

Chicago Daily Law Bulletin®

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December 11, 2019

Letter: More Asian-Pacific American representation needed on the bench

By Gary Zhao

OUR LETTERS POLICY: We consider letters to the editor one important way to fulfill our ongoing mission to enlighten readers, provoke thought and encourage robust debate on the issues of the day. For guidelines on submitting comments, email editor@lawbulletinmedia.com.

Gary Zhao is a partner at SmithAmundsen LLC and president of the Asian American Bar Association of Greater Chicago. He writes on behalf of a group of bar leaders in response to last week's announcement of 15 new Cook County associate judges.

On behalf of the Asian American Bar Association of Greater Chicago, the Chinese American Bar Association of Greater Chicago, the South Asian Bar Association, the Filipino American Lawyers Association of Chicago and the Korean American Bar Association, we congratulate all of the judicial candidates who were appointed associate judges in Cook County last week.

However, as a group, we would like to express our strong disappointment that no APA (Asian-Pacific American) judicial candidates were appointed as associate judges during the most recent judicial appointment process.

This year, multiple qualified or highly qualified APA candidates applied for open associate judge positions. However, only one APA candidate made the short list, and no APA candidate was appointed. This is not acceptable to our community.

According to a Sun-Times article in June, [the Asian population in Cook County reached 408,151 in 2019, an increase of more than 75,000 people since 2010](#). That is the largest percentage growth among minority groups in the county.

The APA community represents roughly 7.9% of the overall population of the county, according to U.S. Census Bureau data.

The Asian-born population in Chicago is up to 29%, up from 23.4% in 2005, according to an [April report in Crain's Chicago Business](#). A 2015 Crain's column noted the Chicago area was on track to become majority-minority by 2020, and specifically noted a surge in the Asian-American population.

The members of our growing community seek justice in our judicial system every day.

Although we recognize that the number of APA judges in both Illinois and Cook County has increased in recent years, it has not yet reached a proportionate reflection of the APA population in Illinois or Cook County.

In fact, of the more than 400 judges in the Circuit Court of Cook County, there are currently only 13 APA judges, representing less than 3.5% of the judiciary.

Undoubtedly, having more diversity in our courts and a judiciary that is representative of the community it serves gives the community more confidence in our judicial system.

With the legal profession struggling with high attrition rates of minorities — especially APA attorneys — before they rise to leadership roles in the legal community, it is more imperative than ever to increase APA representation on the bench.

Judges serve as role models for the legal community, representing the best of the legal profession and the epitome of justice. Members of our own bar associations look to APA judges in our community as role models, but there are too few in these roles compared to the ever-growing class of APA attorneys joining the Illinois bar each year.

Our bar associations will continue to advocate and support those qualified APA judicial candidates in the future appointment process or judicial elections. We will continue to work with Chief Judge Evans and the nominating committee to achieve greater APA representation on the bench.

Zhao's letter to the editor was cosigned by CABA President Jean Y. Liu, an associate at Kaufman Dolowich Voluck LLP; FALA President Gregory Lamorena, an associate at Malman Law; SABA President Chirag H. Patel, senior counsel at Gordon Rees Scully Mansukhani LLP; and KABA President Peter J. Huh, partner at Litchfield Cavo LLP.

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