

People's Alliance PAC 2023 Questionnaire for North Carolina District Court Judge Candidates

Please return the completed form along with your resume or biographical statement describing education, work history, community service, and prior political experience, as well as a high-resolution headshot of yourself as soon as possible, but no later than Saturday, April 1 at 5pm, at the latest.

Please e-mail your responses to PAC Coordinators at papacboard@googlegroups.com by Saturday, April 1 at 5pm.

Please note that following the Saturday April 1 at 5pm deadline, the People's Alliance PAC may publish your responses to this questionnaire and your resume.

When answering this questionnaire, please repeat the questions in your response document with each question numbered and organized as it appears here. Type your responses in italics, bold, or a different font to distinguish your responses from the questions. Do not use colors or shading. Please try to confine your responses to no more than 300 words unless another word limit is indicated. Do not feel obliged to exhaust the limit for each question.

If you use words or ideas from another person, please attribute your source.

Thank you for completing this questionnaire and your willingness to serve the people of Durham.

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Judges and judicial candidates in North Carolina are allowed substantial freedom of political speech. PA PAC believes that every question in this questionnaire may be answered fully within the scope of the applicable rules. For more information on the scope of permitted political speech for judicial candidates, we refer you to the March 2, 2022 memorandum of the Judicial Standards Commission on Permitted Political Conduct. You may find it at:

<https://www.nccourts.gov/assets/inline-files/JSC-3-16-22-Political-Conduct-Memo.pdf?VersionId=ePz7Gk6WyhubUTd5nry0pmUIIX41fuZ3?ePz7Gk6WyhubUTd5nry0pmUIIX41fuZ3>

1. What currently motivates you to be a district court judge and how have you prepared for this role?

My heart for justice was shaped in Durham by family, lifelong friends, classmates, neighbors, coworkers, and clients. I am forever indebted to and motivated by those who have willingly shared their lives with me, opening my eyes to incredible cultures and heartbreaking struggles I would not have understood otherwise. I am committed to using my education and skills to serving where I can be most helpful. I believe the district court bench needs my legal experience and my knowledge of Durham's people and resources.

Durham's district court bench tends to have more judges with criminal law backgrounds than civil law backgrounds, yet, arguably, the most important courtrooms in district court are civil in nature. Vulnerable children, whose lives are significantly impacted by judges in family court, abuse/neglect/dependency court, juvenile court, and domestic violence court deserve to have a judge who knows the law and understands issues related to trauma, mental health struggles, and substance abuse. Ideally, wise decisions in these civil cases reduce the likelihood that the same children will find themselves in criminal courtrooms years later.

I have 18 years of district court litigation experience through my work in government, at a nonprofit, and in private practice law. I am a nationally certified Child Welfare Law Specialist. I have prepared for the role of district court judge by learning all that I can about the law and about the people and resources of Durham. Durham has changed dramatically since my childhood here. The city has doubled in size and now, thankfully, has a more diverse population, including tens of thousands of immigrants. My experience in providing clients, many of them immigrants, with trauma-informed legal services has equipped me with knowledge essential for the district court bench for many of the reasons stated below.

2. What do you think is the single barrier to justice and what would you adopt as your judicial philosophy?

In 2023, I believe the single barrier to justice is lack of equal access for all people. Many can't afford private attorneys to address serious matters such as custody, immigration, and housing issues, and the legal processes are complicated and mostly unknown to those who choose to represent themselves. Individuals who cannot read or who have limited English proficiency are at an even greater disadvantage. While interpretation services are available in court, they are not available to people attempting to complete and understand forms outside of court. The law is not always applied equally to individuals who encounter the justice system, and biases against minorities have devastated families and communities.

From the bench, I will strive to be impartial, fair, and reasonable. I will treat everyone with respect. I will be patient with attorneys and those who represent themselves. I will pay attention to barriers that reduce equal access to justice and will work to reduce or eliminate them when possible.

3. What biases would be difficult for you to overcome and how will you overcome those biases for the administration of justice?

I have always and will always experience the world as a white, American female from Durham, North Carolina. I have biases and privileges that stem from those life experiences. I have learned to consider how my first thoughts about any situation may be shaped by those biases. I have undergone training and read many books to understand my biases better. I committed long ago to nurturing friendships with people from different racial, ethnic, religious, socio-economic, political, and ideological backgrounds from my own. These relationships broaden my understanding of the human experience and help challenge my perspective. When I am unsure of how my own bias may impact my decision-making, I seek guidance and advice. I practice cultural humility in my daily life and will do so in the courtroom, striving to set aside bias and to uphold the law with impartiality.

4. Please describe your practice as a lawyer. Describe the areas of your practice and your specialties. If, over time, your practice has evolved or changed, describe the changes. Describe your various client bases as a part of your answer.

I have 18 years of experience in civil district court, including: custody, divorce, equitable distribution, spousal and child support, domestic violence, abuse/neglect, termination of parental rights, emancipations, delinquent juveniles and general civil matters. I have represented child clients as a Guardian ad Litem (“GAL”) Attorney, adults who can’t afford private counsel through JusticeMatters, and paid clients through a private practice firm. My clients have been U.S. citizens, permanent residents, and undocumented immigrants. I have also equipped individuals to represent themselves in complicated family law matters.

I started my career at a general practice law firm. I spent one year in private practice handling high conflict family law matters. For eight years I represented Durham’s abused and neglected children as a GAL Attorney.

I spent seven years at JusticeMatters representing citizens and immigrants using a holistic, trauma-informed approach, addressing language and cultural barriers, and educating others. While there, I developed and expanded the Family Law section, helping the organization grow from three to fourteen staff members, and serving hundreds of people with limited financial means. In 2017, I oversaw JusticeMatters’ creation of a free, weekly family law clinic at the Durham Courthouse. It still functions today.

I have developed and provided numerous legal and community trainings and assisted with legislative advocacy on issues related to children, trauma, and human trafficking. I served as an early consultant for the development of North Carolina’s first anti-human trafficking court: the WORTH Court in Cumberland County. I returned to the GAL Program in September 2022 to represent abused and neglected children.

In addition to statewide committees, I have chaired Durham's Community Child Protection Team and Child Fatality Prevention Team since 2015 and made annual recommendations to the Board of County Commissioners for systemic improvements on issues related to vulnerable children.

5. If your practice is primarily focused on criminal law, how will you address the learning curve associated with learning about civil law? If your practice is primarily focused on civil law, how will you address the learning curve associated with learning about criminal law?

My practice is primarily focused on civil law. To learn criminal law, I will review the applicable laws, UNC School of Government resources including the NC Judicial College online trainings, and criminal law and procedure publications. I will talk with criminal law attorneys to be sure I understand the issues facing both prosecution and defense attorneys. I will attend trainings and observe criminal court in Durham and in other counties when possible. I will seek a mentor with experience as a judge in criminal district court.

I have spent 18 years serving individuals who have often had tangential criminal law issues that I have assisted them in addressing. While I do not have significant experience in criminal courtrooms, I have meaningful experience with the issues that cause individuals to commit crimes. I understand trauma, substance use issues, immigration struggles, and systemic failures.

6. North Carolina incarcerates an extraordinary number of people, including persons convicted of non-violent crimes. Those who are incarcerated are disproportionately people of color. What, if anything, should the legislature and our courts do to address the issues of mass incarceration and racial bias in the administration of justice?

There must be more time and resources put into treatment courts, diversion programs, and programs that improve equal access to justice. Such efforts would reduce individual contact and re-contact with the criminal justice system.

Resources must also be poured into child care, education, and health care systems that serve children and their families long before children become adults involved in the criminal justice system. As resources are poured into these systems, they must be carefully examined through a racial equity lens and any necessary changes must be made. I have advocated for many of these systemic changes through my role as chair of Durham's Community Child Protection Team and Child Fatality Prevention Team.

As a district court judge, I will continue to attend trainings related to racial equity, implicit bias, trauma, cultural humility, and other skills that are crucial for a person in power to understand and apply when operating within a justice system compromised by issues of mass incarceration and bias. I will also participate on local and statewide task forces and committees that seek to understand and address these issues.

7. Should the North Carolina General Assembly abolish the death penalty?

District court judges do not preside over death penalty cases. However, as an attorney, I have seen the devastation of racial inequities, systemic failures, and injustices on BIPOC communities. I have seen many of the children I represented, who were victims of horrific abuse and neglect, end up in the Durham County jail awaiting trial for serious felony charges as adults. I have grieved the fact that very few people knew their childhood stories and only saw them as criminals. I am grateful that none of them have ever faced the death penalty and would like to know that none ever will.

8. What, if anything, should be done to improve access to justice for people with limited financial means or who mistrust the system? How should courts handle requests to waive court costs, fines, failure to appear fees, probation supervision fees, attorney's fees, and bail in criminal court?

Court costs and fees have increased significantly over the past two decades. There are many opportunities for district court judges in criminal and civil courts to waive fees for those who are unable to pay them. I will carefully consider each fee waiver requests and grant waivers when permitted by law.

In civil courts, access to justice for people with limited financial means would be dramatically improved by providing standardized forms, in multiple languages (beyond the current Spanish and Vietnamese forms), with directions, so that individuals who represent themselves can complete the correct documents to seek the relief they desire. Courtroom practices should be examined from the perspective of individuals representing themselves and attorneys working at no or low cost to determine how modifications can improve their access to justice. Continued work with organizations like local law clinics, Legal Aid, and JusticeMatters also improves access to justice for those with limited financial means.

If given the opportunity to serve as a district court judge, I will work to incorporate trauma-informed principles from the mental health field into daily court procedures and routines. Lawyers, court staff, clients, and individuals representing themselves would all benefit from a trauma-informed court environment. Over time, a trauma-informed court system can build trust within the community.

9. What does racial equity mean to you and how does racial equity inform your work as a District Court judge? Have you any special training in issues related to racial disparities and equities?

I strive to consider racial equity issues in my daily practice of law and would continue to do so as a district court judge. I have participated in a two-day training through the Racial Equity Institute as well as many trainings that address racial equity within the context of child welfare and juvenile delinquency issues.

Racial equity requires people in positions of power, such as judges, to understand the historical context of the issues that bring people to district court and to understand their own implicit biases. Racial disparities are often connected with trauma and systemic failures. Therefore, judges are better able to address issues when they understand both the impact of trauma on individuals and families, and the community systems that serve, or fail to serve them well (such as physical and mental health care systems, housing systems, nutritional and food systems, etc.). Ultimately, racial equity means that those in power treat people of all races with the understanding that the systems have been historically and structurally unfair and harmful to minorities, especially African-Americans.

10. What are your thoughts on Durham's current diversion programs? If you believe these programs should be changed in any way please describe how and why.

I know Durham's diversion programs from the perspective of representing clients who have benefited from them, and I am grateful that Durham has these programs. From that perspective, I have seen the Eviction Diversion Program and the Misdemeanor Diversion Program allow my clients to avoid a future of unemployment and homelessness and the negative consequences that follow. I have not had any experience with the Post Arrest Diversion Program, but I support programs that reduce the harmful consequences associated with criminal justice system involvement. I do not know enough about how the programs are run to comment on any need for changes. However, I do believe that all of our court systems should be considered from the trauma-informed perspective and modified accordingly. As a district court judge, I would meet with the District Attorney's Office and Kelly Andrews at the Criminal Justice Resource Center to understand how to best support these programs.

11. What is the most significant challenge we face in our Durham civil court system and what can be done to address it?

Durham's civil court system is full of individuals and families who are impacted by trauma. Lawyers and judges are also impacted by trauma, and many feel exhausted and tired of practicing law. Trauma-informed services, used in mental health fields, can and should be applied to the practice of law. The application is not quick and easy, but it would reduce the likelihood of the court system traumatizing or re-traumatizing the individuals within it. Some of the issues that can be addressed through a trauma-informed lens include: examining why parent attorneys no longer choose to work in abuse/neglect/dependency court; how the court's calendaring system can be improved; how personal dignity can be maintained in open courtrooms; and how victims can be separated from alleged perpetrators in the courthouse.

Immigrants, who have often suffered trauma in their home countries and do not speak English or understand all local customs, can find themselves in confusing court proceedings where their names are mispronounced, and they endure case delays due to a lack of available interpretation services. If unrepresented during court proceedings, they often do not know when to stand and when it is appropriate to ask questions. When final orders are entered, they rarely get a

copy of the order in their native language. We can and should make trauma-informed improvements to better serve our immigrant community at the courthouse.

Equal access to justice for all people is an ongoing crisis. Durham is fortunate to have two local law schools and several well-respected nonprofit organizations working to address access to justice issues. The partnerships between these organizations and the courthouse should continue and expand when possible.