

SIXTH JUDICIAL DISTRICT COURT 15

QUESTION 1:

CANDIDATE LESLIE E. BEIERS:

Please provide a brief description of the judicial office you are seeking, including a brief description of the duties of the office.

I was appointed to be a Sixth Judicial District Trial Court Judge by Governor Mark Dayton in June of 2014. Pursuant to the Minnesota Constitution, I am seeking election to the seat to which I was appointed. District courts are the state trial courts of general jurisdiction. A district court trial judge presides over a variety of cases including criminal, civil, family, juvenile, and probate.

QUESTION 2:

CANDIDATE LESLIE E. BEIERS:

Please provide a personal statement describing your past work and life experience and why you are seeking this office.

I became a lawyer in 1983. I spent my first two years working as a law clerk for Federal Magistrate Patrick McNulty in Duluth and the next six years at the Legal Aid Service of Northeastern Minnesota. While at Legal Aid, I worked on the Senior Law Project and rode the circuit in Cook, Lake, and Carlton counties. In 1991, I became an Assistant Carlton County Attorney. Several years later, in 1995, I moved to the St. Louis County Attorney's Office where, over the course of nearly 20 years, I worked in all three divisions, criminal, public health and human services, and civil. My work was primarily as an adult and juvenile prosecutor. From 2007-2010, I served as Head of the Criminal Division. I was also appointed a Special Assistant United States Attorney in 2011. I've been on the trial court bench since 2014, handling all types of cases and presiding over the Carlton County Drug Court. I've spent my entire career in public service and want to continue to serve in a way that draws on all of my experience over the past 33 years. I believe my background and temperament make me an excellent candidate for this position.

QUESTION 3:

CANDIDATE LESLIE E. BEIERS:

What do you believe is the mission and role of a judge in the community?

The primary role and responsibility of a judge is to handle the work of the district court. I believe that judges also have a responsibility to do outreach in the community to educate the public about the work of the court. I have done this in a variety of ways since being appointed to the bench, by speaking to classes and community groups about the court and by doing presentations about our drug courts.

QUESTION 4: CANDIDATE LESLIE E. BEIERS:

It is important for candidates to engage, reach out, and listen to all communities, especially underrepresented communities. How are you currently accomplishing this and what is your plan to continue if elected?

I am currently serving on the statewide Committee for Equality and Justice, whose three-fold mission is to work collaboratively across the Judicial Branch to (1) eliminate bias from court operations, (2) promote equal access to the courts, and (3) inspire a high level of trust and confidence in the Minnesota Judicial Branch. I am also the Chair of our local Equal Justice Committee. In this capacity, I have reformed our committee, reached out to underrepresented communities for representation on the committee and worked with the committee to plan our first Community Dialogue. The goal of this Community Dialogue is to provide a forum for community members to share their court experiences with Judges and members of the Equal Justice Committee. Our first Community Dialogue is scheduled for October 29, 2016 at Denfeld High School from 9:30 a.m. until noon. Once this is completed, the committee will evaluate the feedback from the community and determine what changes we might be able to make to improve our court system and how we served underrepresented communities. Going forward, we will continue to host Community Dialogues around the district.

QUESTION 5: CANDIDATE LESLIE E. BEIERS:

Do you believe the composition of juries adequately and fairly reflects society at large? Why or why not? If not, what can we do to change this?

The lack of diversity in juries is a challenge for courts across the country. The presence of minorities on juries allows for fellow jurors to better understand the experiences of different races in the criminal justice system. One of the challenges to empanelling diverse juries is poverty. Poverty often results in a lack of stable housing or frequent moves, which then results in juror notices being returned as undeliverable. Although the Minnesota legislature doubled the juror per diem this year to twenty dollars a day and increased the mileage reimbursement to the same as the federal level, jury service presents a disproportionate burden on the economically disadvantaged. In talking to jurors after trials, most have extremely positive experiences – which contradicts the negative views many citizens have about serving on juries. Possible solutions include finding ways to expand the jury pool, increasing juror compensation, and doing community outreach to explain that jury service is not only the backbone of our system, but a rewarding experience.

QUESTION 6:**CANDIDATE LESLIE E. BEIERS:**

Do you believe there is under-representation of women or people of color in the court system? If so, how would you work to correct the problem?

I believe there is an under-representation of people of color and women working in the court system. The Minnesota Judicial Branch does outreach to underrepresented communities and our Community Dialogues will include information about employment opportunities in the Judicial Branch. The Duluth Courthouse had an open house last year that included information about employment opportunities within the Branch, and it was well received.

QUESTION 7.**CANDIDATE LESLIE E. BEIERS:**

What do you believe are the causes of the high rates of minority incarceration?

This is a subject on which volumes have been written. There are many causes, including poverty, the war on drugs, and institutional racism.

QUESTION 8:**CANDIDATE LESLIE E. BEIERS:**

Do you believe that all citizens have adequate access to legal help and the legal system? If not, what can be done to provide wider and better access?

People do not have adequate access to legal help, especially in civil and family law cases. People appear in court frequently representing themselves on important matters because they can't afford counsel. Minnesota has an excellent public defender system, but their caseloads are too large. Civil legal service programs are underfunded and overwhelmed with cases. Volunteer lawyers offer critical services, but more funding is needed. The Minnesota Judicial Branch has tried to address this problem by establishing self help centers where self represented litigants can find information and assistance. Each county in our district has a self-help workstation with a computer, telephone and printer. Citizens can find legal information, print court forms and talk to self-help staff over the telephone.

QUESTION 9:**CANDIDATE LESLIE E. BEIERS:**

What have been the most effective methods for improving court procedures and efficiency? What other methods would you suggest?

The Minnesota Courts have been a national leader in technological innovations. eCourt Minnesota, which became mandatory for lawyers on July 1, 2016, requires electronic service and filing of documents. Our Chief Justice Lori Gildea described this initiative as, “the largest transformation in the 150 year history on the Minnesota Judicial Branch.” The system improves efficiency and increases the availability of on-line access to court information. There are many other Judicial Branch initiatives that use technology to more efficiently and effectively do our work. Our district has also centralized many of our court operations, which is another innovative way we have improved efficiency.

QUESTION 10:**CANDIDATE LESLIE E. BEIERS:**

What do you perceive as the greatest obstacles to justice, if any?

The earlier answers touch on some of the obstacles to justice, lack of affordable counsel for individuals in civil and family cases, high caseloads for public defenders, and crowded court dockets. Another concerning area is the lack of services for people suffering from mental illness and addiction. With too few services available, people who would otherwise be released into treatment facilities pending trial remain jailed.

QUESTION 11:**CANDIDATE LESLIE E. BEIERS:**

What are the most critical issues facing the criminal justice system in the region?

One critical issue is the explosion of cases involving opiates. These cases affect not only the criminal justice system, but our child protection and family law cases as well. Widespread opiate addiction is not just a problem in the court system; it is a public health crisis. The Minnesota Judicial Branch is committed to treatment courts and we have 5 treatment courts in this district. Unfortunately, these courts cannot handle the very large number of drug cases that have flooded the systems. Additional resources and working collaboratively with service providers is critically important to addressing this problem. Another significant problem is the incarceration of the mentally ill because of the absence of local community resources. Incarceration exacerbates mental illness in many cases, and the lack of resources to protect public safety and the safety of these defendants is a challenge we must continue to make efforts to address.