

Shanghai has a new way to pick judges

Shanghai will begin selecting new judges from the ranks of its judge assistants—a position created five years ago as part of the city’s wide-ranging judicial reform.



Newly appointed judge assistants take their oath as they assume their posts in Shanghai. [Photo/China Daily]

Up to 160 judge assistants, who serve in the city’s district and intermediate courts, will be promoted and assume new roles by the end of the year, the Shanghai High People’s Court announced.

Nearly 300 candidates took written tests on Sept 2 and will go through simulated court hearings and qualification tests in mid-September.

“We believe the size of the talent pool is big enough, and that the people are ready in terms of professional capability and maturity,” said Wei Jianping, a senior official at the high court.

The average work experience of the candidates is 6.6 years.

The role of judge assistant was created by the Supreme People’s Court in 2012 as part of its effort to streamline personnel, increase efficiency and reduce the workload of judges.

Unlike court clerks, who mainly handle administrative tasks such as filing and taking notes, judge assistants preview case files, coordinate mediation hearings and handle the exchange of evidence, which were all previously a

judge's responsibility.

"When court assistants shoulder the time-consuming tasks, such as pretrial mediation, judges can be more focused on hearing cases," said Zhang Xiaoli, director of the general political department of the court.

When the reform was rolled out, judges had to reapply for their jobs, with only the best qualified chosen. Others were reassigned as judge assistants, many of whom are law graduates and experienced court clerks.

Shanghai currently has 1,939 judge assistants assigned to help 1,108 judges.

The first round of promotions marks an important step, said Ye Qing, director of the Shanghai Academy of Social Sciences's Law Institute.

"Chinese courts are moving forward in deepening personnel management reforms and building a more elite team of judges to respond to people's high expectations of fairness and justice," he said.

Candidates with spouses who are lawyers or serve the court in other capacities can only become judges if their spouses leave their positions, a measure designed to protect the courts' impartiality, Zhang said.

Guo Weiqing, vice-president of the high court, said that from now on all the judges in the district courts will be selected from the pool of judge assistants, and those for the city's intermediate courts and high court will be selected from the pool of judges from district courts.

The selection of judges from the judge assistant pool will be carried out once a year, he said.