

# Chicago Lawyer 2024 Person of the Year:

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UNITED STATES COURTHOUSE



219 SOUTH DEARBORN



**Tammy Duckworth**  
*Illinois Senator*



**Dick Durbin**  
*Illinois Senator and  
Senate Judiciary Chairman*



**Thomas Bruton**  
*Clerk of the Court,  
Northern District of Illinois*



**Virginia Kendall**  
*Chief Judge, Northern  
District of Illinois Court*



# The Northern District of Illinois

## Revamped court aims to be a beacon for jurisprudence

Virginia Kendall has met many new faces at the Dirksen Federal Building over the last half-decade.

"About half our bench has been (confirmed) in the last five years," she said. "(It's) a young, active bench. (It) is exciting. It's also necessary for me to try to remind them of the amazing culture that we have."

Now, five months into her term as chief judge of the Northern District of Illinois court, she's in charge of one of the more

youthful and diverse federal benches in the country. She, in turn, has never been more excited about the work being done and coming down the pipe at 219 S. Dearborn St.

The guy behind Kendall — the one who was behind former chief judges Rebecca Pallmeyer, Ruben Castillo and James Holderman — is Thomas Bruton. He makes the trains run on time within the Northern District. Pallmeyer said to Kendall at her August 2024 investiture Bruton is so integral to the Northern District court that if he was to retire, Kendall should immediately take senior status.

"It's eye-opening. When I've gone to other districts, I see the communication isn't there amongst judges, and the clerk's office and the judges," Bruton said. "(Here) it's not uncommon to see a group of judges all day together, communicating and asking for assistance (by) calling the clerk's office (to) team up and try to help work."

Finally, there's Illinois senator and Senate Judiciary Chairman Dick Durbin and fellow Illinois Sen. Tammy Duckworth, who assisted President Joe Biden in reshaping and completely filling the Northern District of Illinois Article III judge bench over the last four years with youthful and diverse judicial and personal backgrounds.

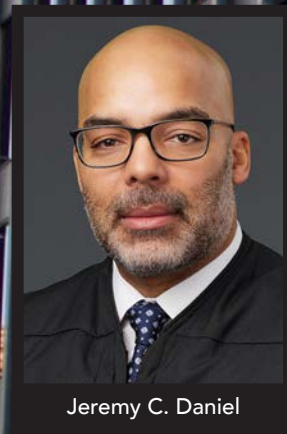




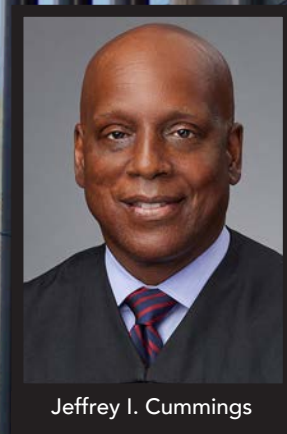
Lindsey C. Jenkins



LaShonda A. Hunt



Jeremy C. Daniel



Jeffrey I. Cummings

“There’s limited diversity on the federal bench nationwide,” Durbin told Chicago Lawyer. “Joe Biden, when he came in as president, wanted to change that. I was happy to work with him. (It resulted) in some historic achievements in the last four years. They are reflected in the Northern District, reflected across our state and our nation.”

Because of this massive undertaking — rethinking and reshaping of a massive institution in the federal judiciary — Chicago Lawyer is breaking away from the tradition of naming one person its Person of the Year. In 2024, we name the transformed Northern District of Illinois and the people behind how it operates in Chicago as its Person of the Year.

### THE MAN IN WASHINGTON

Durbin will officially cede his gavel when the new Congress officially begins Jan. 3. He proudly looks back on the breakneck pace he and his colleague and in concert with Biden worked at. They were able to confirm 235 Article III judges, or more than 25% of the federal bench, in four years. Of the 235 confirmations, according to Durbin’s office, about two-thirds are women, two-thirds are people of color and two-fifths are women of color.

That includes seven judges confirmed to the Northern District of Illinois. Those judges are:

- Lindsey C. Jenkins, confirmed Feb. 14, 2023;
- LaShonda A. Hunt, confirmed May 4, 2023;
- Jeremy C. Daniel, confirmed May 17, 2023;
- Jeffrey I. Cummings, confirmed Sept. 12, 2023;
- Sunil R. Harjani, confirmed March 12, 2024;
- Georgia N. Alexakis, confirmed May 1, 2024; and
- April M. Perry, confirmed Nov. 12, 2024.

Five — Jenkins, Hunt, Daniel, Cummings and Harjani — of the seven judges confirmed to the Northern District are minorities. This was a

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major priority for Biden and his administration. The Northern District confirmations are also part of confirming more diversity throughout the nation, including Ketanji Brown Jackson as associate justice to the U.S. Supreme Court, and Nancy L. Maldonado, John Z. Lee (former Northern District judges), Doris L. Pryor and Candace Jackson-Akiwumi seated on the Chicago-based 7th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals.

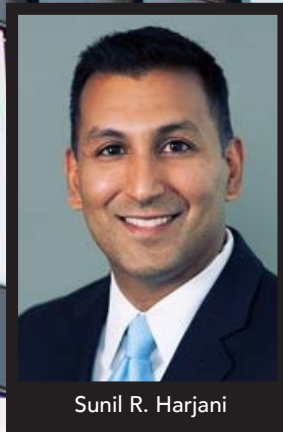
According to David Lat’s Original Jurisdiction newsletter, Biden also nominated the most women, people of color and LGBTQ individuals for seats on the federal bench in presidential history.

“Being a white, male former prosecutor or attorney should never disqualify you from serving on the bench,” Durbin said. “But I think the reality is, most of us who practiced law for a period of time knew there was limited diversity on the federal bench nationwide.”

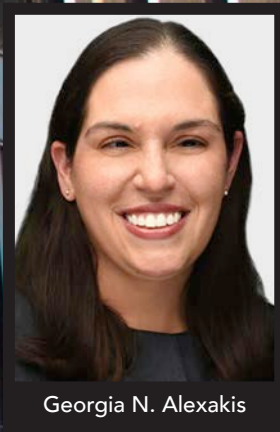
Kendall said she believes in the talent on the Northern District’s full bench — except for two magistrate judge positions that weren’t filled when Chicago Lawyer went to press. Kendall said the court was deep into the interview stage and the roles would be filled soon. When those magistrate judges come aboard, along with newer judges such as Harjani, Alexakis and Perry, Kendall is excited to welcome them to a court that she trusts has been working together for the generation she’s been on it with respect and togetherness.

“They’re going to still be going to have that same camaraderie that I am so blessed to have been a part of for the past 20 years,” she said.





Sunil R. Harjani



Georgia N. Alexakis



April M. Perry

"The younger benches, they really rely on each other to ask questions about their cases. They are eager to call each other up. I have seen a social interaction, which is lovely for this court, because it shows they care about each other.

"Not all venues are like that. You go around the county and it's like ... oh boy. But this venue is really great."

Durbin said he is pleased to hear that Kendall will be leading the charge of developing the bond between the veteran and fresh faces. He highlighted David H. Coar, a former Northern District judge, for understanding the importance of the need for collegiality. Coar is the lead on the panel that vets possible judges to put up for a spot on the Northern District bench.

"I think Judge Coar would, better than almost any other person, be able to understand the group dynamic of the judges serving at one time," Durbin said. "It's a tough job and there are a lot of cases, but if they feel that they're going to work in a positive environment ... that makes a difference."

Also according to Lat, 20% of Biden's first 205 appointees "had experience as a public defender." Bruton noted that the amount of pro se litigants have increased in the Northern District. One of Biden, Durbin and the Judiciary Committee's guiding principles was having a bench that more closely resembled the people in front of it.

"It's a major factor because your life is on the line and your future is on the line. You'd like to look up to the judge and think you have a fighting chance to at least be heard," Durbin said. "I think when you have diversity on the bench, it moves in that direction."

Kendall added: "For any litigant that comes in — pro se or represented — having our bench reflect the Northern District of Illinois is really critical. That is because who it is feels like they have access, that they'll be respected and they will be treated impartially."

After four years with the slimmest of a majority, Durbin is pleased to have injected respected, knowledgeable, hard-working and diverse energy into the Northern District. It wasn't always that way when he joined the Senate in January 1997.

"I'll be frank with you. When I started this process years ago as a new senator, I had a lot of my friends who decided in their 60s that they wanted to make this the (twilight) of their career by serving on the federal bench. I said to them, 'I'm sure you'd make a great judge, but not for long. In a few years you're going to be looking for senior status or retirement.' "

#### THE NUMBERS

Bruton said 2023 was a "record-breaking" year for civil suit filings in the Northern District with 9,265 cases filed. It's the highest total since 2016 and a 29% increase since 2022.

"That doesn't even account for our multi-district litigation (MDL) filings," he stated.

"I have lawyers asking me, 'Why is my case number so high?' "Well, we had some record-breaking MDLs here."

As 2024 came to a close, Bruton said the Northern District was "on pace" for a similar number of case filings, but without as many tag-along cases for the MDL suits.

Bruton said that civil filings are at 14%, personal injury at 7.9%, trademark cases are 7.5%, civil rights are 5.9%, employment cases 4.6% and patent cases are 2.7% of what the Northern District handles. Finally, Bruton notes that 6 of the 11 judges on senior status are still taking on a full caseload.

"That's 1,500 cases right there that would have had to be handled by other judges," he said.

Kendall added: "We have an active senior judge (group) who handle a significant portion of cases and trials. They had harder times, actually, because they didn't have tools that we have now."

#### SAFETY AND SECURITY

Among all the excitement about working together, Kendall does stress — and focus on — security for the judges, clerks, attorneys, clients and Dirksen building employees as threats to judges have risen. Bruton notes that his staff is leveraging available technology to keep judges'



# Person of the Year Honorees

CHICAGO LAWYER®

**1991**  
DONALD P.  
O'CONNELL

**1992**  
DONALD  
HUBERT

**1993**  
CONSTANTINE  
TRELA

**1994**  
CHRISTINA M.  
TCHEN

**1995**  
MARVIN  
ASPEN

**1996**  
KIMBALL R.  
ANDERSON

**1997**  
JUDITH  
COHEN

**1998**  
TODD A.  
SMITH

**1999**  
MICHAEL W.  
COFFIELD

**2000**  
ANN CLAIRE  
WILLIAMS

**2001**  
ANITA M.  
ALVAREZ

**2002**  
TYRONE C.  
FAHNER

**2003**  
MARY ANN G.  
MCMORROW

**2004**  
THOMAS P.  
SULLIVAN

**2005**  
JOEL M.  
FLAUM

**2006**  
CAROL A.  
KELLY

**2007**  
JEROLD S.  
SOLOVY

**2008**  
DAN K.  
WEBB

**2009**  
TONY  
VALUKAS

**2010**  
THOMAS R.  
FITZGERALD

**2011**  
GEORGE N.  
LEIGHTON

**2012**  
ROBERT A.  
CLIFFORD

**2013**  
RITA  
GARMAN

**2014**  
KATHLEEN  
ZELLNER

**2015**  
LLOYD  
KARMEIER

**2016**  
PATRICIA  
BROWN  
HOLMES

**2017**  
TIMOTHY C.  
EVANS

**2018**  
HAROLD  
KRENT

**2019**  
LORI  
LIGHTFOOT

**2020**  
J. TIMOTHY  
EATON

**2021**  
ANTONIO  
ROMANUCCI

**2022**  
LISA HOLDER  
WHITE

**2023**  
PATRICK  
SALVI II

**2024**  
NORTHERN  
DISTRICT OF  
ILLINOIS



“ *For me personally, they’ve removed my information from the internet 618 times. And I’m a (nobody).”* – THOMAS BRUTON

personal information private. When Chicago Lawyer spoke with Kendall and Bruton late on a Friday in mid-December, they each had multiple threats made against them that came in that week. The court’s software runs weekly and scrubs judges’ information from websites and social media wherever it finds it.

“For me personally, they’ve removed my information from the internet 618 times. And I’m a (nobody),” Bruton said with a laugh.

Kendall added: “The threats numbers have increased so significantly. ... That’s a huge advantage to our judges to be able to do that, and I think we were doing that before the (Anderl Act) was in place.”

Bruton also notes that beyond the cases at Dirksen, 38,000 new U.S. citizens were naturalized in 2023. The building is a bustle of energy even in a post-COVID world. Bruton started working on enhancing security measures under Pallmeyer and Kendall took the baton and kept running. The team continues to improve the security with increased daily traffic at Dirksen. The installation of information kiosks in the lobby should be implemented soon. Improving the court’s website, also started under Pallmeyer’s term, was key. The site now features more information to expedite lawsuit filings, how to find an attorney and more other tools.

“We just increased the website’s capacity with examples of filings, guidance on how to file, where to go and who to be with,” she said. “It’s very robust”

Kendall and Bruton say the majority of the new Northern District judges don’t have assistants. The new judges aren’t turning to a secretary for

assistance because they walked in with the technical knowledge.

“Think about it this way ... if they have a (judicial assistant), they’re down one lawyer,” Kendall said. “Because they have three spots in their chambers — all for lawyers. (That means) they’re going to be able to move their cases faster because they have more help.”

She adds that they’re answering all their own communications, they schedule their own meetings — either in person or via Zoom. Kendall continually is impressed with them and hopes to leverage their knowledge within the Northern District as much as possible.

“The younger bench is very well versed with technology, as far as using all of the tools that we have with our computer systems and database systems,” she said. “I think they hit the ground running when it comes to accessing the technology that we’ve implemented.”

In partnership with the trial bar, attorneys agree to work a pro bono case every two years. Northern District judges recruited 203 attorneys to work on pro bono cases in 2023, according to Bruton. It’s a successful program that Kendall said is unique to their court.

“It’s a program that we’ve had for years where if you’re a member of our trial bar, you agree that you will take an assignment every two years, and then judges can tap you for pro bono assignment.”

The entirety of Kendall’s legal career has taken place within Dirksen. She has the utmost respect for the institution and will continue to show the other districts in the country how a diverse bench like the Northern District can be a beacon of progress, stability and, most importantly, jurisprudence.

“It makes me happy to be in this position and to be able to serve those people,” she said. “Because if I can make their jobs a little bit lighter, if I can keep them together socially, if I can give them assistance with their jobs, I feel like I’m making a big impact on the rule of law.”

[jmcnally@lawbulletinmedia.com](mailto:jmcnally@lawbulletinmedia.com)