also serves as a liaison member of the Judiciary-Surrogates Liaison Committee and the Guardian Background Screening Subcommittee.





Morris County Surrogate, Heather J. Darling, Esq.



Surrogate Heather J. Darling, Esq., was elected Surrogate in 2019. She earned her bachelor's degree from New York University in Finance and International Business in 1990 and earned her law degree Juris Doctor, Doctor of Jurisprudence, in 2002 from Seton Hall School of Law.

Heather opened her own law practice in 2004 and focused on Family, Wills, Trusts and Estates in addition to Business and Criminal law, serving Morris County for over 15 years. She is a member of the New Jersey, New York, and Morris County Bar Associations.

Heather is a former Morris County Freeholder and Deputy of the Board. She took office as Morris County's first woman Surrogate in January of 2020. Heather has made significant advancements to the Surrogate's Office including services such as virtual filing of documents to probate wills; an idea conceived by Heather to serve seniors and citizens with mobility issues which became indispensable to the public by COVID-19 and she endeavors to achieve full remote access for those unable to visit her office.

Heather is dedicated to community service. She has served her local municipality as Vice Chair of the Roxbury Economic Development Committee and President of the Roxbury Dog Park Committee. She was a member of the Roxbury Zoning Board and served on Roxbury's Environmental Commission. She has been a member of the Morris County Chamber of Commerce, the Roxbury Chamber of Commerce, Leadership Morris, the Parsippany Chamber of Commerce and the Roxbury Rotary and Roxbury Kiwanis.

Heather spends much of her time as a voice for those who cannot represent themselves including those with special needs, seniors, and animals. She has also focused much of her attention, using her office as a platform, on the special needs community.

Heather Darling resides in Roxbury where she has lived most of her life in her family home.



Annual Report 2021
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