

Lawyers Launch Public Campaign For More Diversity In Federal Appointments



A Black Lives Matter rally in January traveled across Downtown Cleveland to the federal courthouse to call for a nomination for a U.S. attorney in the Northern District of Ohio with a background other than as a career prosecutor or corporate lawyer. [Matthew Richmond / ideastream]

AUTHOR

Matthew Richmond

PUBLISHED March 4, 2021

The first sign in Cleveland that the nomination of a new U.S. attorney by the Biden Administration would be the target of campaigning was at the end of a January protest about the killing of Tamir Rice.

It was held shortly after the U.S. Department of Justice announced it would close the investigation into the police officers who killed Rice, and the organizers' focus that day was one of the offices inside the Carl B. Stokes Federal Courthouse: the

U.S. attorney for the Northern District of Ohio.

Speakers said getting different results on cases like Rice's starts with getting a different kind of U.S. attorney into that office.

"And what I mean by that is this: All of the preceding U.S. attorneys have been former prosecutors and corporate attorneys," said Kareem Henton, co-founder of Black Lives Matter Cleveland.

The Biden administration will nominate three new judges to the federal bench in Cleveland, along with a new U.S. attorney and U.S. marshal. Those nominations will rely on recommendations from Ohio Democratic Sen. Sherrod Brown.

In 2009, Brown recommended Steve Dettelbach to be the U.S. attorney for Ohio's Northern District and Dettelbach served from 2009 to 2016. His background was as a prosecutor and corporate lawyer.

After the election of Joe Biden, Brown spoke with Dettelbach about the job again. The decision to put his name forward, which Brown did not end up going through with, received some backlash.

"We are saying that it's unfair for Sen. Brown to simply have a closed off process where he does not consider anyone else, especially African Americans," said Ciera Colon, president of the Norman S. Minor Bar Association, the bar association for Black attorneys in Northeast Ohio.

The association wrote an open letter calling for a focus on diversity in the nomination process, after research found only two African Americans among the 93 U.S. attorneys nationwide, no Black U.S. marshals and that fewer than 10 percent of sitting federal judges are Black.

According to Colon, their objection was not about Dettelbach's fitness for the job, just about how his nomination was almost made.

According to Brown's office, the plan is to move ahead with the process used in the past – a selection committee reviews applications and conducts interviews, and where members from Southern Ohio make recommendations to the senator for openings in the north and vice versa.

Brown's office did not provide a list committee members.

“It's not very helpful to not know who's on the committee, what the demographics of the committee are, whether the committee is political per se or just qualifications based. What are those qualifications?” Colon said.

The Cleveland Metropolitan and Asian American bar associations also published open letters calling for an application process focused on diversity.

CMBA president Joe Gross said its letter was focused solely on federal judge positions. People want these jobs, he said, and just need to be encouraged to apply, whether it's for federal judge or U.S. attorney.

“If the U.S. attorney has always been some big firm sort of person, you might look at little firms or solo practice people,” Gross said.

Brown's office hasn't approached CMBA for a list of potential candidates, as they have with Colon's.

Lawyers in private practice sometimes make far more money than a U.S. attorney, said Margaret Wong, who helped found the Asian American Bar Association of Ohio and is a past selection committee member.

“It's amazing how a lot of people don't want it, especially like us, children of immigrants, because we came with nothing so we have a lot of debts from college, law school,” Wong said.

The application for U.S. attorney is 10 pages long with more than 50 questions. According to Brown's office, there is not yet a timetable for the selections for federal positions in Northern Ohio. The deadline for applications is March 26.

According to retired law professor Ann Marie Tracey, in addition to more thorough recruitment and diverse selection committee, the application process could help attract more candidates. She sat on a past selection committee for U.S. marshal.

“The process is arduous. And probably at the very initial levels they could make the application information less comprehensive and then expand that as one moves through the process,” Tracey said.

Related Features



NEWS

Justin Herdman Will Step Down As Northern Ohio's U.S...

DEC. 16, 2020



NEWS

Cleveland Officer Who Killed Tamir Rice Will Not Face...

DEC. 29, 2020

News

TOPICS Community Issues

IDEASTREAM E-NEWS Sign up today!

wviz ideastream®

We're here for you, and because of you...

SUPPORT YOUR PUBLIC MEDIA. BECOME A MEMBER TODAY!

The banner features the WVIZ logo, the text 'ideastream', and a tagline. It also includes three circular images: a smiling woman, a person working in a field, and a building.

© 2021 IDEASTREAM.

TERMS OF USE | PRIVACY POLICY | CONTACT US | COPYRIGHT POLICY | TRUSTEES | PUBLIC FILES | SWEEPSTAKES RULES