



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: Sarra Terry

DATE: February 12, 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.

I am a calm and patient person by nature. I have found that this is particularly useful to my clients as they are often faced with tough decisions that have far-reaching impacts on their lives. I have also found that my demeanor affects opposing counsel, police officers and judges. Remaining calm is an exercise in self-control and one that I have mastered over the years. The best example of my demeanor and ability to handle stressful cases and sensitive topics is my lengthy career as a law clerk. I have listened to and written about horrific cases of child abuse, including instances in which children have been murdered. I found that being able to compartmentalize these experiences is the best way to cope with tough cases. As a judge, you must be able to recognize the emotion in each case but not allow it to cloud your judgment.

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 have always had a strong moral compass. I have not and would not allow friends or family members to interfere with my professional duties. I understand that there will be people who reach out looking for “help” in a legal matter. I am not willing to provide any person with special treatment because of my relationship with them. In the event that a person approached me about a pending case, I would have no issue with recusing myself from the matter.

- a. Have you had this experience, and what was your response?

I have not had this experience. While serving as a law clerk, there have been times when a litigant has reached out to chambers by phone or email. Often times these folks are unrepresented, so I try my best to give them an option to share information with the court with all of the other parties present.

- b. Did you disclose it to an ethics body or to law enforcement? Why or why not?

There have been instances where I personally knew a litigant appearing before Judge Cozza. Each time, I advised him about the potential conflict, and he raised the

issue with the parties on the case. I have not been placed in the position where I had to report anything to law enforcement or the Ethics Board.

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?

The Family Division uses the Client Services Center for *pro se* litigants. If placed in the Family Division, I would work with this department to make sure that *pro se* litigants were provided with the resources that they needed to represent themselves. I also think some compassion and leniency go a long way when people do not have legal representation. Having a judge explain procedural issues and the nature of the proceedings is always helpful to unrepresented individuals.

- 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.

I believe that self-reflection is the most powerful tool that one can use when addressing bias. Sitting with your own conscious and unconscious biases is truly the best way to recognize how to make changes. As a criminal defense lawyer, I come into contact with many different types of people. This has been really helpful because I have been able to develop insight into other's lived experiences. Approaching each case with an open mind is the best approach because there are often things to be learned. Listening is such an important component to making people feel seen and heard.

I always believed that I was well versed in reproductive rights and the current issues surrounding those rights. Last fall, I attended a screening of a documentary titled Preconceived at Chatham University. This film detailed the rise of crisis pregnancy centers (CPC) across America. This film contained commentary from a wide variety of individuals including pregnant teens, experts, and leaders in the CPC industry. While I knew teens who had gotten abortions, I had never considered some of the factors in these young women's lives. I found it to be an eye-opening experience and one that I would have not considered if I had not watched the documentary.

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.

I represented an individual who suffered a traumatic brain injury, had cognitive limitations from a neurological disease and had abused opiates for approximately ten years. He was arrested several times for non-violent crimes like theft. At a probation violation hearing, I attempted to explain to the judge that his reasoning and decision-making had been severely impacted by the three factors listed above. The judge discounted my explanation and said, “don’t give me this story about his mental health”. This experience was impactful to me because it highlights a basic lack of understanding of mental health in our court system. We need judges who understand or who are willing to understand how mental health plays a role in criminality.

In another instance, a person involved in a diversionary court program told me “I’m glad that I don’t have an addictive personality like some of these people”. She was referring to a client of mine who was charged with a non-violent crime. This comment was made after I disclosed that he had been the victim of sexual abuse as a child and had never received mental health treatment to address this trauma. I reported that he was abusing alcohol as a coping mechanism. I found it shocking that a person in her position and who was involved in a diversionary program would attribute his addiction to a personality trait. This interaction demonstrated to me that not enough lawyers, service providers, probation officers or judges possess a basic understanding of the effects of unaddressed mental health issues.

I represented a woman accused of a number of non-violent crimes who was facing a mandatory prison sentence. She relapsed several times while in the Drug Court Program and was incarcerated awaiting her probation violation hearing. I was quite certain she would be sent to prison. When we appeared before the judge, she had this seriousness about her that I had never seen in the years that I had represented her. She told the judge that this was the final straw for her. To my surprise, he gave her one more chance. She just celebrated eight years clean, has a great career and is married with a young child. This case is meaningful to me because it exemplifies the importance of a judge’s discretion. Had he not afforded her one more chance, it is possible that she would not have achieved personal and professional stability.

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.

Yes. The Allegheny County courts have long utilized a “one size fits all approach” to treatment options for people suffering from mental health and substance abuse issues. With respect to substance abuse, the county contracts with several agencies who require individuals to undergo evaluations and who then recommend either intensive outpatient or inpatient treatment programs. I have seen mixed results with these corporate type of treatment centers. Often times, these programs lack the individualized approach necessary to effectuate real change in a person’s functioning. I also believe that scheduling and docket control are major issues in the Family

Division. The waiting rooms are filled with families, young children, service providers, law enforcement officers and lawyers for hours. I have always found this to be incredibly inefficient and unfair to require people to wait several hours for their case to be called into court.

- 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?

I would encourage the use of alternative forms of treatment. There is not one tried and true approach, specifically for addiction. The court needs to be willing to allow people to work through treatment at their own pace and with a provider of their choosing. I would also like to create a more trauma informed court especially in Juvenile Court. Up to 80% of the kids who come through the Juvenile Court system have experienced some form of childhood trauma, so trauma therapy is crucial. I would like to see mental health evaluations scheduled at the beginning of the case so that services can be implemented quickly. I am also an advocate for staggered start times in all division of the Court of Common Pleas. This allows more flexibility for case participants and does not force them to spend the whole day in the courthouse waiting room.

6. **Judicial selection process**

- a. Do you believe state judges should be elected? Why/why not?

I believe that judges should be elected because voters in local elections understand the issues facing their region in a way that the governor or president may not. The community should be able to pick the person who is making decisions about their freedom, family or finances. In addition, I would also have concerns about the lack of diversity on the bench if local judges were appointed. We have seen the appointments of women, people of color and LGBTQ+ people increase during some administrations and wain during others. I believe that would be true on the state and local level as well.

- b. If not, what system do you believe should be used instead, and why?

I do not believe that the appointment system should be used to elect judges as mentioned above.