

**DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA COMMISSION  
ON JUDICIAL DISABILITIES AND TENURE**  
515 FIFTH STREET, N.W., BUILDING A, ROOM 246  
WASHINGTON, D.C. 20001  
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April 27, 2020

The Honorable Donald J. Trump  
President of the United States  
The White House  
Washington, D.C. 20500

**Re: Evaluation of the Honorable Laura A. Cordero**

Dear Mr. President:

The fifteen-year term of the Honorable Laura A. Cordero, an Associate Judge of the Superior Court of the District of Columbia, expires on June 27, 2020. She is seeking reappointment to another term.

Pursuant to Section 433(c) of the District of Columbia Self-Government and Governmental Reorganization Act, 87 Stat. 744, as amended by the District of Columbia Judicial Efficiency and Improvement Act of 1986, P.L. 99-573, 100 Stat. 3228, the District of Columbia Commission on Judicial Disabilities and Tenure (“the Commission”) hereby submits this evaluation of Judge Cordero’s performance during her present term of office and her fitness for reappointment. Section 433(c) provides:

Not less than six months prior to the expiration of his term of office, any judge of the District of Columbia courts may file with the Tenure Commission a declaration of candidacy for reappointment. If a declaration is not so filed by any judge, a vacancy shall result from the expiration of his term of office and shall be filled by appointment as provided in subsections (a) and (b). If a declaration is so filed, the Tenure Commission shall, not

less than sixty days prior to the expiration of the declaring candidate's term of office, prepare and submit to the President a written evaluation of the declaring candidate's performance during his present term of office and his fitness for reappointment to another term. If the Tenure Commission determines the declaring candidate to be well qualified for reappointment to another term, then the term of such declaring candidate shall be automatically extended for another full term, subject to mandatory retirement, suspension, or removal. If the Tenure Commission determines the declaring candidate to be qualified for reappointment to another term, then the President may nominate such candidate, in which case the President shall submit to the Senate for advice and consent the renomination of the declaring candidate as judge. If the President determines not to so nominate such declaring candidate, he shall nominate another candidate for such position only in accordance with the provisions of subsections (a) and (b). If the Tenure Commission determines the declaring candidate to be unqualified for reappointment to another term, then the President shall not submit to the Senate for advice and consent the renomination of the declaring candidate as judge and such judge shall not be eligible for reappointment or appointment as a judge of a District of Columbia court.

The Commission reserves the term "well qualified" for those judges whose work product, legal scholarship, dedication, efficiency, and demeanor are exceptional on the bench, and the candidate's performance consistently reflects credit on the judicial system. The Commission will determine a judge is "qualified" if he or she satisfactorily performs his or her assigned duties or whose strong positive attributes are materially offset, but not overborne, by negative traits. A finding of "unqualified" means the Commission has found the judge to be unfit for judicial service.

Judge Laura A. Cordero filed her declaration of candidacy for reappointment on December 2, 2019, and completed her submission of the materials and information required by the Commission on February 12, 2020. In evaluating Judge Cordero's qualifications for reappointment and her contributions to the Court and the community, the Commission paid particular attention to the Judge's written statement in support of her candidacy. The statement provided a comprehensive review of her judicial activities and service on more than a dozen

Court Committees. Most of the Committees involved training, Rule implementation, and access to justice. The statement also highlighted her significant contributions to the Juvenile Drug Court, the Domestic Violence Division where she served as Presiding Judge of the Criminal Misdemeanor Calendars, and the Civil Division where she served first as Deputy Presiding Judge and now as Presiding Judge since 2019. Judge Cordero's statement provided not only the requisite discussion of her assignments and achievements, but it also revealed how she has approached the work of being a judge during her 15-year tenure, she states, "As public servants, charged with making decisions with profound ramifications on the lives of so many, I firmly believe that as judges, irrespective of title or assignment, we are all charged with the immense responsibility of continuously searching for ways in which to enhance the work of the Court with a view towards better serving the citizens of our City and the community at large."

Judge Cordero provided with her statement, three exemplars of her opinions. All three were well reasoned, clear and concise, and meticulous as to the facts and the law. The first example was a 43 page decision in a contested custody case in which she made 89 findings of fact including credibility determinations with explanations. The second involved a civil discovery dispute involving a complex issue concerning documents in the possession of a non-party law firm. The third opinion related to a case involving among other issues, subject matter jurisdiction as it relates to the doctrine of religious abstention. The case was particularly difficult involving novel issues and multiple parties. It should be noted that the Commission has received approximately 5,000 emails objecting to Judge Cordero's decisions in this case, all of which

claiming violations of the First Amendment and religious bias. Although the emails sharply criticize Judge Cordero's legal reasoning, that issue is not within the Commission's purview to consider. Judge Cordero originally dismissed the case on lack of subject matter jurisdiction due to religious abstention, but was reversed by the District of Columbia Court of Appeals. Her final opinion in this case, however, carefully tracked the guidance provided by the appellate court, as noted above, resulting in an opinion that was quite persuasive and was affirmed on appeal. It should be noted, that Judge Cordero only handled some components of this case, and other judges in the Civil Division have been assigned to resolve several separate issues.

A review of Judge Cordero's appellate record indicates that of the 186 decisions that were appealed to the District of Columbia Court of Appeals, 83% were affirmed or dismissed by the Court.

The Commission has examined Judge Cordero's monthly time reports and annual financial statements, and its complaint file concerning the Judge. The Commission found nothing in its files to cause concern. The Commission also reviewed the report from Judge Cordero's physician who stated that she is in very good health and mentally and physically fit to continue performing judicial duties.

The Commission interviewed attorneys who had appeared before Judge Cordero as well as Court staff who have worked with her during her tenure. It also reviewed the comments that had been received in response to the Commission's solicitation to the bar and the public for information bearing on the Judge's qualifications for reappointment.

On April 8, 2020, the Commission met with Judge Cordero via a telephone conference call to discuss the materials and information the Commission had received during the course of its evaluation and to discuss the Judge's reasons for seeking reappointment to another fifteen-year term. The Commission also met with Chief Judge Robert E. Morin later that day via a telephone conference call, who furnished additional information concerning Judge Cordero's qualifications, contributions, leadership, and commendable service to the Court.<sup>1</sup>

Over the past fifteen years, Judge Cordero served for five and a half years in the Family Court; two years in the Domestic Violence Division, including as Presiding Judge of the Criminal Misdemeanor Calendars, and a total of seven years in the Civil Division as both Deputy Presiding Judge and Presiding Judge. It is clear, that Chief Judge Morin and former Chief Judge Lee Satterfield recognized Judge Cordero's unique leadership skills. Both Chief Judges were confident in her ability to tackle difficult organizational changes concerning vital Court operations, particularly in the Family, Domestic Violence, and Civil Divisions.

In 2005, when Judge Lee Satterfield was the Presiding Judge in Family Court, prior to his appointment as Chief Judge, he tasked Judge Cordero with rebuilding the Juvenile Drug Court. The number of participants had dwindled to the point that it was not accomplishing its goal of preventing adolescent and teenage drug dependency in our community. As Chair of the Juvenile Drug Court Implementation Committee, Judge Cordero reviewed the existing policies and procedures for the admission of youth to the program and reassessed the protocols.

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<sup>1</sup> The Commission met with Judge Cordero and Chief Judge Morin via respective telephone conference calls due to the COVID-19 health crisis.

She subsequently began scheduling Drug Court hearings at 4:00 p.m., after school hours to avoid interfering with educational programs and to prevent truancy issues. Based on her recommendation two additional drug counselors were hired by the Superior Court Social Services Division. In addition, Judge Cordero hosted weekly Drug Court staff meetings with counselors, prosecutors, and defense counsel to assess the best treatment options for participants to achieve and maintain sobriety. Upon concluding her term on this calendar, the Drug Court had several dozen participants and had graduations for those who had successfully completed the program. Judge Cordero secured caps and gowns for the graduates and hosted at her own expense, a graduation reception for the participants and their families. The Commission also commends Judge Cordero for initiating a project for two summers in which the Court sponsored overnight retreats to a campsite in Maryland with all of the Drug Court participants, Court staff including herself, and Metropolitan Police Department officers, “to see Superior Court staff, not as members of the Court system, but as a community of persons genuinely committed to supporting their successful trajectory.”

In 2016, Judge Cordero was designated as the Presiding Judge of the Domestic Violence Division, Criminal Misdemeanor Calendar. As Presiding Judge, she promoted a team approach for all associate and magistrate judges in the Division. She enlisted judges who had concluded matters on their calendars, to take cases from colleagues that were ready for trial and other dispositions, if timely adjudication of the matters scheduled wasn't possible. In her efforts to enhance access to the Court for both petitioners and respondents in cases involving protective

orders, she revised the protocols in the Clerk's Office thereby improving the service of process. She accomplished the same goal developing a cross-Division protocol for courtroom clerks from the Domestic Violence Division and the Family Court whereby a computer generated alert is now issued when the same parties have different cases in both branches.

In 2017, Chief Judge Robert Morin appointed Judge Cordero Deputy Presiding Judge, and in 2019 as Presiding Judge of the Civil Division. Due to severe budget constraints, several judicial vacancies, and other overwhelming circumstances beyond the Court's control, comprehensive changes to the operations of the Court needed to be made, particularly in the Landlord and Tenant Court. Faced with an incredibly difficult set of circumstances, Judge Cordero made some very tough and at the time, unpopular decisions affecting the landlord Bar and the legal services community. Despite the initial resistance, the Court adopted mandatory e-filing in individual cases for all complaints. The Clerk's Office assumed the scheduling of hearings, ending the practice of allowing attorneys to file one document with over 100 cases, then scheduling all of the cases on the same day. These changes vastly improved the operations of the Clerk's Office and it not only reduced the wait time for litigants, it also allowed judges to have more balanced daily calendars.

Another of Judge Cordero's great accomplishment, as noted by Chief Judge Morin, was to assign a team of four magistrate judges to handle all initial hearings in Landlord and Tenant Court, as opposed to the weekly rotations of associate judges. The change was eventually accepted and has provided consistency and continuity in the processing of cases. In 2019, all of

the changes instituted, particularly for the approximately 30,000 cases in Landlord and Tenant Court and the approximate 9,000 Small Claims cases heard annually, provided better access and treatment for those litigants appearing in Court, many of whom were pro se litigants. All of the changes, discussed in this report that were suggested by Judge Cordero and eventually instituted by the Court, have had the approval and support of the Chief Judge.

Understanding how difficult it is for stakeholders to embrace changes in procedures, Judge Cordero and Chief Judge Morin have hosted annual forums for all members of the bar and the general public seeking comments and recommendations on the instituted changes and the additional reforms the Civil Division is contemplating.

Also, due to the Covid-19 pandemic, the Civil Division, the largest Division of the Court, had to devise a system by which previously scheduled hearings and trials would be continued. Judge Cordero set deadlines for judges to issue Court orders continuing cases, and due to her concern about pro se litigants she established an email box for copies of orders, from which the Clerk's Office prints out the orders and mails them to the litigants each day.

In addition, the Commission must applaud Judge Cordero for handling and resolving over 800 Motions that were pending regarding final foreclosure sales. She has retained that calendar and continues to keep it current.

Judge Cordero has been honored over the past fifteen years with several awards and recognition for her service on the bench and to the community. Most notably she received the Hispanic Bar Association of the District of Columbia Ricardo Urbina Lifetime Achievement Award in 2009, and the Council on Legal Education Opportunity Inc. ("CLEO") Edge Award for




Diversity in 2018. She has served two terms as a Commissioner on the Access To Justice Commission, where she also served as a member of their High Volume Courts subcommittee. She has hosted over 120 middle and high school, college, and law school students as interns to work on projects that contribute to the operation of her chambers. She explained in her statement, “I hope to impress upon my interns, not only the challenges that bring litigants to our Court, but the emotional, psychological, and financial costs that the litigation process may exact on all parties involved in the Court system.” The Commission would also like to acknowledge Judge Cordero’s generosity and recognition of the Court’s cleaning staff, who with the support of other judges, hosts an annual holiday party to thank them for their hard work and dedication, and each spring hosts a luncheon for the staff with a guest speaker.


It appears to the Commission that Judge Cordero unquestionably deserves reappointment. She is a valuable member of the leadership team of the Court, she has worked hard, takes great pride in her work, understands the need for the bar and litigants to have trust and confidence in the Courts, and is willing to make hard and possibly unpopular decisions that will eventually result in a more efficient and fair institution. She is compassionate and empathetic to those most vulnerable in our society, and she fully embraces the duties and responsibilities of judicial office. Judge Cordero remarked, “Throughout my service, I have always strived to do what is right – even if the path was not an easy one.” The Commission believes that Judge Cordero has lived up to that statement. It would take several additional pages to provide an exhaustive discussion of all of Judge Cordero’s accomplishments and contributions to the Superior Court and the community. The above has been only a snapshot.

For the foregoing reasons, the Commission finds that Judge Cordero's judicial service merits her automatic reappointment to the bench. The manner in which she has performed her duties as a judge has been exemplary and has entitled her to a rating in the highest category in which this Commission is statutorily empowered to place a judge. We therefore determine Judge Laura A. Cordero to be well qualified for reappointment and her term shall be automatically extended for a full term of fifteen years from June 27, 2020.

Respectfully submitted,


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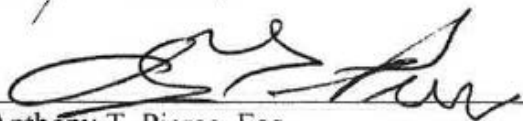
  
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