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Coalition releases judicial retention recommendations

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By **BARBARA VITELLO**

Talk about job security. If any public officials have it, Cook County judges do.

Just look at their retention rate. Since 1990, no judge has failed to win his or her bid to remain on the bench, said Malcolm Rich, executive director for the nonpartisan Chicago Appleseed Fund for Justice, a social reform group.

That's a retention rate of 100 percent. By way of comparison, the retention rate for U.S. representatives running for re-election was 88 percent or greater during the same 20-year span, and 79 percent or greater for senators, according to the Center for Responsive Politics, a nonpartisan organization established in 1983 that tracks money's impact on politics.

Sitting judges do not run against opponents. They must receive a 60 percent 'yes' vote to remain in their positions.

"Most of the judges are retained whether they've been recommended or not. That tends to be a bit frustrating, said Martin Glink, president of the Suburban Bar Coalition, comprised of the Northwest Suburban Bar Association, North Suburban Bar Association, West Suburban Bar Association, Southwest Bar Association and the South Suburban Bar Association.

The group is one of many organizations to rate judges running for retention.

Bar association members spend hundreds of hours investigating and interviewing candidates who are evaluated on legal ability, fairness, diligence, integrity, temperament and courtroom management, Glink said. They then compile their findings for voters. In screening results released Tuesday, the Suburban Bar Coalition found 62 candidates qualified for retention.

It found Susan J. McDunn unqualified and recommended against retention for Donald J. O'Brien, Jr., David Delgado, Dorothy Jones, William D. O'Neal and Lawrence J. Dunford, none of whom participated in the screening process.

The Chicago Bar Association recommended retaining all candidates except McDunn, Jones, O'Neal and Jim Ryan. The Illinois State Bar Association, whose 35,000 members make it the largest in the state, found McDunn, Jones, O'Neal, Ryan, Jeffrey Lawrence and Patrick T. Murphy unqualified, but recommended retention for all other candidates.

Bar association recommendations are available in print and online from the Daily Herald, at the bar association websites and at voteforjudges.org, a nonpartisan voter education organization managed by Chicago Appleseed.

VoteForJudges.org lists recommendations from the Alliance of Bar Associations, comprised of smaller groups including the Asian-American Bar Association, Chicago Council of Lawyers, Lesbian and Gay Bar Association and the Women's Bar Association of Illinois, among others. Voters may take recommendations into the voting booth.

"A vast majority of retention judges are found qualified, said Jeannine Cordero, who chairs the Chicago Bar Association's Judicial Evaluation Committee. "That speaks well to the screening process, in that once these individuals are on the bench either through appointment or election they do rise to the responsibilities of being a judge.

That said, bar groups have been largely unsuccessful in removing unrecommended judges from the bench, in part because voters don't access the information the way the associations wish they would, Cordero said.

That prompted Chicago Appleseed to establish the nonpartisan Judicial Performance Commission of Cook County, a pilot program bringing together lawyers and non-lawyers to evaluate judges.

The commission reviewed more than 2,600 surveys and interviews with attorneys detailing their experience practicing before retention candidates. Accompanying the rating is a statement detailing areas in which even recommended judges can improve, Rich said.

"These kinds of rehabilitation efforts need to be employed, he said. "Even one judge who's not up to snuff hurts thousands of people.

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