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# Judicial Evaluations and the Spirit of Volunteerism

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In the months before I assumed the presidency of your Illinois State Bar Association, one of the thorniest issues confronting the Board of Governors related to the subject of judicial evaluations in Cook County and our relationship with the Alliance of Bar Associations. As many of you will recall, at our April 2003 meeting the ISBA Board unanimously voted to place conditions on our continued participation in the Alliance.

A little background may be useful here. In 1995, the Board voted to begin evaluation of judges in Cook County for all races, including retention races. This was a marked departure for our Association and required a commitment of personnel and money to accomplish our desired goal. Over the years, the budget for this item grew until it became one of our largest expenditures. It is estimated that the current cost of our work in judicial evaluations in Cook County exceeds \$160,000 annually.

During Todd Smith's presidency, he came up with the undeniably noble idea of joining forces with several smaller bar associations to form the Alliance of Bar Associations to devise a screening process that would better represent the various interests and be more convenient for judicial candidates. (It is also worthy of mention that the ISBA has paid every nickel for the operation of the Alliance since its inception.) In the be-

ginning we discussed the idea of a single rating, but it was decided that we would work together to build the type of relationship that would ineluctably result in a single rating in the near future.

At our December 2002 Assembly meeting, I proposed that we get out of the business of judicial evaluations in Cook County for a number of reasons. Principally, I believe that it is irresponsible for us to spend huge sums and dedicate inordinate staff time to this cause when there is precious little evidence that it results in a more informed electorate that votes consistent with our recommendations. For example, since we began screening retention candidates every candidate has won retention, even though approximately five are usually not recommended.

I believe this points to the fecklessness of the effort. And if the effort is ineffective, we have to question our methods and our financial commitment. While questioning our methods, our Board voted unanimously to tie our future participation in the Alliance to its adoption of a modified single rating system. Under our proposal, there would be a single rating (qualified/unqualified) for each judge issued by the combined Alliance, but each individual association would be free to publish its own results. This would allow us to eliminate the utterly confusing "grid" which is the current work product of

the Alliance. This document is virtually worthless as a tool to educate the electorate, and the Chicago newspapers will not print it.

The other Alliance members rejected this proposal. In response, our BOG voted to continue with judicial evaluations in Cook County, but solely under the auspices of our own Judicial Evaluations Committee.

But we can only do an effective job if our membership is committed to the process. We recently asked each section council and committee to pass out applications asking their members to join the JEC. Only one member volunteered! If we want to screen judicial candidates in Cook County, we need dozens of volunteers who are ready to work in this effort. We don't need members who want their names on the committee roster just so they can put it on their resumes. We need workers. It is not enough to spout platitudes about the beneficial effect of judicial evaluations; we need members who will work to back up those words.

I have been consistently impressed by the spirit of volunteerism in the ISBA. This is a huge test for that spirit. If we get a resounding response to this request, we will be a voice in the judicial elections process. If we fail, you may hear my voice again calling for our withdrawal from the process. Here's hoping for a successful call for volunteers. Let us hear from you. ■