

Judge Kathleen M. O'Connor, retired
6219 West Shawnee Avenue
Spokane, WA 99208

December 2, 2022

Chair Dick Durbin
Committee on the Judiciary
Hart Senate Office Building, SH-711
Washington, D.C. 20510

Ranking Member Chuck Grassley
Committee on the Judiciary
Hart Senate Office Building, SH-135
Washington, D.C. 20510

Re: Support for the appointment of Superior Court Judge Charnelle Bjelkengren to the Eastern District
Of Washington Bench

Dear Chair Durbin and Ranking Member Grassley,

I write to support the appointment of Superior Court Judge Charnelle Bjelkengren to the position of United States District Court Judge for the Eastern District of Washington. I know you have received many letters attesting to Judge Bjelkengren's success in her previous employment as an Assistant Attorney General and Administrative Law Judge; her competence and ability to be a fair and impartial judge; and her work ethic as a Superior Court Judge on a very busy bench. I support those characterizations as well. However, as a retired trial court judge, I will focus on some other attributes of Judge Bjelkengren that I observed when she appeared in my courtroom.

A Federal District Court judge, like a Washington State Superior Court judge, is a trial court judge. These judges see a wide range of civil and criminal cases. Plaintiffs and defendants are as varied as you would expect in an area of mixed urban and agricultural and include several large Indian tribes as well. It is not uncommon for defendants to represent themselves (pro se) and Judge Bjelkengren had her share of these cases before me. She treated the defendants with respect and was not only civil to them, she did not "talk down" to them or emphasize her superior knowledge of the law. She was patient and did not object to a reasonable request a pro se defendant made while still representing her client to the best of her ability. Of course she ultimately prevailed in most of the cases but not by demeaning the defendant.

Judge Bjelkengren also brings diversity to the bench. I know how important it is for litigants to see a person on the bench who looks like them. When I was elected Superior Court judge in 1988 I was the first woman judge. Judge Bjelkengren was the first African-American judge appointed to the Spokane County Superior Court bench. Over time the Spokane County Superior Court bench changed for the better with more women and minorities bringing their views to judges meetings and working to implement new policies to improve court services in the community.

Judge Charnelle Bjelkengren is a part of that process. Please consent to her appointment, I am confident she has the qualifications and the qualities to make a difference as a Federal District Court judge.

Yours truly,

Superior Court Judge Kathleen M. O'Connor, retired

