

2020 Pierce County Democrats Endorsement Questionnaire
-Judicial Election-

Candidate Name: __Sabrina Ahrens__

Position sought: __Superior Court Judge, Dept. 14__

Date submitted: __4/23/2020__

In judicial elections, the Pierce County Democratic Central Committee (Pierce County Democrats) seeks to endorse well qualified candidates with the education, experience, ability, and temperament to reach just decisions in the individual cases brought before them and who will also seek to make the justice system more understandable, accessible, and equitable for all. The Endorsements Committee screens candidates for and makes endorsement recommendations to the Pierce County Democrats.

The Pierce County Democrats may withdraw endorsement of any judicial candidate it determines has acted in conflict with the answers provided during the screening process or it determines has violated the letter or the spirit of the Code of Judicial Conduct or the Rules of Professional Conduct.

You may respond N/A (not applicable) if appropriate. Expand or decrease space as needed.

Questions

1. Why are you running for this particular position?

Having been recently appointed by Governor Inslee to the Pierce County Superior Court, I am now running to retain this seat. I believe that my breadth of experience serving the public and my commitment to upholding the rule of law, public safety, and equal access to justice qualify me to serve as Judge.

2. What are your qualifications for seeking this office, and what was the nature of your law practice?

I received my Juris Doctorate from Seattle University School of Law in 2001 and was admitted to the bar in 2002. For over 14 years, I had the pleasure of serving our county as a Deputy Prosecuting Attorney. In 2005, I started a criminal defense and family law practice and also represented personal injury clients. I have served as a Pro Tem for Lakewood and Olympia Municipal Courts. In 2017, I was appointed by the Pierce County Superior Court Judges as a Court Commissioner presiding over domestic, civil, and juvenile criminal cases. During this time, I also conducted numerous involuntary commitment trials and handled domestic violence protection order cases. In 2019, I was appointed by Governor Inslee as Judge in Department 14 for the Pierce County Superior Court. In addition to the aforementioned judicial duties, I am currently assigned to preside over felony criminal trials.

3. If your past legal practice has emphasized one area of law, how will you prepare to decide other disputes and demonstrate to litigants that you can competently do so?

Throughout my legal career I have had the opportunity to practice many different areas of the law. When faced with a new area of law or an issue with which I am not familiar, I have relied upon my legal education to research the statutes, court rules, and tap the varied experience of colleagues. I do not hesitate to ask questions and I take the time necessary to familiarize myself so that I can confidently decide the issues before me.

4. What are the most important issues for the jurisdiction you would serve or for the court you seek to join?

There are a number of important issues for the Pierce County Superior Court to focus on for our community. Those highest on my list are access to justice and continuing to support our therapeutic courts (including Mental Health and Drug Court).

5. Why should the Pierce County Democratic Party support you for this position?

I am seeking support of the Pierce County Democratic Party to retain this seat because my professional experience and commitment to fairness and justice make me the best candidate.

6. If you hold any Democratic Party values, how have you demonstrated them?

Throughout my career, I have sought to tear down the barriers to the judiciary both for those seeking to enter the legal field and for the public seeking access to justice. My legal career began when Seattle University School of Law's special admissions program designed to support students from diverse backgrounds who lack the traditional criteria took a chance on me. In mentoring students and young attorneys, and in creating procedures in my courtroom that mitigate the barriers to access to justice, I have sought to give back for that opportunity.

7. Please list any key endorsements.

All of my fellow Superior Court Judges; City of Tacoma Mayor Victoria Woodards; Representative Steve Kirby; Pierce County Councilmember Derek Young; Former City of Tacoma Mayor Harold Moss

8. Provide ratings from any Bar Associations, either in this election or a prior one.

Exceptionally Well Qualified - Pierce County Minority Bar Association

Well Qualified - Tacoma-Pierce County Bar Association

Well Qualified - Washington Women Lawyers

9. Has any professional or disciplinary body made a finding that you violated any rule or code of judicial or professional conduct? If so, please provide a full explanation.

No.

10. To what Bar groups or sections do you belong now or have belonged to in the past?

- Loren Miller Bar Association, (1998-Present)
- Pierce County Minority Bar Association, (2002-Present)
 - Vice President 2004
 - Secretary 2014-2015
 - Vice President 2015-2016
- Tacoma-Pierce County Bar Association, (2002-2005 and 2006-Present)
- Washington State Bar Association, (2002-Present)
- Washington Women Lawyers, (2014-2017)
- Judicial Institute Fellow (2015)
- Pierce County Prosecutor's Association (2002-present), (Legislative, Nominations, Negotiations, and Grievance committee member)
- Superior Court Equality and Fairness Committee (2017-2018)
- Pierce County Superior Court Committees (April 2017- Current) (Guardianship/11.88, LINX, Criminal Procedures, Criminal Justice, Pro Tem Judge/Commissioner)

11. When in law school did you participate in a bar review publication? What was your final class rank?

To be honest, it's been a while since I was in law school and do not remember, nor can I find records of my class rank.

12. How have you supported pro bono or low-cost legal services?

I had the opportunity to volunteer with Tacoma Pro Bono to assist veterans with their family law cases and paperwork. While there clearly was a litigation aspect to this legal volunteer work, what I took from the experience was something bigger. I was able to see how difficult it could be for pro se litigants to navigate the court system and the frustrations experienced with trying to seek resolutions for their families. This experience guides my judicial philosophy of seeking to remove barriers to access to justice.

13. Do you have a judicial philosophy? If so, what is it?

As your Judge, I see my responsibility as administering justice fairly, consistently, and promptly. By treating all parties with respect and explaining my rulings, I strive to ensure that every person who enters the courtroom feels empowered to have their voice heard. Lastly, by setting procedures in place that reduce barriers to accessing justice, I work to ensure that everyone is treated equally before the law.

14. How is being a judge different than being a lawyer, if it is?

I have found that being a judge is very different than being a lawyer. As a judge I have an ethical and legal obligation to remain impartial while considering both sides. Judges must follow the law even if doing so results in rendering an unpopular decision. This is very different than advocating as a lawyer where you have a position or perspective and the responsibility to argue and support that position. Advocacy differs greatly from impartiality.

IF ELECTED TO THIS POSITION.....

15. How would you educate and inform the public about your court and the justice system?

I believe that the duty to educate and inform the public about the justice system stems from a constitutional mandate to maintain open courts. I welcome any interested member of our community to come and visit our courts, and my courtroom in particular. I also continue to volunteer as I have done in the past at schools and community groups to share about what is happening within our courts.

16. What would you do to provide greater access to the civil judicial system for non-wealthy people?

I remain committed to access to justice and I know that our Superior Court is constantly evaluating our processes to identify those areas where we can adjust and implement new ways for our courts to be accessed and utilized by those who may not have the means to hire attorneys. An example of this is our court's implementation of "How to" type videos posted on our website that explain court processes or describe what to expect for particular kinds of hearings.

17. If you think that the judicial system improperly produces different results for certain groups or classifications, what would you do to remedy that problem?

I am always mindful that similarly situated individuals should be treated in a similarly situated fashion. When I see disparate treatment, I call attention to it and address it, requiring parties to explain the circumstances.

18. Do you think there is a problem with the way in which legal financial obligations or other costs and fines are currently imposed on criminal defendants? If so, what would you do to remedy that problem?

I think that our current court practices as mandated by statute and supported by case law recognize how legal financial obligations can be crushing on criminal defendants, which is quite different than in years past. I follow that law and ask the questions required to evaluate the ability or inability of a criminal defendant to meet proscribed financial obligations. I waive them when the evidence supports doing so.

I recently also had the opportunity to participate in our Pierce County Legal Financial Obligations Reconsideration day as one of two Superior Court Judges presiding over motions to reduce or waive LFOs. Granting those motions and interacting with the litigants was one of the most fulfilling things I have done as a judge.

19. Do you support or oppose alternatives to criminal prosecution, such as drug courts, mental health courts, diversion programs, etc.? What changes would you make, if any?

Yes! I support alternatives to criminal prosecution and recognize that these programs need more funding so that they can be expanded.

20. How would you approach any caseload or court congestion issues?

I follow our court case management plan for criminal and civil cases and my department maintains good communication with the parties to find out what impediments may be present. I see too much downtime as contrary to judicial efficiency which is why we stay busy with advancing our cases for timely resolutions.

21. Is there anything else you would like to share with the Committee?

I want to thank the committee members for their time and energy. This is a very important process and I am proud to be a part of it and hope that I can count on the Pierce County Democratic Party's support in the upcoming election to retain this seat.