

JUDGE BRENDA HARBIN-FORTE

Superior Court of California, Alameda County
Hayward, California

Judge Harbin-Forte was appointed to the Alameda County (Oakland) Municipal Court in 1992, and became an Alameda County Superior Court judge in 1998. Before her judicial appointment, she was a partner at Thelen, Marrin, Johnson & Bridges in Oakland and San Francisco

Judge Brenda F. Harbin-Forte has been at the forefront of efforts to improve diversity in the judiciary. She has presented seminars on the judicial appointments process with various Governors' Judicial Appointments Secretaries and chairs of the California State Bar's Judicial Nominees Evaluation Commission. She served as the chair of the Courts Working Group of the State Bar's Diversity Pipeline Task Force and led the effort to convene the first statewide judicial diversity summit in 2006. That historic summit, sponsored by the State Bar and the California Judicial Council, brought together key stakeholders from the bench, the governor's office, the bar, the legislature, law firms, law schools and other stakeholders to discuss the status of judicial diversity. With no formal demographic information available, she worked with the African American, Asian/Pacific Islander, and Latino judges' associations to create an informal tally of the ethnic and gender makeup of the bench and presented a sobering report on the lack of diversity in the courts. With the increased awareness of the need for greater judicial diversity, the legislature passed a bill after the summit which, among other things, required annual public reports from the Governor's Office, the Judicial Council, and the State Bar on the gender and race/ethnicity of judicial applicants, appointees, and sitting judges. That legislation has been amended over the years to require annual demographic reports on sexual orientation and other diversity. Following the summit, the State Bar created its Council on Access & Fairness ("COAF") and appointed Judge Harbin-Forte as its founding chair. Under her leadership, the COAF set its vision, mission, strategies and goals to identify and implement initiatives to address diversity challenges along the pipeline to the legal profession. In 2011, again under Judge Harbin-Forte's leadership, the State Bar/COAF and the Judicial Council convened another statewide judicial diversity summit to assess the success of efforts to increase judicial diversity. The next judicial diversity summit is scheduled for 2016.

While serving as the first woman Presiding Judge of the Alameda County Juvenile Court from 2000-2003, she worked with the county's probation department to create innovative programs for delinquent youths, including programs to address mental health needs and truancy issues, and obtained funding for a new juvenile hall. On the dependency side, in an effort to reduce the backlog of dependent children delayed in the court's general adoption system, she established the first annual mass Adoption Day in 2000, and also brought adoptions "in-house" for juvenile court bench officers to finalize on a weekly basis. To address the issue of the sexual exploitation of girls in foster care, she worked with the Alameda County District Attorney, the Oakland Police Department, the Board of Supervisors and other agencies to establish the county's groundbreaking Minors in Prostitution Task Force. As a result, the juvenile court and stakeholder agencies viewed these girls as victims and began to provide specialized services to them. The MIP Task Force evolved into Alameda County's nationally recognized Human Exploitation and Trafficking (HEAT) program. In 2003, her juvenile court peers statewide, through the California Judges Association's Juvenile Court Judges group, named her Juvenile Court Judge of the Year.

Her leadership positions in California's judiciary include appointment to the California Judicial Council, where she served a term as chair of the Council's Rules and Projects ("RUPRO") Committee. She was the first African American woman to serve as Dean of the B.E. Witkin Judicial College (California's mandatory judicial education program), and Chair of the New Judge Education Committee. She currently serves as a consultant on various bench books and benchguides for California's judges, and has planned and taught numerous judicial education courses in California and at the National Judicial College in Reno, Nevada.

Her pre-bench bar association activities included service as the first African American woman President of the Alameda County Bar Association, and President of Black Women Lawyers of Northern California.

Her numerous honors include the American Bar Association's Spirit of Excellence Award, State Bar of California's Diversity Award, Charles Houston Bar Association's Hall of Fame Award, Women Lawyers of Alameda County's Woman Jurist of Distinction Award, Alameda County Bar Association's Distinguished Service Award, California Judges Association's Juvenile Court Judges' Judge of the Year Award, Charles Houston Bar Association's Judicial Excellence Award, California Women Lawyers' Rose Bird Memorial Award, Minority Bar Coalition's Champion of Unity Award, and California Association of Black Lawyers' Bernard S. Jefferson Judge of the Year Award.

She received her Bachelor's degree from U.C. Berkeley in 1976, and her law degree from U.C. Berkeley's Boalt Hall School of Law in 1979. She was admitted to the California Bar in 1979.