

Hon. Sheila R. Tillerson Adams

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**Personal Testimony of Judge Sheila R. Tillerson Adams (Retired)
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for Prince George's County and the 7th Judicial Circuit of Maryland
House Judiciary Committee / Senate Judicial Proceedings Committee
HB 778 / SB 630 – Favorable
February 12, 2025**

Greetings Chairs Clippinger and Smith, Vice Chairs Bartlett and Waldstreicher, and members of the House Judiciary and Senate Judicial Proceedings Committees,

I am honored to submit this testimony today in support of House Bill 778 and Senate Bill 630, Circuit Court - Judges Selection and Retention - a Constitutional Amendment. This Bill will ensure that all applicants applying for Judicial vacancies are fully vetted and will allow Marylanders to vote to retain or reject Judges in elections following their appointment by the Governor. This change is needed and will significantly impact and improve the Administration of Justice in this State.

Now, before I proceed with my testimony, I must admit that I was not always a fan of doing away with contested judicial elections in Maryland. I started my career in the law in the early 80s in Baltimore City, at a time when there were few African American Judges on the Bench in that city. Black lawyers at the time saw challenging the establishment as a way of urging and even forcing the system to appoint competent Black lawyers to the Bench.

Qualified and skillful lawyers put their hat in the ring and they challenged the Sitting Judges - some won, most lost, but it opened the eyes of the establishment to take a more holistic look at all the candidates applying for judicial vacancies and to create a fair system of selecting judges. Hence, the vetting system that we have today.

Fast forward to 1996 when I was appointed to the bench by Governor Glendenning and then to 2010 when I was named Administrative Judge of the 7th Judicial Circuit by then Chief Judge Robert M. Bell. Through the eye of an Administrative Judge, I saw the Judiciary through a totally different lens. I saw the role of the Judge being unlike that of any other elected official and the importance of qualified and skilled practitioners being placed on the bench became abundantly clear to me.

Judges are the ultimate public servants - entrusted with making decisions intimately and directly impacting the daily lives of citizens who come before them. Decisions that determine if a citizen

goes to jail or not, the custody of their children, the dissolution of their marriage, the partition of their property, just to name a few.

These decisions impact families directly and judges, unlike most elected officials, have the unilateral authority to make these decisions.

The skill it takes to understand the laws impacting the resolution of these decisions is not derived from an “on the job training” checklist. It takes years of practice.

The law is so vast and is constantly changing. There are so many areas of the law, that is why there are so many lawyers who specialize in certain areas - lawyers train and practice for years to be skilled at what they do.

As Administrative Judge, I advocated to have judges with vast experience appointed to the bench so that I had a cadre of judges with the expertise to handle any matter presented to the Court.

The vetting process that exists in the current judicial appointment process and which would continue with this Bill, would require ALL applicants to the bench to be vetted. Vetting evaluates their expertise, temperament and experience with a variety of case types. This vetting is so crucial to the integrity of the bench and the service that the bench is required to give to the public.

Without vetting, what happens is that lawyers can just put their name on the ballot to see what happens and sometimes they win. All lawyers are not created equal! What I mean by this is that the only criteria that currently exists in the law to make you eligible to run for a Circuit Court Judge is membership in the Maryland Bar for 5 years and the attainment of age 30. There is no requirement of:

1. Jury Trial experience- Civil or Criminal
2. Years of practice
3. Judicial temperament (respect shown to litigants and others)
4. Specific experience with certain types of cases
5. Prior experience on a lower court or in a quasi - judicial role
6. Reputation at the bar
7. Just to name a few

People have been elected to the bench without any prior experience - never tried a case or never represented a client (other than a family member) - then we are asked to train them to resolve some of the most important and complex matters in the lives of our citizens...

This amendment to the Maryland Constitution will require that all judges are vetted and provide that citizens would still have a voice in judges remaining on the bench. On Election Day, citizens can cast their vote for or against the retention of Judges if they believe they are or are not serving the citizens in a manner that meets the needs of the public.

I urge you to pass this Bill for the Good of the Citizens of Maryland.