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The Honorable Dick Durbin
Chair, Committee on the Judiciary
United States Senate
711 Hart Senate Office Building
Washington, DC 20510

**Re: In Support of the Confirmation of Hon. Gina R. Méndez-Miró
as United States District Court Judge for the District of Puerto Rico**

Dear Chairman Durbin and Ranking Member Grassley:

As a former Court Administrator for the Puerto Rico Judicial Branch, Appellate Judge for the Puerto Rico Court of Appeals, Regional Court Administrator, trial court judge and as a law professor, I wholeheartedly recommend State Court Judge Gina R. Méndez-Miró to serve as U.S. District Judge on the United States Court for the District of Puerto Rico.

I have had the privilege of knowing Judge Méndez-Miró for over fourteen years, both as a lawyer and as a judge. We first met when I interviewed her for the position of Director of Judicial Programs, a key Directorate in our Judicial Branch in charge of developing and implementing policies, projects and programs that strengthen the judicial function and provide for greater access to justice for the entire community. I was impressed, at once, by her assertiveness, eloquence, and her commitment to access to justice. While she had served as a labor and employment attorney at both the law firm O'Neill & Borges and at the Department of Justice, I knew she could be great with the Judicial Programs, and I was right.

Having been an Administrative Director of the Puerto Rico Court System for a decade, I can attest to the importance of her role at Judicial Programs. For almost two years, practically on a day-to-day basis, Gina interacted with judges and court administrators from all 13 judicial regions on the island learning from them and understanding the intricacies and complexities of the court system. She showed to be well versed in handling the substantive legal topics relating to the different programs from self-represented litigants, drug courts to

specialized domestic violence courts, and many more. Gina was fundamental in producing our first Court Manual for Protective Orders in Domestic Violence Situations and a protocol to address and aid homeless individuals that appeared before the trial courts, documents that are still in use in our courts. Furthermore, then Chief Justice Federico Hernández Denton and I always made it a point to include her in our interactions with the Conference of Chief Justices and the Conference of State Court Administrators. Gina represented us flawlessly. She could speak with constitutional professors about a most recent Supreme Court decision, staffers from the National Center for State Courts or directly to Chief Justices from 50 states with whom she served as a most valued liaison. Her work at Judicial Programs was remarkable. I recall her teamwork with Department of Justice prosecutors on establishing Drug Court Guidelines, or with Executive Branch representatives on how to better serve domestic violence victims. I further recall her presentations before mayors to persuade them on the importance of treating substance abuse a terrible disease that has taken ownership of significant sectors in society. But more so, I am reminded of a Gina who cherished running 5K's with drug court participants, attended their family events and their graduation from the court program, without exception. None of this was expected or required, but that is Gina. She lives her work experiences with a sense of duty that goes above and beyond, and I am proud to have been part of her initiation into topics relating to equal justice who reflect the judge she has become.

At the end of the day, however, Gina was an attorney of attorneys. Chief Justice Hernández Denton and I shared the view that she would be a great asset as General Counsel for the Judicial Branch. We were right. As Director of the Office of Legal Affairs she provided counsel in numerous legal matters. Gina was in charge of all Judicial Branch's significant legal claims and disputes brought before both federal and state forums. She took her role very seriously, sometimes assuming legal representation, litigating and investigating high profile cases. Gina also put in a lot of time and effort in reforming the legal office to operate to the standards of productivity and quality of a private law firm. Though we did not always agree on every issue or legal strategy, I recognize her undeniable professionalism, intellectual capacity, and leadership skills.

When she decided to serve as Chief of Staff at the Senate, I was saddened to see her go. However, from my previous experience with her as Director of Judicial Programs, I understood her calling. Gina had always displayed a passion for public policy issues relating to education and the criminal justice system, and at the Legislative Branch she would have the opportunity to lead important reforms. As she has done throughout her career, she continued to challenge

herself and those around her. I later watched with pride Gina's performance in her new role at the highest level of policy making, and how she was able to become an even better mediator and negotiator at the Senate. I was equally impressed but never surprised by how she gained the respect of legislators from all sides of the aisle, academics, and other fundamental stakeholders in the legislative process.

Accordingly, her judicial appointment to the Puerto Rico Court of Appeals and unanimous confirmation by the Senate was a natural step to an already distinguished legal career in the private and public service. By then, Gina had served with distinction at a prestigious law firm and in all three constitutional branches of government with praise. Notably, important academic and political circles—as well as local media—considered her a serious contender for the seat left by Chief Justice Hernández Denton upon his mandatory retirement. While life had other plans, Gina's candor, and straightforwardness—qualities often atypical in political settings, but that are second nature to her—gained the respect of her peers. Coupled with her warm-heartedness and consistent collegial manner I see how, when it came down for each senator to cast their vote and honor their constitutional duty to consent to the Governor's appointment, were decisively in favor of Judge Méndez-Miró's nomination. I imagine achieving unanimity is challenging in any jurisdiction, but I assure the Committee, doing it in Puerto Rico is not an easy feat.

As a Court Administrator responsible for the oversight a Judicial Court System comprised of 386 judges and a workforce of over 5,000 employees and as a former judge who served for more of two decades—both at the trial court and on the Appellate Court—I know a good judge when I see one. Her judicial work on complex civil and criminal legal topics many of which are also examined at the federal level, impressed me. Gina surpassed my expectations which, candidly speaking, were already quite high. As an Appellate Judge, Gina is the embodiment of an independent and fair judge. Upon review of her decisions, one easily identifies Judge Méndez-Miró's intellectual skills but further sees that her judgments showcase a judge who is pragmatic and one who, while never sacrificing a meticulous legal analysis, will reject any mechanical dismissal without providing a well-reasoned result—on the merits—that is understandable to lawyers and self-represented litigants alike. In addition, you can observe that she reviews each case meticulously, guided only by the arguments and particular facts as presented in the record and by applicable law. In line with the access to justice principles adopted in the Strategic Plan for the Federal Judiciary, she strives to be a fair and neutral decisionmaker by approaching each case the same way and ensuring that all litigants alike, can present their case no matter their wealth or status. Particularly, when she works

to ensure that indigent defendants have their day in court and that their constitutional and statutory rights can be protected throughout the entire process, I can see the young attorney I interviewed years ago and her core values. I am proud to have identified those Méndez-Miró core values that have been at the service of our beloved Puerto Rico for over a decade.

On a personal note, Gina is an extraordinary human being. I know her family and through the course of endless working hours and meetings abroad she came to know mine. I remember her loving and dedicated relationship with her grandmother as well as her conversations with my now deceased husband, an outstanding environmental law attorney and my children. They instantly became fond of her. Such genuine connection with my family is emblematic of who she is as a person. Also, as mother of beautiful twins, I know she will instill in them the values of honesty, empathy and service that define her.

Therefore, I unswervingly recommend her confirmation as a judge on the U.S. District Court for the District of Puerto Rico.

Sincerely,



Sonia Ivette Vélez Colón