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## Here are tips for choosing judges on ballot

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BIRMINGHAM — How often do you stare at a ballot, eyes blurring at the section about judges?

Most people do, since candidates for judge often are not as well-known as gubernatorial or congressional candidates – perhaps even lesser known than local mayoral candidates. This November, arm yourself with knowledge before choosing a candidate for a court seat, advises Alisa Peskin-Shepherd, a family law attorney and Collaborative Divorce expert.

“Most lawyers and people in the legal profession feel that judges should not be elected; they should be appointed. Because beyond a name, studies show that most people don’t do any research about judges,” Peskin-Shepherd notes. “It’s like picking a name out of a hat – but

judges wield a huge amount of power over our lives. We don't want judges making decisions that impact families forever without being steeped in knowledge on family law."

Most people use name recognition when voting for judges. Peskin-Shepherd encourages voters to learn about candidates before voting.

"If you have friends who are attorneys, talk to them. Ask their opinions. Talk to people who work in the courts, too," she advises. "Judges are supposed to be unbiased. Search for them online and see what biases are known."

Anyone can attend events for judge candidates and meet-and-greets, she notes. Go if your schedule allows. "You never know when it's going to be your turn in front of a judge," she says. "These decisions potentially affect us all."

Peskin-Shepherd offers these tips for getting to know candidates during this election season:

-- Think about the qualities you want in a good family court judge. Compassionate? Fair? Doesn't prefer one parent over another? Experienced in family law?

-- Understand each candidate's experience. How many years did they practice? What sort of cases did they take on? Do they have a stated bias? Are they known for being ruthless or collaborative?

-- Has the candidate been in private practice or just worked for a court? What will this mean when deciding cases? Can he or she see both sides?

-- What is the candidate's demeanor? You can glean this from interviews, editorials, and blogs so do a bit of research. Is this person a good listener? Quick to make a judgment?

-- Judgeships are non-partisan candidates so try to remain unbiased toward their political stance. In fact, the best candidates may appear neutral in published materials when it comes to political party. Be concerned if they show a political preference as it's not appropriate in this context.

-- Is this candidate well-connected to prominent people? If so, will that unduly influence them?

-- That said, pay attention to the people they surround themselves with. A judge should have honest, fair character. If they are seen with crooked folks, be careful.

-- Do they treat all people fairly and with compassion? Those are good skills for a judge.

About Alisa Peskin-Shepherd & Transitions Legal

With more than 25 years of experience as a family, divorce and custody attorney, mediator and collaborative divorce practitioner, Alisa Peskin-Shepherd specializes in “mediative” divorce, a term she coined to refer to a constructive approach to divorce, rather than letting anger and emotions lead the way.

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