

King County Democrats 2026 Endorsement Questionnaire

Candidate name
Catherine McDowall
Candidate pronouns
she/her
PDC Filer_name
Friends of Cat McDowall
Campaign phone
206-282-1805
Number we can text or call if we have questions about this form
206-276-8138
Campaign email
judgecatmcdowall@gmail.com
Campaign website
https://judgecatmcdowall.com
Campaign manager name
Erin Schultz
Campaign manager email
erin@nwpcconsulting.com
Campaign manager phone
323-384-8683
Jurisdiction of office sought
Municipal Court
Specific office
Seattle Municipal Court, Judge Pos. 1
Does your campaign have a code of conduct for staff and volunteers?

Yes

Please describe your background (education, employment, community and civic activity, union affiliation and political activity).

J.D., University of Virginia Law School, 1995.

I practiced civil litigation at Sonnenschein (now Dentons) from 1995-1997.

I served King County as a Deputy Prosecuting Attorney from 1997-2009.

Judicial experience:

Pro Tem Judge in Seattle Municipal Court 2013-2020.

Pro Tem Judge King County District Court 2015-2020.

Appointed full time to Seattle Municipal Court in September 2020.

Elected to full term in 2022.

While serving at SMC, I have advanced equity-focused reforms to reduce bias in court processes, helped to modernize court operations and improve access to justice, and worked collaboratively with other judges, staff, and stakeholders to strengthen public trust in the courts. I serve as the co-director of Seattle Youth Traffic Court, a collaboration with Garfield HS and Seattle Univ. Law School.

I have served as a member of the Board of Governors for the District and Municipal Court Judges Association since 2021, and have co-chaired the DMCJA Rules Committee since 2022. I have presented at statewide conferences on a number of issues, and I was co-presenter of the DUI training at the 2026 Judicial College.

Please tell us about your proudest accomplishment either through your civic, public and/or community involvement?

My proudest professional accomplishment has been my work overseeing SMC's Domestic Violence Intervention Project. Our court piloted this program in 2018 and has been studied by external evaluators from the University of Nebraska Omaha and University of Washington. The DVIP program takes an innovative, multi-disciplinary approach to interventions for intimate partner violence. By holistically addressing each participant's unique situation, and by soliciting input from victim advocates and community partners, our multi-disciplinary team develops individualized programs that may include substance use, mental health, or parenting classes in addition to traditional domestic violence treatment. We recently received preliminary feedback from this program that demonstrates that our approach is effective in reducing intimate partner violence.

Importantly, DVIP has secured funding to assist in providing this intervention at low or no cost to participants. I continue to work with researchers and our community partners to continue this groundbreaking program.

What injustices have you perceived, either within or outside the courtroom, and what was your response to those events?

Bias based on race and ethnicity permeates every aspect of our justice system. Judges must acknowledge these biases and be mindful of how they may affect our decisions. I have worked diligently to explore my own biases through my participation in a study conducted by Harvard University that analyzed and provided feedback on my pretrial release decisions over a two-year period. During the course of the study, I was able to reduce the impact of implicit bias in my release decisions. The tools and skills I learned through this study impact my decision-making every day. After bias, the most significant barrier to access to justice is often poverty. Legal financial obligations often keep defendants connected to the court system for years after jurisdiction for their criminal matters ends. In 2021, I prepared a briefing to my colleagues in an effort to persuade them that under RCW 3.62.010, we have the discretion to waive or suspend even mandatory fees, based on inability to pay. Ultimately, my colleagues agreed to waive LFOs for individuals when appropriate, and on the bench, I often use this discretion to decline to impose LFOs for indigent offenders.

What will you do to restore faith in the integrity of the justice system?

Upholding the rule of law is central to the effective operation of our democracy. Every day, I strive to accurately apply the law to cases before me, with compassion and fairness. In the courtroom, procedural fairness is the primary way that judges can ensure that participants and observers develop faith in our justice system. Every person in the courtroom should have the opportunity to understand the proceedings, to be heard on every issue that pertains to them, and to feel that the decision-maker understood their position. When making rulings in court, I strive to explain the reasons for my rulings so that people understand why I have ruled a certain way. It is also essential to provide language access to non-english speaking participants in court.

Personally, I also believe that judges must act with exceptional integrity and honesty both in and out of the courtroom. We must lead by example, and strive to uphold the highest standards of conduct in our professional and personal lives.

In cases involving “malicious harassment” or hate crimes, what are some of the issues in balancing free speech rights against the need to control offensive activity?

Judges must work diligently to protect the rights of every individual in society, including the rights of individuals to exercise their right to freedom of expression. When that expression crosses the line and becomes more “action” than “speech,” judges must not hesitate to enforce the law around these actions in order to protect crime victims and ensure a safe society. The line between action and speech can be difficult to ascertain. Courts must strive to become aware of historical implications of some speech, and to understand the cultural context with which people interpret certain behaviors and actions.

New technologies like AI and advances in practice are continually changing. How would you approach cases involving novel legal issues or emerging technologies?

Generative AI and other technological advances are quickly changing the legal profession and all of society. Judges and courts must be diligent in learning about new technologies and how these advances are affecting the law, the courtroom, and legal practice in general. To that end, I am preparing a judicial education presentation on generative AI in the courts to the judges at the spring judicial conference. I have learned about, and will teach other judges, about the pitfalls (like hallucinated citations) and positive uses (such generating transcripts of body-worn video or other recordings) of this emerging technology.

When I am faced with a case that involves a new or unfamiliar issue, I begin by asking questions of the lawyers presenting the issue to me questions to develop a working understanding of the issue or technology. I also conduct independent research to makes sure that my understanding is complete and accurate. Before issuing a ruling on a novel issue, I will also take time to reflect back to the lawyers my current understanding of the technology, issue, or novel idea they are presenting me, and give them the opportunity to correct any misunderstandings.

A 2021 Gender Justice Study of Washington Courts found evidence of many gender inequities. How would you support a criminal justice system that rectifies these historical and systemic inequities?

Gender inequities persist in our justice system, especially for Bblack, indigenous and other women of color. As a judicial officer, I have a responsibility to identify these inequities and work to eliminate them. Judges must seek to advocate for higher juror pay and greater access to childcare and language access, in order to increase participation by these historically underrepresented groups. We must also develop flexible court schedules and increase access to online hearings in order to provide greater access to court proceedings.

Recruiting women to the legal profession, and encouraging and mentoring women who wish to enter the judiciary, are important ways to support eliminating inequity. I have worked to support networking events at local law schools and to serve as a mentor to these women as they embark on their legal career. I have also conducted outreach to local high schools through Seattle Youth Traffic Court, and through participation in Law Day events.

Attestation

- The candidate hereby attests that, to the best of their knowledge, the provided information is true and accurate.