

Hon. Monise Stephenson

Associate Judge
Circuit Court for Charles County
200 Charles St
La Plata, MD 20646

**Personal Testimony of Judge Monise Stephenson
House Judiciary Committee
HB 778 – Favorable
February 12, 2025**

Good Afternoon Chair Clippinger and Vice Chair Bartlett,

My name is Monise Stephenson and I am an associate judge for the Circuit Court for Charles County. Please allow the record to reflect that this testimonial is being done in an independent capacity and not on behalf of the Maryland Judiciary.

In November 2022, I completed a contested judicial election. Based on my experiences, I urge the legislature to reconsider the practice of the currently contested judicial election that only the circuit court judges in Maryland have to endure.

Being a judge is by far the best job I could have ever imagined. Receiving the call from the Governor was a day of momentous joy. However, the joy of an appointment was short lived by knowing I faced a contested election, with two candidates who had filed to run for judge months before I was even appointed. I had a new job to learn while navigating an election process with which I had no prior experience.

Judges in a contested election are severely disadvantaged compared to their opponents. While managing the stress and learning curve of a new job, the new judge is spread even more thin by daily campaign activities. Frankly, campaigning serves as a constant mental and physical distraction from the job. Each weekday I contributed 2-3 hours of time to campaign that could have been used in other ways that would advance the judiciary. On weekends, those hours easily extended to 5-10 hours of campaign activities. I woke up earlier and went to bed later, in attempt to make sure my name was out in the community to keep my job. Where I would have rather allocated that time to transitioning to my new job, or spending time with my family, instead I feverishly campaigned.

The most difficult part of campaigning was having opponents who had already organized their campaigns months before I started. My opponents, both attorneys, were afforded several freedoms that judges simply do not have. I could not respond to false allegations made about me or my campaign. I could not correct erroneous information that was spread because I was afraid it could end in a sanction against me or my campaign. False allegations against your campaign and character often must go unaddressed to maintain the sanctity of the position and to follow the rules by which judges are bound.

The danger of this particularly in the age of social media, is that the unaddressed, unfounded allegations create doubt in our judiciary, our processes, our application of the law and the decisions we make on and off the bench. I've been approached about what my opponents have posted on social media and been asked "is that true?" I often could not craft a response that directly addressed the false statements without lowering myself to a level that infringed on the dignity of the role as judge. I was unwilling. Perhaps, leaving the doubt in the community was worse, but I couldn't take the risk. I had to uphold my oath and follow the judicial canons. One friend who also had a contested election succinctly explained these restrictions as running a marathon with one arm tied behind your back and one foot in a cast, while your opponents have both arms and legs available to compete. The disparity is indescribable.

Finally, I must address the impact that a judicial race had on my family. I have young children in the community. They were exposed to people coming up to me at their sporting events, community activities, even at a swimming pool, that wanted to discuss their cases and the election. This made me feel unsafe. I created "get away" terms with my kids that meant, do not ask questions, disperse immediately and I would advise them of where to meet me if we got separated. We only had to use that one time. Thankfully, most of the people approaching were harmless and often very kind. Having been a magistrate for 8 years prior to my appointment, many people had appeared in front of me before regarding highly contested divorce, custody, child support and juvenile cases. Some people were happy about my prior rulings, others were not, and where I learned about it was on the campaign trail, while door knocking. Door knocking is critical in smaller counties. During door knocking I faced a parent in a juvenile matter I was handling. During door knocking I faced a parent that I awarded custody and she yelled for her child to come the door to meet the judge who gave her to them. At an ice cream social, a mother of Defendant I sentenced who was grateful for the sentence her son received because it turned his life around. Anyone of these interactions could have gone very differently, been life threatening even. My children were approached at school and at camp about the election and my candidacy. Children would come up to me ask me if I put anyone in prison that day. The campaign was hard on my family, and although they are excited about my position, we are still catching up for lost time.

I recognize that this is the price that the family pays when you enter politics, but the partisan election process is a decidedly imperfect vehicle for assessing the performance of a judge—particularly one who is just beginning to learn the position. The qualities we seek in a judge—neutrality, a respect for balancing the rights of all parties in the context of the law and promoting fairness and justice—simply do not mix well with the requirements of an effective campaign. I am thankful and grateful to have been appointed, to have won my election, and to serve as a circuit court judge. But I cannot ignore the toll that it took on me and my family during the 10 months of my campaign. I would be remiss if I didn't urge you consider another way; a way that does not expose judges to danger, put them at risk for *ex parte* communications, and distract them from the focus of their career, the daily duties of a judge. Thank you immensely for your time and your diligent work on this important matter.