

## “They Have Big Things on Their Minds”

### *Youth Raise Serious Issues in ‘We are the Change’ Candidate Forum*

LANSING (Oct. 22, 2020) – They called their questions tough, impressive – and the experience memorable. Candidates for three state Legislative districts in Lansing and Flint came together with students from Peckham Inc. Youth Services over a virtual platform in late October to learn what was on their minds, and share how they plan to act if re-elected into office. .

“We Are the Change” Youth-Led Candidate Forum, sponsored by Michigan’s Children, Peckham Inc., the Institute for Educational Leadership, and the Capitol Area College Access Network, invited youth to pose questions to the candidates while sharing a bit about their own experiences, reflecting system failures and cracks in safety net programs that they have faced.

The youth drilled into issues such as the rising tide of teen suicide, the shortcomings of law enforcement response to victims of sexual assault, the need for prevention and services related to teen pregnancies, protection for children in child welfare cases, and worries over the impact on Michigan of a second COVID-19 wave. Participating students, ages 16-24, came from Waverly High School’s college access program, and Peckham’s Youth Services programs, Right Turn, Jobs for Michigan Graduates, Youth Career Academy, Footprints, and the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act program. WLNS News Reporter Brittany Flowers moderated the program.



**While all candidates** for Michigan House seats representing the Flint and Lansing areas were invited to participate, three incumbent Democratic Legislators took part – Sheryl Kennedy from Flint’s 48<sup>th</sup> House District, Kara Hope of Lansing’s 67<sup>th</sup> District, and Sarah Anthony of Lansing’s 68<sup>th</sup> District. All candidates gave answers to all questions posed to them.

Desiree Skaggs, 16, told the panelists she had multiple experiences with the child welfare system and asked what legislators would do to ensure safe home environments for children, and access to services for dysfunctional families.

Anthony said interactions between Michigan’s child welfare system and the public were disastrous over the course of her 15 years in government service. She blamed funding cuts for creating negative outcomes resulting in fewer caseworkers, spread thin, with limited ability to serve children and families. “There are

ways we can make this system more humane and work a little better for the people it should serve,” she said. “An important piece is making sure there’s adequate funding.”

Juwan Trainor, 24, asked candidates what they would do to combat a second wave of COVID-19. Hope said the second wave has arrived, increasing caseloads and straining local hospitals. The pandemic has exposed cracks in the social safety net, she added. “We’re seeing a lot of need; I’ve heard from a lot of people who never had to go to a food bank before or seek assistance of any kind,” she said. “On top of that, other folks are needing help with unemployment. We need to make sure we’re taking care of people who need the help most.”

**Angelina “Angel” Godines**, 19, talked about her experience as a victim of sexual assault, and called for more sensitivity training for police officers and prosecutors. She said she was re-traumatized when she was asked to recount the experience to an officer of the same sex as her assailant. “I was traumatized and didn’t report all the facts,” she said. “It takes incredible courage to come out and report, and tell your story.”

Kennedy praised Godines for raising “a really important conversation” and agreed training is needed for law enforcement. At one point, Flint had a six-month backlog in child interviews of sexual abuse and assault that spurred her to “rattle some cages” and win real-time interviews and more funding, she said. “I’ve been an advocate for this, and it’s a conversation we need to lift up and bring to the forefront. It’s not talked about enough.”

Morgan Baggett, 17, asked the lawmakers what they would do to address an epidemic of depression and anxiety among teens, including providing resources needed to address mental health. The lawmakers agreed that mental health concerns are growing and that solutions should include more available professionals, particularly school-based counselors and social workers.

During her tenure as a high school principal, Kennedy found school counselors and social workers essential for helping students. “We have got to have mental health professionals in schools,” Kennedy added. “I have a Ph.D. in educational leadership, but I am not a mental health professional. We need to prioritize this.”

**Anthony added the** answer lies in destigmatizing mental health care. “We need to do a better job of normalizing mental health care. We need more mental health services and individuals trained to identify and provide services for kids in schools,” she added.

Anthony implored the youth to step up and help adults solve problems affecting them. “The stakes are too high. We need young people alongside us to ensure we fix these problems for your generation,” she said.

Hope praised the students for their involvement in the forum and urged them to stay civically active. “They have big things on their minds. It’s important you remain connected.”

After the public forum ended, the youth participants were asked what they thought of the experience. Angel Godines said the forum experience meant a great deal to her, particularly the remarks by candidate Anthony. Anthony had acknowledged Godines for her courage in raising an issue affecting many, and said she was entitled to the support of wrap-around service and caring attention from law enforcement. “We as a community have a responsibility to take your story seriously, and have training and compassion to figure out those next steps,” Anthony said.

“Sarah Anthony’s response definitely stood out to me. The tone in her voice made me feel as if she could empathetically understand, which is exactly how anyone should approach this topic,” Godines said. “It

was empowering as a policy influencer to have policy makers individually listen and respond to topics and issues that we feel need to be addressed and knowing I'm a part of important and necessary change."

Boaz Overly, 19, agreed that candidates were a receptive audience, adding he felt most of the students agreed with the candidates' responses. "So, I hope they actually push for those things," he said. His only criticism was that he felt their answers to his question about reforming public safety were lean on details. "I'm glad I took part in it, and I was glad no one said anything so outrageous that I wouldn't vote for them," he added.

**"We have a lot to learn** from these young people," said Youth Services Specialist Elizabeth Glaser from Peckham's Right Turn Program. "Many times, the voices of young people involved in the court system and young people with disabilities are not valued, and this leadership opportunity really gave them an opportunity to be listened to, to be heard, and to feel valued!"

Dahlia Shaewitz, Vice President of Transition, Disability & Employment at the Institute for Educational Leadership, said many employers and policy makers who grew up in an earlier time have less inclusive ways at looking at the world that are not shared by young people. "So youth voice is critical in identifying the most relevant policy initiatives, and youth leadership in civic engagement is essential to ensure those initiatives have staying power."

"We will hold winning candidates' feet to the fire to make sure they are putting into practice actions that they shared with the young people today," said Matt Gillard, President and CEO. "Our expectation is that they will continue to work with these young people and others after they are elected."

Michigan's Children will share the forum proceedings with the candidates who chose not to participate in the forum as well. Other invited candidates were: incumbent Democrat Cynthia Neely and Republican James Miraglia in Genesee County's 34<sup>th</sup> District; Republican David Martin in the 48<sup>th</sup> District; incumbent Democrat John Cherry and Republican Bryan Lutz in the 49<sup>th</sup> District; Nate J. Ross in the 67<sup>th</sup> District; Republican Robert J. Atkinson in the 68<sup>th</sup> District; and incumbent Democrat Julie Brixie and Republican challenger Grace Norris in the 69<sup>th</sup> District.