

Youth-Led Forum Raises Tough Community Issues while Seeking Answers from Candidates for Ingham County Prosecutor, Sheriff, House

Young People Tackle Struggles with Violence, Juvenile Justice, Foster Care, Mental Health, Sex Trafficking

October 18, 2016, LANSING, MI – Poised and prepared for a night in the spotlight, eight teens and young adults from the Ingham Academy for court-ordered youth, a day treatment program and high school program, stood before candidates for the top law enforcement and prosecutorial jobs in the county and pressed for remedies to keep other kids out of trouble.

The program attracted over 100 audience members, community representatives and court officers, and was one of the most unique youth-led candidate forums since Michigan's Children's Sandbox Party launched the forums for empowering youth in 2014. Teens and young adult, once adjudicated for being expelled or chronically suspended from their home schools, talked about their personal struggles with crushing issues -- community violence, foster care, mental illness in their families, substance abuse, child protective services, juvenile justice and human trafficking. Candidates were riveted.

"Clearly, these young people had prepared and thought about the points they wanted to make," said Matt Gillard, Michigan's Children President & CEO. "They put real thought into what these candidates can do to help other young people in these situations."

In attendance were Republican Billie Jo O'Berry and Democrat Carol Siemon for prosecutor, Republican Erik Trojanowicz and Democrat Scott Wigglesworth for sheriff. State Rep. Tom Cochran, D-District 67, was the sole state House candidate attending, though all office-seekers for House Districts 67, 68 and 69 were invited.

Candidates attempted to offer suggestions and insights into the social concerns raised by the youth. Among them:

- One Lansing youth spoke about the death of her brother to street violence and asked what could be done to protect community youth.
- Others identified themselves as former substance abusers who worried about limited access to community treatment programs.
- Another teen, neglected by her parents, brought up frustrations in contacts with police and Child Protective Services workers who were left unaware of the circumstances in her home.
- A fatherless 20-year-old, who received support through the county's juvenile justice program, spoke in favor of mentorship programs for youth missing male role models.
- A teen formerly ensnared in human trafficking was represented by an adult support worker who asked what resources could be made available to help other victims re-establish themselves in the community.

- A youth placed in the state’s welfare system – who said she frequently had to ask for food and even a shower from her foster parent -- said there should be a limit on the number of children that foster family can claim to ensure needed attention for each one.
- A teen said mental health problems in his family were behind his actions to stop attending school at age 14, and asked what could be done to keep kids from suffering the consequences of their parents’ illnesses.

To Erica DeLong’s question about how to keep young people safe in their own communities – a question prompted by the death of her brother to street violence –candidates agreed it was essential for law enforcement to build trust among young people. “Community policing is a huge piece,” Cochran said. “We need to bring numerous people together. There is mistrust with law enforcement. When violence happens, people need to step up and talked about who committed this violence. It’s a very good question, and something we struggle with.”

O’Berry agreed. “By establishing that confidence in you and your office, people will watch for each other and come forward,” she said. “The way to solve crimes is . . . by helping us.”

Siemon said solutions also lie in confronting the causes of violence in the first place. “One of the real tragedies is we’ve cut spending for so many vital services . . . that would provide a safety net against the ripple effects of violence. Prison budgets have gone up 25 percent, but education (spending) has gone down – and all the things that help to give hope and a possible future. Crime does go down when needs are met,” Siemon said.

Wriggelsworth agreed law enforcement needs to spend more time building relations with young people to encourage students to report when a youth brings a gun to school, for example. “That’s the only way we’re going to make a difference,” he said. Trojanowicz, a recent sheriff’s office retiree, said the department has only one community liaison office, and said more money is needed to increase funding for these specialized services.

Youth struggling to find and access treatment programs for substance abuse was the theme of Tessa Baker’s question. O’Berry said she would seek funding to pay for these programs, acknowledging that “no one is immune” from the possibility of addiction, regardless of age. “This is a problem affecting our entire region,” she said. “It’s vital we have services available.” Siemon agreed more funding is needed to make treatment accessible, adding after-care services are also necessary for success when a person emerges from treatment. She added it’s critical to uncover underlying causes. Trojanowicz said community leaders need to determine where services can be accessed when offenders are released from jail. Wriggelsworth, an East Lansing Police lieutenant, touted his department’s specialized behavioral assessment which targets help to individuals in crisis, adding he’d replicate it at the county.

Cochran agreed with Siemon that root causes of substance abuse – high unemployment, for example – need to be addressed. “We see with opioids right now – it’s in epidemic proportions.”

Rochelle Shirmer, a teen-age mother, who experienced neglect as a child, asked what could be done to ensure that children's safety comes first among child protective services case workers and police officers.

Wriggelsworth sympathized with failures in the system that meant she "had fallen through the cracks," attributing such shortcomings to state case workers' large caseloads. In such cases, law enforcement should be urged to press CPS workers to respond, he said. O'Berry, a Lansing city attorney, said young people in such situations need to confide in people they are comfortable with. She said it's important to encourage educators to report signs of abuse and neglect because teachers are often best able to spot problems in students they know rather than police officers responding to a single complaint. "We need to work closely with schools so that they feel comfortable working with us," O'Berry said.

Siemon, a former assistant county prosecutor, said systems are designed to "assign blame" and action takes place only when standards of investigation are met. But she says children are protected best when there is cross training among professionals on family engagement and signs of abuse similar to what visiting nurses learn. Trojanowicz agreed that CPS workers and law enforcement should receive common training so they're all "on the same page" to do a "better job" of removing children from a home when the circumstances warrant it.

Megan Dean, an adult youth worker speaking on behalf of a victim, asked candidates how to provide services and resources for victims of human trafficking. During court proceedings, she said victims do receive resources to help them, "but when the dust settles," resources dwindle. Siemon said the most vulnerable youth – those out of foster care, LGBT youth, and immigrants are the most likely targets of traffickers. It's important to remove the stigmas of being a survivor of sexual exploitation. With 27 million cases nationwide, Trojanowicz, who has worked with the Michigan Human Trafficking Task Force, said he would support prosecuting suspects and that programs for victims are in place. Wriggelsworth said he would tap resources at Michigan State University, where a film project was completed interviewing victims of trafficking, for graduate students who could serve as a listening ear to young victims in the community.

Cochran called all forms of trafficking, including labor trafficking, a shocking problem that requires legislative action, resources and means to engage communities. Because of Michigan's international borders, Michigan has the third highest trafficking numbers in the nation, he said. "We as a state need to do much more to go after these individuals," he said. O'Berry said law enforcement and prosecutor need training to identify victims. Then resources – a place to live, furnishing, food – should be provided so that victims can re-establish themselves to prevent re-victimization.

Samuel King, now 20, and a student at Ingham Academy, spoke in favor of transitional services for youths like himself "who need a bridge "between the juvenile justice system and success" when core services cease. He was raised without a father and a mother who worked constantly to maintain an income for them. Too many leave probation without a high school diploma or means to be successful, he said. Fortunately, he said, he was helped by Ingham and Peckham Inc.'s Right Turn Program, which

provides career development support for at-risk youth or those involved with the juvenile justice system.

As a prosecutor, O'Berry said she would lobby for such programs, though the position itself can't guarantee such services are available. She agreed with King that youth at the legal age of 18 aren't typically able to move on without support. Even youth from intact families, she said, "can't do it alone in this economy." She vowed to work with county officials to ensure programs that help young people transition from the juvenile justice system are funded. Siemon agreed strong programs are needed to help youths emerge from the juvenile justice system, and added that youths leaving foster care also need support beyond age 18. Addressing King, she asked what supports beyond employment and vocational training are needed to help youths succeed. King answered that mentorships programs are key to keeping kids on track. "A lot of kids don't have a parent figure, and need somebody to look up to," he said.

Both Trojanowicz and Wriggelsworth said they've served youth in sports and school programs and believe at-risk youths need guidance that community groups could offer.

The youths praised programs like Ingham Academy's Day Treatment Program, an operation of the Ingham County Circuit Court – Family Division, and Peckham's Right Turn program for making a positive difference in their lives. Katelyn Rogers, who lived in the county's youth home for a time, said she felt "more at home in the youth center" than in my own home. Marisol Martinez, 16, who got into trouble when she stopped attending school and started smoking, said she's liked working at Ingham Academy, has appreciated the support from staff and feels more settled emotionally today. "Now I'm doing really good and I'm almost out of here," she added beaming.

***The Ingham Day Treatment Program** is a highly structured program providing high risk youth who have been chronically suspended or expelled from school with an individualized learning environment that offers both educational and community supports. The Day Treatment Program focuses on providing youth the opportunity to receive the tools needed to excel academically while also gaining fundamental life skills to address antisocial thoughts and beliefs.*

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