

SOS! IVP Toolkit for Protecting our Judiciary

Saturday, April 6, 2024
9:00 – 10:30 AM



The purpose of this presentation is to inform attendees of program materials prepared by IVP Committee members over the past several years that are available to use for public education in a variety of ways. These materials, which are available either through the NAWJ website or by direct request, include PowerPoint slide decks, videos in English and Spanish, animated video regarding judicial elections, and one-page single-subject handouts that can be adapted for specific state use and printed.

In an election year like this one, in which many judges are on ballots all over the country, we want our members to be aware of the existing tools they can use to combat misinformation and unfounded attacks on the records and service of judges that undermine judicial independence. We encourage NAWJ members to use these materials for public educational efforts of any kind, so that voters will have accurate and reliable information and criteria for evaluation of judges.

Learning Objectives:

1. Recognize threats to judicial independence.
2. Evaluate factors contributing to decline in public trust and confidence in the judicial branch.
3. Engage in strategies to strengthen judicial independence.
4. Identify resources to educate the public on the judicial branch and the importance of an independent and impartial judiciary.

Speakers:

Hon. Gina Benavides



Justice Gina M. Benavides was first elected to the Thirteenth Court of Appeals in 2006, and most recently elected to her third six-year term in 2018.

The Texas Supreme court Historical Society Awarded Justice Benavides the President's Award at their John Hemphill Dinner in September 2023. And at the State Bar of Texas Annual Meeting in June 2023, the Hispanic Issue Awarded her the Reynaldo Garza Lifetime Achievement Award. The Hidalgo

County Bar Association most recently bestowed on her the Ethics Award at their annual Gala in May of 2023

In the past, as in 2021, Justice Benavides was bestowed with the Judge Merrill Hartman Pro Bono Judge Award in recognition of her exceptional work and dedication to the provision of legal services to the poor. She had previously been named "Latina Judge of the Year" by the National Hispanic Bar Association in 2007.

Most recently Justice Benavides published and presented an article on Gus Garcia on behalf of the Texas Supreme Court Historical Society at their annual symposium in El Paso Texas. In the spring of 2021, Justice Benavides also published two articles in the Supreme Court Historical Society Journal recognizing the Latinx community and specifically profiling Justice Eve Guzman and Judge Elsa Alcala, the first two Latinas on Texas's highest courts.

In October 2022, Justice Benavides was honored with two new positions. She was elected to be the Regional Director 11 of the National Association of Women Judges which covers Texas, Oklahoma, and Arkansas. At the same time, she was welcome to Texas American Board of Trial Attorneys whose mission is the preservation of right of the trial by jury guaranteed by the 7th Amendment to U.S. Constitution; the independence of the judiciary; and civics education. As a matter of fact, on September 16th which is Constitution Day, Justice Benavides spoke to school kids about the 4th Amendment.

In May 2021, Justice Gina Benavides was one of the founding members of the Texas Latinx Judges was created to empower Latinx judges in the State of Texas and promote diversity, inclusion, integrity, and excellence in the judiciary. Justice Benavides is one of the founding members of Texas Latinx Judges.

In 2019, Justice Benavides was elected by her peers to Chair the Judicial Section of the State Bar of Texas. In her capacity as a chair of the Judicial Section, she serves as a liaison to the State Bar of Texas, Texas Bar Foundation, and the Texas Center for the Judiciary.

Justice Benavides is also involved in the Hispanic Issues Section of the State Bar of Texas and was named their "Judge of the Year" in 2014. In 2018, she served as Chair of the Hispanic Issues Section.

In 2018, she co-wrote an article in the St. Mary's Journal on Legal Malpractice & Ethics entitled "The Texas Standards for Appellate Conduct: An Annotated Guide and Commentary" with her former staff attorney, Joshua Caldwell.

In 2010, the Texas Supreme Court appointed Justice Benavides to the Texas Access for Justice Commission. In February 2012, Justice Benavides was appointed to the Solutions 2012 Task Force.

In 2008, Justice Benavides was appointed to serve on the Texas Center for the Judiciary Board of Directors (the "Texas Center") and in 2011, she was elected Chair of the Texas Center by her fellow judges—the first Hispanic female to hold this position. In 2013, Justice Benavides received the Chair's Award of Excellence from the Texas Center.

Justice Benavides currently serves on the Board of the Appellate Section of the State Bar of Texas and chaired the Appellate Diversity Subcommittee. She also serves on the Pattern Jury Charge on the Damages and recently joined the Texas Supreme Court Historical Society and is leading their website committee.

She also continues to ensure that all Texans have access to justice by sitting on the board of the Texas Legal Services Corporation and the legislative committee of the Texas Access for Justice Commission.

Justice Benavides serves an active role in the State Bar of Texas, the National Association of Women Judges, the Hidalgo County Bar Association, and Texas Women Lawyers. She is past President of the Mexican-American Bar Association of Texas, past President of the Cameron County Bar Association, and a former Vice-President of the Texas Association of Defense Counsel.

She frequently serves as a speaker and presenter for Continued Legal Associations for the Judges and Lawyers of the State of Texas.

Justice Benavides is originally from Corpus Christi and graduated with a Bachelor of Business Administration in 1985 from the University of Texas in Austin. She then attended law school at the University of Houston Law Center and was admitted into the State Bar in 1988. Justice Benavides currently resides in Corpus Christi, Texas with her husband Sammy. She is the proud mother of three: Daniella, Ricardo, and Alyssa; and the grandmother of Willow, Trey, Celia Leona and Auggie

Hon. Dori Contreras



Chief Justice Dori Contreras was first elected as a Justice to the 13th Court of Appeals in 2002 and was re-elected in 2008 and 2014. She was elected Chief Justice in 2018 and will serve in this position through 2024. It is her honor to be the first woman Chief Justice of the 13th Court of Appeals and, at the time of her election, only the second Latina Chief Justice to serve statewide.

Chief Justice Contreras was raised as the youngest of four children. Her parents were first generation Mexican American. Both sets of grandparents immigrated from Mexico in the early 1900's. Chief Justice Contreras was often told by her father, a hard-working man who proudly had a 35-year career with the Texas Department of Highways and Public Transportation, that his one regret in life was not obtaining a college education. Taking this to heart, after graduating from high school, Chief Justice Contreras attended the University of Texas at Austin from which she received a Bachelor of Business Administration in Accounting in December of 1980. She was the first in her family to graduate from college. Chief Justice Contreras moved to Houston, Texas and worked as an accountant for several years before applying to law school. In 1987, as a wife and mother of two daughters, she began law school in the night program at the University of Houston Law Center and continued working full-time. After one year and one-half, she transferred to the full-time program. She was admitted to the Bar in December of 1990.