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RAKIM BROOKS

CHAIR

PAULETTE MEYER

April 16, 2024

The Honorable Richard Durbin
Chairman
Senate Judiciary Committee

Dear Chairman Durbin:

On behalf of the Alliance for Justice, a national association representing more than 150 diverse organizations united in our commitment to justice, I write to express our support for the confirmation of Rebecca Pennell to the United States District Court for the Eastern District of Washington. With over a decade of public defense experience, Judge Pennell will bring much needed professional diversity to the federal bench.

A graduate of the University of Washington and Stanford Law School, Pennell began her legal career in 2007, clerking for the Honorable Robert H. Whaley of the United States District Court for the Eastern District of Washington, the very court she is being nominated to. Following her clerkship, Ms. Pennell secured a highly esteemed fellowship from the Skadden Foundation, a testament to her exemplary qualifications and dedication to serving others. During her tenure at TeamChild, a prominent legal services organization based in Yakima, Washington, she demonstrated remarkable passion for and skill in advocating for the rights of youth entangled in or at risk of involvement in the juvenile justice system. At TeamChild, Ms. Pennell actively contributed to the organization's mission of safeguarding the rights of vulnerable youth by providing comprehensive support services, including education, healthcare, housing, and other essential needs. Her advocacy work encompassed crucial areas such as special education, guardianship, emancipation, and mental health services, underscoring her deep understanding of the complex challenges faced by at-risk youth and her proactive, comprehensive approach to addressing these issues.

After her fellowship at TeamChild, Rebecca Pennell devoted her legal career from 2000 to 2016 to the Federal Defenders of Eastern Washington and Idaho in Yakima, Washington. Initially, she served as a trial and appellate attorney, handling cases across the federal district court and the United States Court of Appeals for the Ninth Circuit for eight years. Transitioning into a research and writing attorney role from 2008 to 2012, Pennell honed her focus on appellate litigation. As a federal public defender, Ms. Pennell upheld one of the most fundamental principles of our nation and constitution: that every person deserves defense in the criminal legal system. In doing so, she served those most socioeconomically disadvantaged, fighting to ensure equal justice under the law. This experience and commitment to our constitutional principles will serve the Eastern District of Washington with exception and make the court more just.

Rebecca Pennell has been a judge on the Washington State Court of Appeals since January 2016. Appointed by Governor Jay Inslee and subsequently re-elected in 2016 and 2020, Pennell's tenure signifies her strong standing in and respect from the legal community. As a member of the Washington State Court of Appeals, an intermediate appellate court, Judge Pennell handles direct appeals from Washington State Superior Courts, contributing significantly to the fair and effective administration of justice in the state. Pennell's career is a testament to her unwavering dedication to public service, showcasing impactful contributions that go beyond her daily duties. During her time at the Federal Defenders office, she played a vital role in establishing federal re-entry drug court teams, known as STEP teams, in Yakima and Richland, Washington. These teams were an integral part of the Sobriety Treatment and Education Program (STEP), which focuses on individuals under federal supervision grappling with substance addictions. Working closely with a diverse team comprising a federal judge, an assistant U.S. attorney, a probation officer, and a treatment provider, Pennell, in her role as defense attorney, demonstrated innovation and commitment. Despite lacking specific statutory backing or dedicated funding, the STEP teams effectively operated within existing court structures, crafting an evidence-based support system for individuals transitioning out of federal prison with substance abuse disorders.

Pennell's commitment to equitable justice also extends to impactful community service. Serving as a board member of the Yakima YWCA from 2006 to 2012, she significantly enhanced services for domestic violence survivors. Moreover, Pennell organized events elevating the voices of those impacted by crime and violence. In 2019, she facilitated a listening session through the Dispute Resolution Center of Yakima, where a panel shared experiences of crimes on Indian reservations with law enforcement officers, federal prosecutors, and judges. In 2021, she played a pivotal role in organizing the Pro Bono Work to Empower and Represent (POWER) Act session, empowering women navigating challenges in seeking justice for domestic violence offenses in state courts.

Last summer, Pennell orchestrated a series of engaging events for law students interning in Yakima, Washington. The aim was to forge strong connections with the community, encouraging these students to consider returning to eastern Washington after graduation. Furthermore, for the last two summers, she actively participated in the Law School Admission Council's Pre-Law Undergraduate Scholars Program at Heritage University in Toppenish, Washington. This program is dedicated to assisting local residents from historically underrepresented communities in navigating the law school admissions process.

Given her remarkable qualifications, we urge your office to ensure the Senate confirms Rebecca Pennell to the United States District Court for the Eastern District of Washington as soon as possible. Ms. Pennell's professional journey is marked by a profound dedication to public service and a steadfast commitment to upholding justice and fairness.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Rakim H.D. Brooks".

Rakim Brooks
President, Alliance for Justice