

Melanie L. Turnbull, Office of the Governor, Office of Legal Counsel

Question #13-- What in your opinion qualifies you to serve the People of the Virgin Islands in the position which the Governor has nominated you?

In my role as a public defender for the past 10 years, I have represented individuals across a wide spectrum of the criminal justice system, including those facing misdemeanor domestic violence assaults, children entangled in the juvenile justice system, and individuals accused of committing major felonies. That work serves as constant reminder that the law is not abstract, it affects real people in real time. A result of sitting with clients in their most vulnerable moments, has equipped me with the ability to listen with patience, how to explain challenging legal concepts with clarity, and the ability to advocate with both skill and compassion. These lessons have shaped my understanding of what justice should look like in Family Court: fair, accessible, and humane.

Earlier in my career, I had the privilege of clerking for the Virgin Islands Supreme Court, under the tutelage of the ever-meticulous Honorable Associate Justice Ive A. Swan. That experience sharpened my legal reasoning and gave me a deep appreciation for the appellate process, where every word of an opinion matters because it guides not just one case, but the future application of the law for the territory. There I gained skills that required focusing on attention to detail, impartiality, and having the ability to see multiple sides of an issue, all of which remained central to how I practice law today.

Beyond the legal experience required, if confirmed for a judgeship, I believe that qualifications should also extend beyond the courtroom. As such, a love for one's community is necessary. I have served on boards that support our community, coached moot court to help develop the next generation of advocates, and worked to improve our schools as a member of school boards. The willingness to serve my people - our people is central to any role in the public sector. I have a deep, abiding love for people in every facet in which they are found. I naturally lead with compassion, empathy, and understanding in my interactions with the community, whether I'm in the courtroom or the public at large.

The matters that come before the Family Court are often the most sensitive and emotional cases in our justice system. They involve children's futures, the safety of families, and the most personal aspects of people's lives. If confirmed, I bring with me a sense of humility, respect, and consideration for the people that will appear before me. Having practiced for over a decade, I understand all too well how overwhelming a courtroom may feel to the average person. My goal is not only to apply the law with consistency and fairness, but also to ensure that every individual who enters the courtroom feels heard and treated with dignity.

I believe the Family Court has the power to do more than resolve disputes, it can be a place of accountability, stability, redemption, and hope. With my experience as a public defender, my grounding in appellate law, and my lifelong commitment to community service, I am prepared to bring both legal expertise and a deep sense of humanity to this role.

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Question #27-- Please explain your understanding of "Conflict of Interest" as it applies to the position to which you have been nominated to serve the People of the Virgin Islands.

A conflict of interest is when a person in a position of trust and/or authority has competing personal, financial, or professional interests that could improperly influence or give the appearance of influencing the impartial exercise of their duties. In the judicial context, it is critical to avoid conflicts because the integrity of the court depends on public confidence in the fairness of decisions, I would be called on to make. In a small community like ours, it's vital that judges do not erode trust in the judicial process. As a safeguard measure against conflicts, if confirmed as a judge, I would disclose any and all potential issues that may arise and recuse myself to ensure that proceedings remain fair and impartial. I am aware that this practice currently exists at the Superior Court in which the Family Court Judges exchange conflict cases across districts.

Avoiding conflicts of interest is not simply about compliance with rules, but about protecting the credibility of the judiciary and upholding the public's confidence in our courts. If confirmed, I would exercise great care to identify, disclose, and avoid any situation that could compromise, or appear to compromise, my impartiality.

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Question #30-- In no more than 150 words, please outline in priority order your four (4) specific short-term and four (4) specific long-term goals and objectives you would employ to achieve the entity's purpose and improve its service delivery system if your nomination is confirmed for this position.

In an effort to streamline my short and long-term goals, I've submitted them in bullet form for the committee.

Short-Term Goals

1. **Improve case efficiency and reduce any potential backlog:** Prioritize timely resolution of family law and juvenile cases to minimize the emotional and financial toll on children and families.
2. **Expand Access to Justice:** Review and update plain-language resources, forms, and guides to help individuals better understand Family Court processes and their rights.
3. **Implement Trauma-Informed Practices:** Partner with local psychological practitioners to train court staff on recognizing trauma and ensuring proceedings are conducted in a manner that minimized harm to children and families.
4. **Strengthen Community Coordination:** Strengthen relationships with schools, social services, and nonprofits for holistic family support beyond the courtroom.

Long-Term Goals

1. **Develop and Launch a Restorative Justice Program:** Create alternatives to juvenile court system that emphasizes accountability that focuses on repairing harm.
2. **Establish Legal Education Initiatives:** Develop ongoing training by co-opting "brown bag lunches" – a District Court practice allowing for informal interactions between the bench and family law practitioners.
3. **Collaborate with Education Partners:** Work with the Department of Education to enhance support and outcomes for youth in residential care.
4. **Foster Positive and Collaborate Working Environment:** Host Family Division staff meetings and appreciation days.

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Question #31 Is there any additional information that you believe would assist the Committee on Rules and the Judiciary in processing your nomination expeditiously?

I would like to sincerely thank the Committee on Rules and the Judiciary for the opportunity to come before it as a nominee for the role as Family Court Judge. I believe the Committee has before it a full picture of my professional experience, community service, and commitment to the people of the Virgin Islands.

What I would emphasize, however, is my deep respect and understanding for the responsibility this position carries. I am committed to approaching every case with fairness, diligence, and impartiality, and to upholding the highest standards of judicial conduct. I also wish to reaffirm my willingness to provide any additional documentation or clarification the Committee may require to assist in the confirmation process. It is my hope that my record of public service—as a Public Defender, law clerk, board member, and active participant in our community—demonstrates both my qualifications and my commitment to justice.

Ultimately, I view this nomination as an opportunity to contribute meaningfully to the stability and well-being of families across our Territory. I stand ready to serve, and I thank the Committee for its careful and thoughtful consideration.