



ICJL 2018 Judicial Retention Questionnaire

**Zina R. Cruse
Circuit Judge – 20th Circuit**

1. State the main reason why voters should return you to the bench.

In addition to the critiques listed in #4 and while it is somewhat difficult to state only one, I believe my distinction on the bench is one of the main reasons voters should return me to the bench. For the past six years I have served as the only African-American and the only woman on the Circuit bench in the 20th Judicial Circuit. Of course, that does not make me special, however with that distinction comes the heightened ability to appreciate both the differences and similarities in the people who I interact with from the bench, including individual litigants, their representatives and those affected by the case. To the extent that I can, I try to put my finger on the pulse of the lives of those involved in and affected by the cases before me. This enables me to more clearly see them for who they are and examine the case more comprehensively, versus with tunnel vision. Our Circuit is a multiformity: Socio-economically, culturally, racially, by gender, by age, by level of education, etc. I consider the people who come before me without preconceived notions of who they are or who I think they should be. I highlight this as one of the main reasons voters should return me to the bench because these qualities in a jurist are essential to impartiality and boost confidence in the judiciary.

2. What actions have you taken as a judge of which you are most proud?

One of the actions I have taken as a judge that I am most proud of is serving as a problem-solving court judge. I preside over a Veterans Court and a Mental Health Court—over and above a full felony docket. With reducing recidivism as a target, these dockets provide resources for certain offenders and require participation with the Department of Veterans Affairs and/or community-based programs and services. We try to address the underlying problems which might have contributed to an offender's run-in with the criminal justice system. As a problem-solving court judge over our Veterans Court, this gives me the opportunity to give back to the men and women who either currently serve or have served in the U. S. Military.

3. Name and describe one change you would make in the Illinois court system.

There are many moving parts to the Illinois court system. Fortunately, many of the areas in the court system are fluid and the opportunity to change is on-going. However, speaking from a jurist's

perspective, one change I would make in the Illinois court system that is less so, is to provide a mechanism for people to have a clearer understanding of the role of the judiciary. I agree with the ICJL that the judicial branch of government is misunderstood yet important. As judges, our lives can be somewhat monastic. Understandably, we are not allowed to discuss cases or issues which could come before us. We do not want even the appearance of impropriety. Often, erring on the side of caution, this may cause us to stay silent when it comes to most discussions – no matter how distantly related to a case or issue which may come before us. There is little opportunity to clarify or explain our role when we are publicly ridiculed or vilified. I would develop a process, with established boundaries, by which judges are able to provide details which explain the procedures and judicial role throughout cases without breaching our judicial canons or putting the integrity of the litigation in jeopardy.

4. One prominent Illinois judicial evaluation survey asks attorneys to evaluate candidates on Integrity, Impartiality, Legal Ability and Temperament. Critique yourself in these four areas as to how you personally approach your job as a judge?

Integrity: I stay mindful of the judicial canons which are a guide for our conduct. I review and adhere to them, especially when faced with circumstances I may not be sure of. I do not adjust my conduct or my moral/ethical compass based on pressure or others' opinions. I understand "integrity" must be the foundation for my conduct, whether or not someone is watching or listening.

Impartiality: Referring to my response to #1, I do not rule based on any pre-disposition. I do not allow improper influence to guide my rulings. I practice neutrality and I am open-minded. I do not jump to unsubstantiated conclusions. I rule based on what is relevant and make every effort to dispense fair justice.

Legal Ability: I have been a judge for over nine (9) years. I have been assigned to traffic, misdemeanor, family, and [currently] felony dockets. Additionally, I have presided over cases in juvenile, probate, and civil. Prior to taking the bench, I practiced law for about 15 years. As a sole practitioner, I was not pigeon-holed into one area of expertise. My practice emphases were family/domestic, minor personal injury, small business, not-for-profit organizations, real estate, municipal and bankruptcy. I was a certified Guardian *ad Litem*, certified arbitrator in St. Clair County's Mandatory Arbitration program, and an assistant public defender.

Temperament (Exercise the judicial temperament to serve with appropriate courtesy, consideration, firmness, fairness, patience and dignity): I am firm but fair, mixed with compassion and understanding. I always give people an opportunity to talk. I am clear in what I expect and what can be expected of me. If the tenor of a proceeding becomes volatile, I remain calm. If I feel any sense of offense or attack, I sit back and take a deep breath and make sure I maintain my composure and stay conscientious. I maintain control in

**the courtroom, sometimes with a commanding voice. I do not
ridicule, embarrass or demean people.**