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New judges reflect Alberta's diversity

The Alberta government has appointed three new judges to the Provincial Court of Alberta to ensure Albertans have more timely and representative access to justice.

Cheryl Arcand-Kootenay was appointed to St. Paul Provincial Court and Melanie Hayes-Richards was appointed to Provincial Court, Edmonton Criminal. Michelle Christopher was appointed to Medicine Hat Provincial Court – the first woman appointed to that judicial district in the history of Alberta.

“Melanie Hayes-Richards, Michelle Christopher and Cheryl Arcand-Kootenay are accomplished women whose dedication and expertise make them important additions to our Provincial Court. A more representative judiciary means all Albertans benefit from a greater diversity of experience on the bench. Albertans deserve to see themselves reflected in the people who provide justice in their community.”

- Kathleen Ganley, Minister of Justice and Solicitor General

The three appointments will fill vacancies in each court location. In addition to ensuring the judiciary better represents the population they serve, the new judges will hear more cases and increase Albertans' access to justice services.

“Every day, we hear from women in our programs about how difficult their courtroom experiences can be – and their struggle to convey the seriousness of the violence they and their children experience. With the government's new funding for victims of crime, we are improving how vulnerable populations are treated and seen in the courtroom and, with this historic appointment, we are also providing role models that have never existed in our community before.”

- Natasha Carvalho, executive director, Medicine Hat Women's Shelter Society

Unlike Court of Queen's Bench and Court of Appeal justice positions, which the federal government appoints and funds, the province both creates provincial court judge

positions and appoints judges to those positions. Of the 27 provincial court judges the Government of Alberta has appointed since 2015, more than half are women. Cheryl Arcand-Kootenay is the third Indigenous judge appointed in the last three years and Michelle Christopher is the first female judge to serve in the Medicine Hat Provincial Court.

Biographies of Alberta's new Provincial Court judges

Cheryl Arcand-Kootenay received her bachelor of laws degree from the University of Alberta and became a member of the Alberta bar in 1993. Arcand-Kootenay spent much of her legal career in the areas of family and aboriginal law, including as a roster lawyer for the Legal Representation for Children and Youth branch of the Office of the Child and Youth Advocate, and legal counsel for AKO Child and Family Services, a delegated First Nation agency in Maskwacis. A member of the Alexander First Nation, she is a dedicated representative of her community and supporter of First Nations in Alberta, including supporting the Indigenous Law Students Association at the University of Alberta Faculty of Law.

Michelle Christopher, QC, was born in Drumheller. She received her bachelor of laws degree from Dalhousie Law School and her master of laws from Osgoode Hall Law School. Called to the Alberta bar in 1987, Christopher has extensive experience in the areas of family, criminal and civil law, including as a private practitioner in Calgary, as youth criminal defence counsel with Legal Aid Alberta and as a mediator with the Provincial Court of Alberta and the Alberta Court of Queen's Bench. Prior to her appointment, she served as executive director of Student Legal Assistance, faculty liaison for Pro Bono Students Canada and associate professor of law at the University of Calgary. In addition to her legal work, Christopher has served on the boards of numerous initiatives and organizations within the legal community, both locally and nationally.

Melanie Hayes-Richards received her bachelor of laws degree from the University of Alberta and became a member of the Alberta bar in 1999. Prior to being appointed, Hayes-Richards practised mainly in the area of criminal law, including as a Crown prosecutor and as legal counsel for the Alberta Court of Appeal. In addition, she has taught criminal law courses for police, prosecutors, law students and others in the legal community, and has been active in the legal community, including as a faculty member for the Legal Education Society of Alberta.

Background information

The Alberta Judicial Council screens candidates for provincial court appointments. The Provincial Court Nominating Committee (PCNC) then interviews candidates. The committee provides its recommendations to the Minister of Justice and Solicitor General.

The Alberta Judicial Council has representatives from the Alberta Provincial Court, Court of Queen's Bench, Court of Appeal and the Law Society of Alberta. It also includes two individuals appointed by the Minister of Justice and Solicitor General. The PCNC has 11

members representing the Alberta Provincial Court, the Law Society of Alberta, the Canadian Bar Association (Alberta Branch) and representatives of the province's legal community and the public appointed by the Minister of Justice and Solicitor General.

Media inquiries

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