

Atlantic County a leader in judicial diversity, by Julio L. Mendez

Julio L. Mendez For The Press

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Before a gathering of 400 family members, local lawyers, officials and well-wishers, four new Atlantic County judges took the oath of office to serve as judges of the Superior Court recently. Stockton University hosted the event.

The swearing-in ceremony displayed the traditions and solemnity of the judiciary. And it demonstrated the efficient efforts with which local elected officials, Bar Association and judiciary keep the wheels of justice moving in this part of South Jersey.

The special session of the court was presided by Atlantic-Cape May Assignment Judge Michael Blee along with the full bench. This was the first in-person swearing-in ceremony in close to three years. At the event two other judges who began their judicial service during the pandemic were also recognized.

The new judges are a welcome and necessary addition to the Atlantic-Cape May bench.

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Under the New Jersey Constitution, judges are nominated by the governor subject to the advice and consent of the Senate. Each judge underwent an intense vetting process, including a review by the local and state bar associations, the N.J. State Police, the Governor's Office, and the Senate.

Sometimes the judicial appointment process moves slowly and other times — as in this region — it unfolds efficiently.

The Atlantic County bench has a reputation of excellence. It is considered one of the best in the state. The new group of six judges greatly adds to the quality and diversity of the bench.

There is much to celebrate with the new judges: Michelle Perry-Thompson, Jorge Coombs, Steven Scheffler and Jeffrey Wilson took the oath at the event. The two appointed last year are Judges Danielle Walcoff and Dorothy Incarvito-Garrabrant.

They are exceptionally gifted lawyers, with impeccable reputations. They also reflect the great diversity of Atlantic County in both their ethnic and racial backgrounds and areas of legal experience.

Their extensive legal background also includes child protection, juvenile, criminal and immigration law, areas not often represented on the bench. The group also has one former municipal and two administrative law judges.

The state faces a significant crisis with judicial vacancies. There are 60 judicial vacancies in New Jersey. Judicial vacancies often result in delays in the disposition of cases. Timely disposition of cases is a vital component in the fair administration of justice.

Atlantic County has an excellent record of rapidly filling vacancies. This last group of jurists is a perfect example of the judicial appointment process working efficiently. Unfortunately, it's not the same in other parts of the state.

The Atlantic County formula starts with the local senator working closely with the local bar associations, conducting early review of candidates, communicating with the judiciary, and finding common ground with the governor.

The county and state bar associations play an integral part in the appointment process. They work closely with the appointing officials and are key part in the vetting of candidates. The governor shares the credit for the newest judges.

Hats off to Atlantic County Sen. Vincent Polistina and Cape May-Cumberland Sen. Michael Testa for navigating the process with great skill in filling vacancies. They understand the importance of filling judge vacancies promptly with qualified candidates.

Lack of diversity on the bench is another significant statewide concern. Despite some recent gains, there are just not enough women, and even fewer Minorities serving on the bench. Here again, Atlantic County leads the way with the newest group of judges.

Of the six newest judges, three are woman, two are African Americans and one is Latino. A bench reflective of the community enhances public trust in the courts. This becomes even more important at a time when public trust in the institutions of government is declining.

In a post-pandemic time with the full resumption of court operations, having sufficient judges allows for the judiciary to make a significant dent on the immense number of pending cases caused by the pandemic.

The timely disposition of cases is a central principle of the fair administration of justice. The six new judges, and another one on the way, provide sufficient judicial resources to tackle the challenge at hand.

Atlantic County has proven tradition of appointing exceptional judges. The newest group adds to that tradition.

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