



FOX CHAPEL DEMOCRATIC COMMITTEE 2025 JUDICIAL CANDIDATE QUESTIONNAIRE

PART 1: INTRODUCTION

As you know, there are a large number of candidates for an unusually high number of judicial vacancies within the Allegheny County Court of Common Pleas in 2025. The Fox Chapel Democratic Committee (FCDC) believes that citizens of Fox Chapel and those of surrounding communities as well voters within Allegheny County in general would benefit from learning more about the candidates, so that their choices in upcoming elections can be as informed as possible. Therefore, FCDC has developed a Judicial Candidate Questionnaire and is asking each judicial candidate to complete and return it, so that your responses can be distributed as widely as possible.

FCDC intends to:

- Share your responses with Democratic committees of other communities in our region;
- Share your responses with the citizens of Fox Chapel and to individuals within Fox Chapel School District, and encourage other area committees to do so;
- Publish your responses on FCDC’s website and seek to have them published on the Allegheny County Democratic Committee’s website as well;
- Publish them on FCDC’s social media pages.

PART 2: INSTRUCTIONS

Please respond to the questions on the following page and return your written responses to *foxchapedems@gmail.com* on or before **Friday, February 14, 2025**.

This form is in Word format, so responses may be typed directly under each question.

Please answer each question, including subparts, as completely as possible; however, please keep responses clear and reasonably concise so they are understandable and useful to individuals who may not have a background in law.

QUESTIONNAIRE

CANDIDATE NAME: *Hon. Alyssa B. Cowan*

DATE: *February 11, 2025*

1. **Judicial Philosophy and Temperament**

Judges make decisions in high-stakes and emotional situations. How do you stay fair and calm under pressure? Share an example from your career.

My career has been dedicated to working with court-involved families and children and improving judicial interventions in their lives. Families and children appear in the courtroom in crisis often having experienced significant trauma in their lives. This is the situation in every case that I have litigated. I am a dual degree professional with both a master's degree in social work and a law degree so I bring an interdisciplinary perspective to every case. My professional experiences have allowed me to develop skills in active listening and empathy. This gives me the ability to de-escalate high stress situations in order to resolve conflict rather than exacerbate it. My goals as a judge would be for families to have the opportunity to be heard on a level-playing field in the courtroom, to leave hearings with confidence in the system, and to have peace with the result whether it is their preferred outcome or not.

2. **Commitment to Judicial Ethics**

Judges must avoid conflicts of interest and undue influence. How would you handle a situation where a friend or campaign donor asks for special treatment in your courtroom?

I am committed to bringing integrity, diligence, and empathy to the bench. My judicial philosophy is to ensure a fair, unbiased, and accessible courtroom where every litigant has a meaningful opportunity to be heard. My goal is for all participants to leave with confidence in the judicial system. These goals can only be achieved if I am very firm that everyone will be treated according to these shared values in my courtroom.

- a. Have you had this experience, and what was your response? *No, I have not had this experience.*
- b. Did you disclose it to an ethics body or to law enforcement? Why or why not? *N/A*

3. **Accessibility and Fairness**

- a. Judges must ensure everyone can participate in the legal process. How will you make your courtroom accessible to people without lawyers?

Despite various efforts by the legal community, legal services remain out of reach for many individuals. This is a significant issue because fair outcomes often depend on individuals being prepared and informed when they come to court. Expanding access to legal services across the socioeconomic spectrum is essential. Steps to achieve this include expanding pro bono programs, creating additional self-help centers, and encouraging attorneys to adopt a sliding-fee scale based on income and ability to pay.

The first step toward greater access is expanding self-help centers to provide individuals without an attorney with quality information about the law, rules, and procedures applicable to their case. Secondly, judges should ask unrepresented individuals appearing before them whether they have explored options for legal representation and their understanding of the matter at hand. Thirdly, judges should allow unrepresented individuals time to prepare, explore representation options, or access a self-help center. Finally, if a case proceeds with an unrepresented party, the judge must ensure that the individual has the same rights and opportunity to participate fully in the proceedings as represented parties.

b. Every person has conscious and/or unconscious biases. How do you recognize and suppress those biases in yourself, so that you can deal with all parties fairly and dispassionately? Give examples of how you've dealt with this issue.

It is crucial to acknowledge that implicit bias exists in all settings, including the judicial system. Implicit bias stems from the messages, attitudes, and stereotypes we absorb from the world around us. While these messages may be unavoidable, we all have a responsibility to actively educate ourselves about their inaccuracies and work to combat implicit bias.

For judges, this responsibility is even more critical. Judges are tasked with assessing the credibility of witnesses and rendering decisions—two circumstances where implicit bias can have profoundly adverse effects on those appearing in court. Judges must take the lead in addressing implicit bias within the judicial system. Throughout my career, I have made it a priority not only to confront and mitigate implicit bias within myself but also to promote education and awareness of these issues within the legal community. As a judge, I would remain deeply committed to continuing this critical work and fostering an equitable court system.

4. Describe the types of cases you've tried/presided over

List 3-5 examples of cases (anonymously) in which you've been involved as counsel or judge, and that you believe inform or enhance your ability to serve as a judge. Include why/how these experiences influenced you.

- *S.K. was a 5-month-old infant who presented to Children's Hospital with concerns related to head trauma. Upon examination, S.K. was found to have a left parietal skull fracture with a large adjacent hematoma. The attending physician reported that the injuries took place during the last few weeks when the child had not attended daycare*

and was in the sole care of her parents. This case was significant because it highlighted the importance of qualifying an expert witness in the right specialties when multiple experts are being presented to the Court. The two witnesses I prepared presented as more credible and reliable resulting in the court adjudicating the child dependent based on clear and convincing evidence.

- *C.S. had been sexually abused by her mother’s boyfriends while her mother battled a substance use disorder. As a result of this significant childhood trauma, she experienced multiple home and school placements. Despite her bright, inquisitive nature, her schools would funnel her into disciplinary classrooms because of her past placement history instead of nurturing her potential. As her court-appointed attorney, I advocated for her to be fully assessed and placed in courses according to her academic ability not her foster care history. As a result, she was able to achieve her goal of becoming a college-bound student and nurse. My experience representing clients like C.S. inspired me to develop a training entitled “Meeting the Educational Needs of Children in Care” focused on developing skills to address the unique challenges faced by foster care children in their school settings.*
- *C.D. was a two-month-old infant whose siblings were already dependent children. Their mother had been involved with CYF for several years prior to C.D.’s birth. She had been court-ordered to participate in drug and alcohol treatment and intimate partner violence services (IPV). Mother had a history of several relationships involving IPV issues. When C.D. was born, the Court allowed him to remain in his mother’s care until an IPV incident occurred between mother’s paramour and his former paramour that placed C.D. at risk. This case was significant because the circumstances of C.D.’s removal highlighted the complexities of families struggling with IPV issues and how difficult it can be to adjudicate these issues in a courtroom. It is cases such as these where my interdisciplinary training is critical to resolving these complex issues.*

5. Improvements to the courts

Courts are in the business of serving the public by providing the fair, efficient and prompt administration of justice.

- a. Do you perceive shortcomings in our current court system? Please provide examples.

Through my career in the law as an attorney for children and families, I have seen a critical need for expanding alternative dispute resolution options in the Family Division of the Court of Common Pleas here in Allegheny County.

- b. If elected, how would you go about correcting these problems? What specific steps would you take to improve the quality and delivery of results to litigants and the public?

Alternative dispute resolution options such as mediation allow parties to problem-solve in a confidential setting that is less formal and less stressful for families compared to the

traditional, adversarial litigation process. Alternative dispute resolution options allow for efficient resolution of disputes without imposing a decision on the parties, but rather create a setting for all parties to work together to find a resolution. In addition, alternative dispute resolution processes can help to alleviate the high caseloads of judges and burden on court systems by resolving some case issues outside of the courtroom.

I began my legal career in 2004 as an Assistant Attorney General in Washington, D.C. assigned to the child protection section representing D.C.'s Children and Family Services Agency in the D.C. Superior Court. In that role, we had access to mediation services in all of our child welfare cases prior to scheduling a trial. This allowed families and attorneys to work collaboratively to solve the problems that brought them into the courthouse. This process facilitated timelier implementation of services, faster reunification of children with their families, and successful closure of our cases with positive outcomes.

At their core, child welfare cases are about protecting children and providing services to families that can ameliorate the cause of the abuse and/or neglect rather than focusing on punishing specific actors. Given the federal and state statutory emphasis on service provision and reunifying children with parents in a timely manner, mediation can serve an important role in expediting the reunification process. Mediations provide an opportunity for attorneys and their clients to sit down together to discuss their needs. Mediators can help the parties find some shared positions and reach some basic agreements about the case without imposing a decision on the parties. Those agreements can be presented to the Judge for approval and the case can then immediately move into implementing that plan and those services rather than proceeding to an adversarial and potentially lengthy trial process. Mediation also promotes ongoing compliance by parties with the court process and subsequent court orders because everyone had a chance to equally participate in decision-making at the outset. Mediation can be a practical, humane approach that prioritizes families' well-being while easing the burden on judicial resources. As a judge elected to full ten-year term, I would be able to provide the leadership necessary to increase access to alternative dispute resolution options such as mediation in the Family Division of the Court of Common Pleas.

6. Judicial selection process

- a. Do you believe state judges should be elected? Why/why not?
- b. If not, what system do you believe should be used instead, and why?

I am very thankful to have received a judicial appointment from Governor Shapiro to fill a vacancy in the Court of Common Pleas Family Division and am now running to seek election to a full ten-year term. There are pros and cons to judicial elections, but overall, I believe they offer great value to the public. The endorsement and campaigning process encourages candidates to visit nearly every neighborhood in the County, allowing them to connect with

community leaders across the region. This fosters the election of candidates who have a deep understanding of the county's diversity and the unique needs of various neighborhoods. However, I do have some reservations about judicial elections, particularly the high costs involved, which can create a barrier for many attorneys, especially public interest attorneys, from running. Additionally, there are times when the most qualified candidate does not win due to political or other factors. This is where the efforts of the Allegheny County Bar Association Judiciary Committee and their rating process become critical to ensuring a thoughtful and informed judicial selection process.