

2025 JUDICIAL CANDIDATE QUESTIONNAIRE

This questionnaire is designed to provide insight about your candidacy and to aid the various committee members in making a more informed choice when casting their endorsement vote. This will be shared with the members of the committees participating in the 2025 Judicial Candidates Zoom Conference and any other Democratic Committee/Committee member that requests copies. Your response is requested no later than: January 20, 2025. Please email your .pdf responses to: committee@mccandlessdemocrats.org

Name: Jaime Marie Hickton

Campaign website: www.hicktonforjudge.com

1. Have you received a rating from the Allegheny County or Pennsylvania Bar Association?

If so, please state the rating and year received.

If not, are you applying for a rating? Please state when your interview is scheduled or why you are not applying for a rating.

I applied for the Allegheny County Bar Association rating, and I am scheduled for my interview on January 22, 2025.

2. What are your qualifications to run for a Judicial Seat? What specific accomplishments in your past have qualified you for this?

Regarding why I feel my personal life qualifies me to run for a Judicial Seat, please see my answer to Question 4 below.

Regarding my professional accomplishments, I have worn every single hat in the courtroom, and because of my work in each role, I understand the nuances of how the systems interact and the collateral consequences of the decisions that judges make. From 2006 through 2014, I was a juvenile probation officer in Westmoreland County. In that role, I worked with children and families to help them access community-based resources to resolve the underlying issues that led to them having system involvement. I had to testify hundreds of times, so I appreciate what witnesses go through when we ask them to appear before a judge and/or jury and recount their experience(s). From 2014 through 2015, I was a judicial law clerk for the Honorable Judge Meagan Bilik-DeFazio in Westmoreland County Court of Common Pleas. In that role, I worked side by side with the judge to ensure compliance with procedural rules, heard and considered the relevant facts and evidence, and applied the law to those facts and evidence. In that role, I saw behind the curtain. As a result, I

understand the need to balance the competing interests of parties in an adversarial system with the focus always being on doing what is right and just.

From 2015 through 2020, I was an Assistant District Attorney in Allegheny County for the Juvenile Unit and then the Child Abuse Unit. While I was initially apprehensive to prosecute the people who, up until that point in my career, I had always helped, I learned early that the role of a prosecutor is to seek justice without bias. Justice does not always mean convictions, and it is never about winning. Once I better understood my role within the system as a prosecutor, I loved being able to decide whether to even prosecute an individual and, if so, what resolution could be offered to provide justice to the victim, the community, and the defendant. From 2020 until present, I have been in private practice, and I have represented clients in divorce, custody, support, protection from abuse, indirect criminal contempt, criminal defense, juvenile delinquency, juvenile dependency (as a parent advocate, guardian ad litem, child advocate, and solicitor for Children, Youth, and Family agencies), civil litigation (small claims, medical malpractice, and personal injury cases), landlord/tenant matters, and adoption matters.

It is impossible to know the true number of cases I have tried to verdict or judgement because the juvenile system is confidential. I attempted to access some of the cases that I tried in the juvenile system as a Juvenile Unit Prosecutor, but I am unable to access them anymore in that I no longer work for the Allegheny County District Attorney's Office. I am certain that I have tried at least 40 cases to verdict or judgment, but I know that I tried many more than that number. I do not want to misrepresent the accurate total since I am unable to access the records from the period of time when I was a Juvenile Unit Prosecutor. I was sole counsel in all of those matters other than one (two criminal jury trials where I was co-counsel; one was when I was a Child Abuse Prosecutor, and one was with my law partner where we were co-counsel in a criminal jury trial).

3. Describe the nature of your legal practice since graduating from law school, including the percentage of your practice dedicated to litigation and whether you appeared in court frequently, occasionally, or not at all.

When I first became a licensed attorney in 2014, I was Judicial Law Clerk for the Honorable Judge Meagan Bilik-DeFazio. In that role, I attended proceedings every week, whether it was for pre-trial motions, trials, or post-trial motions/argument(s). In Westmoreland County, judicial law clerks are not permitted to practice law in the same division as the division that their judge is assigned. We were assigned to the Family Division for six months and then to the Criminal Division for the last year that I worked with Judge Bilik-DeFazio. I was her only law clerk and, thus, I did not have much flexibility to practice outside of my role as a law clerk. As a result, less than 5% of my practice was dedicated to litigation.

In July of 2015, I became an Assistant District Attorney in Allegheny County. While I was in the Screening Unit, I only appeared in court approximately once per month for Summary Appeals. At that time, approximately 5% of my practice was dedicated to litigation. In 2016, I was promoted to the Juvenile Unit and, in that role, I appeared in court at least three days each week, often in multiple courtrooms. In approximately February of 2019, I was promoted to the Child Abuse Unit. In

that role, I was typically in court multiple days each week. While working in both the Juvenile Unit and Child Abuse Unit, approximately 60% of my practice was dedicated to litigation.

In May of 2020, I went into private practice for a family and criminal law firm in Pittsburgh, PA. While there, I appeared in court on average two times per week. In that role, approximately 40% of my practice was dedicated to litigation. In July of 2021, I started my own law practice and, in that role, I appeared in court on average three times per week. In April of 2022, Attorney Greg Stein and I created Hickton + Stein Law Group, LLC. Since that time, I appear in court on average four times per week, often in more than one proceeding each day. In private practice, approximately 60% of my practice is dedicated to litigation.

4. Why are you running for this office?

Privilege is defined as a special right, advantage, or immunity granted or available only to a particular person or group. Being a justice or a judge is a privilege, and I have learned, through my lived experience, that only those who uniquely understand that privilege should be permitted to sit in judgment of others. I was born into a blue-collar family in Southwestern Pennsylvania. None of my immediate family attended school beyond high school. They worked manual labor jobs that earned meager incomes. They were hardworking but, despite their sweat equity, we were relatively poor. For four years, we grew up as trailer park kids. While that time taught me the importance of family for protection and love, it did not allow me to know or experience that other children and families were in still more desperate circumstances with even less support.

In high school, I was first exposed to the disparity of opportunity between the haves and have nots. I had friends who wore the newest clothes while we waited for our clothes to be paid off from the Hills layaway—hoping that it would be in time for the new school year. I joke that, while my friends wore the latest Nike tennis shoes, we wore "Mikeys," or some off-brand shoe. I decided in high school that I wanted more, but college was not a financial option in my family, which was understandably worried about putting enough food on the table for a family of seven.

With few options and a mountain range of obstacles in my path, I decided that I would try out for the high school girls soccer team because I had learned that there were a lot of college soccer scholarships. I volunteered to try out for the position of goalie because I had no foot skills and knew I would not likely make the team as a field player. When I was selected for the junior varsity team that year as a goalie, I promised myself that I would listen to every bit of advice and do whatever it took to improve and position myself for a college soccer scholarship down the road.

Each week, I would lift weights and work out at the gym independently to get better, stronger, faster. I did drills on my own to increase my hand-eye coordination and skill. The following year, as a sophomore, I made the varsity team and, by my senior year, I was offered several soccer college scholarships for goalie. Despite the obstacles in my path, I've always been willing to set my sights high and do the necessary hard work to learn more and become better.

I earned a soccer scholarship to Seton Hill University and, while there, I continued to distinguish myself. I became class vice president while double majoring in political science and history, and I worked as a public policy intern to University President Dr. JoAnne Boyle. That was my

first exposure to politics and to elected officials who could make a direct impact in the lives of those they serve. I traveled to Harrisburg and DC with Dr. Boyle and the other interns to lobby our state and federal representatives to give more money to higher education so students like me could afford to go to college. That experience taught me to believe in myself as a woman, to never underestimate my power, and to fight for those who can't fight for themselves.

After undergraduate school, I accepted a job as a juvenile probation officer. For the first time in my life, I began to really learn about my privilege. I had regarded my childhood with largely negative feelings and thought I had struggled. That I had not been given things that I was owed and that I had missed opportunities that should have been handed to me. Working with kids and families in the juvenile system helped me understand that I had been given more protection and more help than almost all of the kids I worked with. That opportunity and insight cemented in me the drive to go back to school so that I could help kids and families in a different and more powerful way. I applied for and was accepted into Duquesne University's School of Law evening program. Despite my relatively moderate success, I couldn't afford to stop working to go to school. I worked full-time as a school-based probation officer in Westmoreland County and commuted to Pittsburgh at night to attend law school. While working and attending law school, I also was accepted into Duquesne's National Trial Team program. For the next two years, I competed against some of the nation's top students in multiple national trial competitions. For the first time, I was up against the best and brightest advocates, and then, in my last competition, I won the top award of Best Summation.

When I graduated from law school, I knew that best way I could directly help children and families was by being a trial attorney, and the ideal way to learn how to do that was to first work for a judge as a law clerk. Seeing behind the curtain and learning to understand how a judge thinks was critical to learning how to best advocate for someone. I worked for a judge in Westmoreland County; however, for the first significant time in my life, I experienced severe discrimination. I'm a straight-passing lesbian. At the time, I was in an openly lesbian relationship, but it mostly didn't impact my life. However, when my (now) ex-wife and I decided to get married, two judges in Westmoreland County refused to perform the ceremony. I was crushed and confronted with the reality of what most marginalized individuals deal with daily. My straight-passing appearance had shielded me from the everyday discrimination that those who cannot conceal their marginalized status experience. That was when I learned about another form of my privilege. Even still, I couldn't get a job in the DA's office in Westmoreland County, so I applied to the Allegheny County District Attorney's Office, and I came back home.

Because of my substantial experience, my path in the DA's office was abnormal. I quickly made it to their Juvenile Prosecution Unit and to Judge Clark's courtroom. I watched her take seriously the issues that children and families brought before her, and I listened when she encouraged me to think outside the box to handle a case in a manner consistent with the need to try to rehabilitate and help the kids. Judge Clark made every effort to treat everyone in her courtroom with dignity and respect regardless of how that person presented or whether they wanted it. By working with kids and families in that way, and having the opportunity to learn from Judge Clark, I

realized I wanted to do more. I then became a Child Abuse prosecutor and, in that role, I felt I could directly impact the safety and protection of every child victim I interacted with and I could ensure that the cases I handled were properly litigated. I think, had my personal life not changed, I would still be a Child Abuse prosecutor today.

My ex-wife and I separated and, faced with the reality of caring for our three children adopted from the child welfare system, two of whom have special needs, I was unable to provide for them financially as a prosecutor. I chose my children over my career and went into private practice. I now appreciate the lessons that life was teaching me, because I would not have had the opportunity to represent and defend children and their families in the child welfare and juvenile delinquency system or the criminal and family law system if I had stayed in the prosecutor's office.

Understanding and recognizing the privilege I have enjoyed and appreciating the ways in which I have not experienced privilege have helped to shape the advocate that I have become. Having worked in the trenches as a juvenile probation officer or standing beside a parent or child when the state is trying to take that child away has given me a unique perspective on what really matters and the importance of the roles that we all play. Judges have a unique ability to, positively or negatively, significantly impact the life of every person who appears before them. What's more, though, is that, in rendering their decision on each case, our judges impact all of us as members of the community. For our society to function as it is meant to, the system requires that we put in judicial roles people who intimately understand both the power and corresponding responsibility of a judge. I believe that, because of my lived personal and professional journey, I possess a unique combination of experience, skill, and temperament that will aid my ability as a judge. I spent almost twenty years in a courtroom, and I've worn every hat within it. The positions that I have held in government have forced me to make difficult decisions, often subject to public scrutiny, and I have had to demonstrate the courage to fight for truth and justice. The positions that I have held in private practice have offered me the chance to see a case from every angle. A judge must fundamentally understand the nuanced issues that exist in each case for every person who appears before them and the collateral consequences that result from each decision they will make. I believe I possess that ability and, for all of the aforementioned reasons, I am running for Allegheny County Court of Common Pleas Judge in 2025.

5. Have you ever run for or held office? If yes, what office? Why did you leave office?

No.

6. Have you ever been arrested? If yes, list the county and state of arrest, the charge, and the outcome of the case.

No.

7. Have you ever had a Domestic Violence Protection Order or Civil Stalking Protection Order taken out against you? If yes, list the county and state issuing the Order.

No.

8. Do you have any outstanding tax liabilities? Have you ever had any outstanding tax liabilities in the past? If yes, describe them and the outcomes(s).

No.

9. Have you ever had a malpractice claim filed against you? If yes, list the year and detail the complaint.

No.

10. Have you ever had a bar complaint and/or grievance filed against you? If yes, list the Bar Association which handled the matter and the outcome of the matter.

No.

11. Has your law license ever been inactive? If so, why?

No.

12. Has any professional license held by you other than your law license ever lapsed, been denied renewal, suspended, or revoked for any reason? If yes, describe the circumstances and outcome(s).

No.

13. Has your driver's license ever been denied renewal, been suspended, or been canceled because of unpaid tickets or for any other reason? If yes, describe the circumstances and outcome(s).

No.

14. Do you have or have you had any liens or judgments on any property you own? If yes, describe the circumstances and outcome(s).

No.

15. Have you ever sued or been sued in your personal capacity? If yes, describe the circumstances and outcome(s).

DeRiso, DeRiso & Suher v. Jaime M. Hickton

Docket Number: AR-21-004430

Employment Dispute

In this matter, I left employment from the above-referenced law firm prior to the expiration of my contract. My employer sued me wherein they claimed that a liquidated damages clause permitted them to recover monies from me. The parties resolved the matter and a voluntary discontinuation was filed by the employer.

16. Have any sexual harassment allegations and/or complaints been levied against you? If so please detail.

No.

17. Please provide your screen/username for all social media accounts, including but not limited to LinkedIn, Facebook, Twitter, etc.

a. Facebook: Hickton for Judge (candidate); Jaime Hickton (personal); Hickton + Stein Law Group, LLC (professional)

b. Instagram: jaimemhickton (personal); hicktonsteinlawgroup (professional)

c. LinkedIn: Jaime Hickton (professional)

d. X: No longer a user of X

e. TikTok: @jaimehickton (personal)

f. Other: N/A

18. Please disclose any other matter that may be of significance in your judicial race. Include in your disclosure any information about you that could be used negatively against you or the Democratic Party.

N/A

19. Please explain your thoughts on cashless bail? i.e. when is it appropriate and when is it not appropriate?

Pretrial detention is one of the most significant problems that we face in the Allegheny County criminal justice system because it causes tremendous disruption to people's lives,

including, but not limited to, impacting their employment, their ability to care for their children, their housing, and generally, their ability to exercise the freedoms that we should all enjoy. We are all guaranteed specific fundamental freedoms, and one of the most important fundamental freedoms is that we are all presumed innocent unless and until the Commonwealth proves beyond a reasonable doubt that we are guilty of the crimes with which we have been charged. Because we are guaranteed that right, incarcerating people accused of crimes pretrial should only be used when there is a substantial risk to the safety of the community, if the individual presents with a substantial flight risk, or if the individual has a demonstrated history of failing to appear for court proceedings.

Cash bail comes into focus when we know that the individual does not present with a substantial safety risk to the community. If that were the case, bail would simply be denied. In cases where there is substantial evidence of flight risk or a demonstrated history of failing to appear for future court proceedings, cash bail can be used as a deterrent to flight and failure to appear, and it can be used to deter flight and/or compel appearance at future court proceedings. Unfortunately, in my experience, when cash bail is used, it rarely is used for the right reason and it rarely results in achieving its goal. Most often, if cash bail is used, it is insignificant to high-income individuals who can essentially buy their way out of jail pretrial, and the amount that is set is of no consequence to that individual. With low-income individuals, however, cash bail results in unnecessary or prolonged pretrial detention simply because they cannot afford to pay the bail amount. The end result is that we have low-income people incarcerated pretrial, despite being presumed innocent, simply because they do not have the financial means to pay bail. Keeping people in jail pretrial simply because they are low-income and before they have been convicted of any crime violates fundamental rights, ignores the presumption of innocence, and further erodes public confidence and trust in our judicial system.

As a criminal defense attorney, we routinely fight the Commonwealth and argue before the Courts to set a nominal bond or to release the individual on their own recognizance because it is rare that the Commonwealth can prove that the individual is a flight risk or that they have a history of failing to appear for court proceedings. The court system can and must do better to only use cash bail in the most extreme cases where high-income individuals have the means and motive to flee the jurisdiction and/or the county to avoid prosecution of their case, or when there is a demonstrated history of failing to appear for future court proceedings. Even in those circumstances, the amount of cash bail used should be commensurate with their ability to pay, and that is often never part of the court's consideration when the court determines that cash bail is appropriate.

20. Are you familiar with Senate Bill ("SB") 752 (Expanding Diversion; Focusing Detention and Out-of-Home Placements; Related Juvenile Justice Reforms)? Please explain whether you support the bill and explain your reasoning.

While I am not intimately familiar with all of the aspects of SB 752, I understand the purposes of it, and I personally support it. Having worked within the juvenile justice system for my entire adult life, I fundamentally understand that the juvenile system (when it operates as it was meant to operate) should minimally impact children and their families' lives, only when necessary and, even then, in the least restrictive way. Unfortunately, like many systems, it does

not always operate the way it was meant to, and so any legislation that is aimed to improve that system is legislation that I would personally support. I have witnessed probation officers, judges, attorneys, and other system professionals make decisions that do not prioritize the core principles of the juvenile justice system and, as a result, I have seen countless youth and their families be harmed and/or negatively impacted.

In my practice, I commonly encounter those problems, and I routinely advocate zealously on behalf of children and their families to achieve the true purpose of the juvenile justice system. When I was appointed as a member of the Pennsylvania Commission on Crime and Delinquency - Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention Committee, I regularly worked with statewide leaders to make system improvements and advancements to better serve the children and families within the juvenile justice system. It is something that I am extremely passionate about. I feel like I could talk endlessly about this issue, and I am happy to expand upon my experience if that would be helpful.

21. Is a hot dog a sandwich? Please explain your reasoning.

This is an interesting question for a variety of reasons. First, I love hot dogs, and while I wouldn't initially say that I consider a hot dog a sandwich, I think the fundamental issue is whether someone considers a bun one piece of bread or two. Personally, I think a bun is one piece of bread because the two sides of a bun are attached. If that logic is correct, then I don't consider a hot dog a sandwich because I think the common definition of a sandwich is two pieces of bread with something in between those two pieces of bread. I can see, though, how some people might consider a bun two pieces of bread and, thus, if so, then a hot dog is considered a sandwich by those people. Because I consider a bun one piece of bread, and I accept the common definition of what constitutes a sandwich, I do not consider a hot dog a sandwich.

Democratic Values

22. Why are you a Democrat? What makes you a Democrat?

I was raised in a home that valued hard work while also recognizing that everyone deserves to be treated with dignity and respect. I was taught to interact with the garbage man in the same way that I would interact with a CEO. My parents fought tirelessly to provide for us and to give us opportunities that never existed for them, but they always reminded us to appreciate where we came from. My parents did not force or indoctrinate me into either party. Instead, they taught me morals and values that, when I went to undergraduate school, I felt identified more with the democratic party. Despite attending a small Catholic private college, the professors (some of whom were Sisters of Charity) and administrators all instilled in us the same foundational principals that I learned during my childhood at home. As a result, I have always been a registered Democrat even though there have been times when I haven't agreed with an issue or topic on the national party's platform. I believe that being a Democrat in this country is more about always prioritizing the needs of those less fortunate than you and always being willing to fight for those who do not have a champion in their corner.

23. If you do not receive the Democratic Party Endorsement for this position, will you run against the endorsed candidates?

Yes.

24. Have you ever run for political office where you ran against an endorsed Democratic candidate? If so, why?

N/A.

25. Have you ever changed your party affiliation or voted in a primary other than the Democratic Primary? If so, when and why?

No.

26. Have you ever volunteered for a Democratic campaign? If yes, what candidate and what year?

Yes. During my senior year in undergraduate school, I volunteered for U.S. Senator Bob Casey's first U.S. Senate Campaign. In 2021, I volunteered for the Honorable Judge Bruce Beemer's Allegheny County Court of Common Pleas Judicial Campaign. In 2022, I volunteered for PA Representative Mandy Steele's District 33 campaign. In 2024, I volunteered for PA State Representative Mandy Steele's re-election campaign, PA State Senator-elect Nick Pisciotto's District 45 Campaign, PA Representative Anita Astorino Kulik's District 45 re-election campaign, and Angela Girol's PA Representative District 39 campaign.

27. What personal experiences have you had that you believe will shape your judicial temperament?

The personal experiences that I detail in Question 4, above, detail why I believe that I have the necessary temperament to be a judge. Overcoming adversity while maintaining my moral compass and ethical responsibilities to the people I interact with most plainly indicates what type of temperament I possess. I understand that a judge is meant to serve others instead of themselves or some agenda, and I will maintain that core principle if I am fortunate enough to be elected to serve Allegheny County in that role.

28. What does it mean to have a commitment to diversity and inclusion? In your personal, professional, or civic life have you demonstrated that commitment? If so, how?

As a member of the LGBTQIA+ community who has personally experienced discrimination, I focus a portion of my efforts on supporting other members within the community who are either members of the Pennsylvania Bar or who are considering becoming members of the Pennsylvania Bar. At my law firm, we prioritize hiring members of the LGBTQIA+ and other marginalized communities. Our law firm has five employees; three attorneys and two paralegals. Both of our paralegals, who plan to attend law school in the near future, are within a marginalized community: One of whom is in the LGBTQIA+ community, and one of whom is a black woman. I also often informally consult with other individuals in the legal profession who

are within a marginalized group on matters or issues that they are confronting as they navigate their legal careers.

In my professional life outside of the practice of law, I have helped to organize and operate the 2021 Pittsburgh Women's March, I helped to organize the 2024 Rally for our Rights event with Progress PA and Shaler Democratic Committee, and I marched with other local leaders during the 2024 Pittsburgh Pride Parade.

29. Have you previously represented any clients where you had to take a position adverse to any Democratic values or core constituencies (ex. representing an employer during a union busting campaign, representing a white supremacist)? If so, please explain.

No.

30. Have you ever taken a public stance for or against the following? If so, please detail your position at the time of the public statement and where the statement can be found (if published or recorded):

a. Women's Reproductive Rights

Yes. I am a board member of Planned Parenthood of Western PA, so my position on a women's fundamental right to make health care choices about her body has always been clear. I also helped to organize the 2021 Women's March in Pittsburgh and the 2024 Rally for Our Rights event with Progress PA and the Shaler Democratic Committee. My personal Facebook account, which is public, can be accessed to view my numerous posts for each issue.

b. LGBTQ Rights

Yes. I have been a vocal and out member of the LGBTQIA+ community since undergraduate school when I came out. I left Westmoreland County because two judges would not marry my ex-wife and I, and I have marched in the Pittsburgh Pride Parade along with attending many LGBTQIA+ events as a sponsor or volunteer. My personal Facebook accounts document my efforts and advocacy.

c. Marriage Equality

Yes. As indicated above, my personal life was impacted both prior to and after we were given the fundamental right to marry. My Facebook account documents my advocacy.

d. Right to Work Legislation

I have not taken a public stance for or against this issue; however, three of my brothers are union members who would be significantly impacted by this legislation.

e. Collective Bargaining

I have not taken a public stance for or against this issue; however, I was a union member when I was an Assistant District Attorney and as a Juvenile Probation Officer. My Facebook also contains posts supporting Collective Bargaining and Unions.

f. Second Amendment

I have not taken a public stance for or against this issue.

g. Vaccinations or other public health measures

Other than some posts on Facebook that I made during the COVID-19 Pandemic, I have not taken a public stance for or against this issue.

h. The validity of any election or election process

I do not believe that I have taken a public stance for or against this issue.

31. If you believe that gender, racial, ethnic, class or other forms of bias can infect the justice system, how will you work to keep your courtroom as bias-free as possible?

I have observed gender, racial, ethnic, class, and/or other forms of bias impact the justice system and those who find themselves involved within it. The first step toward addressing a problem or issue is to recognize that it exists. Unfortunately, not every system-involved professional believes that the aforementioned issues exist. If I am fortunate enough to be elected as an Allegheny County Court of Common Pleas Judge, I will work tirelessly to make sure each person who enters my courtroom is treated with dignity and respect, regardless of their gender, gender identity, sexual orientation, race, ethnicity, class, et cetera. I will guarantee that my staff will be aware of and practice the same standard(s) of how each person will be treated in our courtroom, and I will promise to continue to educate myself and grow so that I can be as informed as possible to meet the needs of the individuals who appear before me. I will make sure the attorneys that I court-appoint for the people who appear before me are also cognizant of and sensitive to the issues of bias and system-induced trauma, and I will work with other courtrooms and judges to make improvements to the court system to better serve Allegheny County.