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Detroit Youth Ask the Tough Questions at Candidate Forum for Dems in Area House Races

Detroit, Mich. – There were no softballs among the questions fielded by teens and young adults at the Youth-Led Candidate Forum, sponsored by The Children’s Center and Michigan’s Children in Detroit on July 7, 2016.

Facing Democratic office-seekers in several area House primary races, youths like Marianna Campbell didn’t shy from asking about issues that weighed on her mind, along with those of her friends and others living in the neighborhoods of Michigan’s largest and impoverished urban city.

“What would you do to ensure that the relationships between our young men, especially our young black men, and police officers are kept in a place where both parties are able to succeed as well as our city as a whole?” she asked, as a collective “ooh” arose in agreement from the crowd.

Candidates **Joseph Tate** and **Carla Tinsley-Smith** from the 2nd District, state Rep. **Fred Durhal III** from the 5th District, and **Dennis L. Black**, State Rep. **Stephanie Chang**, and **David Sanchez** from the 6th District participated, taking turns answering questions posed by youths who had experienced their share of challenges, including foster care, poverty and trauma. For nearly two hours, the emerging conversations kept the audience spell-bound and moderator Charlie Langton, the well-known broadcaster for WJBK Fox-2 and WWJ News Radio 950, on his feet.

Candidates agreed open communications is critical for restoring trust between police officers and people of color.

“I advocate for bringing officers and citizens together around a roundtable to discuss issues before they escalate,” said incumbent Durhal, in support of funded programs that do just that.

“Having those set opportunities where the community can get together to be engaged and have a presence there [is important],” Tate agreed. “Always have that in place.”

Tinsley-Smith said community organizations should be enlisted to build familiar relationships between police and community members, and urged police officers to meet and mingle with young people at community centers and other gathering places.

Incumbent Chang said consistent reporting data is needed to identify and quantify police abuse of authority. She’s introduced such a policy requiring reporting from police departments statewide. Putting more police officers on the streets and employing community policing programs will improve relations between them and the public, particularly men of color, she added.

Sanchez said police should patrol neighborhoods more and reach out to “good people who live there” to develop relationships and build insights into neighborhoods’ activities.

Black, a Black Lives Matter co-director for Michigan, said the responsibility for restoring relations should be on police officers’ shoulders. Strategies should include using police labor contracts to improve relations, and using pension funds to pay for lawsuits brought by harmed individuals, he said.

Beyond the policing issue, the young people’s questions covered wide-ranging topics including unemployment, racism and discrimination in schools, smoking and drinking by minors, and improving Detroit Public Schools. They also asked candidates personal ones, wanting to know who inspires them, how they’ve experienced racism, and another asking them to identify a personal characteristic that helps them get things done. At the top of the forum, candidates were asked what makes them worthy of elective office.

Candidates were visibly moved by their conversations with the young people, who ranged in ages from 14 to early ‘20s.

Sanchez called for increasing investments in youth mentorship programs and extra-curricular activities that keep youth learning and away from trouble. “Investing in our youths is the most important investment you can make. And it pays off with dividends none of us can imagine,” he said. “If you don’t do right by our young people you don’t do right by society in general.”

To a question about strategies for dealing with minors who turn to smoking and drinking, Chang said closed recreation centers have a direct link to spikes in summer crime and unproductive behavior by youth. She called for funding recreation centers, and working with youths to head off drinking and drug problems. “The larger issues are how we address keeping families together and programs in place to address depression and stress,” she added. “It’s making sure we have counselors in the schools. It’s not just about drugs and alcohol but overall well-being.”

One teen remarked, “I can tell you how I started smoking. It has everything to do with nothing to do and the people you hang around with.”

Tinsley-Smith said she favored providing cash incentives to encourage youth participation in mentorship and extra-curricular programs that expose one to something new and different. “We need to bring out your talents,” she said. “It’s our job to make sure you don’t fall victim to the system.”

Tate agreed that programs that help youths stay on a healthy path and school counselors are critical, but so is investing in early childhood education and investing in supporting families who don’t have resources at home to help their children, he said.

Durhal said he has mentored youth and said that adults youth can relate to are vital to such programs.

Black empathized with the youth in the audience and said his own father has been imprisoned his entire life. He advocated for addressing the school-to-prison pipeline, and repealing certain laws that make felons out of developing youths. “One thing that ruins a teen’s life worse than anything is a felony record.”

Among youth who participated was Desmond Scruggs, 17, who has been in the foster care system since he was 8 years old. Today he lives independently. It was his first candidate forum. “I give them credit to

come to talk to us knowing some of us can't vote. They're actually trying to change some things," he said.

Like Desmond, Nadila Haynes, 16, and her brother, Howard, 14, posed questions that night. "This (event) gives voice for a lot of people who can't vote," she said. "When politicians hear what we have to say, they carry that with them."

Howard said he was inspired to become more active in "what's going on around me. I should pay attention to this stuff because it's really serious."

De'Anthony Jefferson, 20, a peer counselor employed by The Children's Center, helped the youth prepare for the forum over the past few weeks. Many were initially shy about speaking before a large audience. "Today, I'm really proud of them," Jefferson said. "They stepped up. They got their own concerns out there. To see that growth is powerful."

Candidates were impressed, too. "Of all the forums I do, this is my favorite," Durhal said. "You guys ask the best questions. You guys truly are the future and one day you will represent this city."

Michigan's Children hosted the youth-led forum, the first of the 2016 campaign season, through its election advocacy arm, the non-partisan **Michigan's Children's Sandbox Party**. The program was created to make kids the priority during an election season by elevating their issues with candidates and engaging the electorate.

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*Founded in 1929 by former Detroit Mayor and United States Senator James Couzens as one of the first child guidance centers in the United States, **The Children's Center** has grown to be the Michigan child and family agency offering the largest number of specialized therapy programs for at-risk children and youth. It serves more than 7,500 children and families annually through behavioral, social and emotional health services.*



*Developing Strong Children
and Successful Families*



***21st Century Community Learning Centers Program** is an after-school program which delivers youth development, enrichment, and academic services to middle school students in Detroit Public Schools.*



***Youth M.O.V.E. Detroit** is a youth-led organization devoted to improving services and systems that support positive growth and development by uniting the voices of youth who have lived experience in various systems, including mental health, juvenile justice, education, and child welfare.*