

Capital Region Stands Up State House and Senate Candidate Questionnaire

Please answer the following questions by midnight on Monday, March 16th. Capital Region Stands Up will post the answers from all candidates on our website and share with our members and mailing list through email and Facebook.

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1. As a member of the PA General Assembly, what would you do to lower drug prices for Pennsylvanians?

Right now, Rep Dan Frankel, along with 40 other house Democrats have House Bill 2212 in the legislature. This bill would allow for the creation of the Prescription Drug Affordability Board that would allow lawmakers and regular people to understand how drugs are priced, understand how that pricing impacts us, and create a mechanism to reduce what we have to pay for our medications. The Board would then be able to set limits on what Pennsylvanians have to pay for their medications.

If this bill would be put up for a vote today, I don't know that a bi-partisan majority of the House would pass it. I want to be clear on what that means: I don't know if enough Representatives in our legislature care that we have Pennsylvanians dying because they can't afford their medications. What I do know for sure is that if elected, I will always promote and vote for legislation that puts Pennsylvanians ahead of the drug manufacturers. We deserve a legislature that actually works.

2. Do you support work requirements for Medicaid recipients? Why or why not?

Medicaid is low or no cost health care for poor people. I do not support a work-requirement for Medicaid benefits that would put the health and well-being of Pennsylvanians at risk.

There is a fundamental misconception that "all" Medicaid recipients are not working and it's just not true. The poverty level in Pennsylvania is \$12,760, which after taxes comes out to about \$957 a month. The median rent in Cumberland County is \$913 a month. Some people in our community are left with \$44 a month for necessities like food, utilities, and health care costs.

Medicaid is a critical source of health coverage for many hourly workers in food service, construction, or retail. Their work hours often fluctuate from month to month, leaving them short of the required minimum in some months even as they exceed it in others. These workers are women, they are parents, they are sons and daughters trying to take care of their families. They may also be part of the sandwich generation, people who are caregivers for their aging or ill parents and caregivers for their children. These policies also harm those with disabilities or serious illnesses who may not be exempt or may struggle with the bureaucratic hurdles to secure an exemption. We need to be honest here. A bunch of politicians who make \$90,000 a year want to deny health care to poor people. This kind of moral failing shouldn't be acceptable to anyone.

I stand with Governor Wolf in opposing this legislation and any other that harms Pennsylvanians.

3. As a member of the PA General Assembly, how would you balance the critical importance of meeting PA's goal for carbon reduction (26% by 2025 and 80% by 2050 as measured against 2005 levels) with the creation of good paying jobs that are claimed by the energy sector?

There are people who make a lot of money in Pennsylvania's current energy sector who do their best to pit workers against green technologies, but it's time that we stand up to them.

Carbon reduction is not odds with good paying jobs, because there is real opportunity in renewable energy and carbon reduction.

Pennsylvania can and should be a leader in job growth and renewable energy so that we can reduce carbon by pivoting to clean energy sources and solutions. Throughout the country, the renewable energy industry employs more than 3.3 million Americans, which outnumbers fossil fuel workers by 3 to 1 and there is huge growth potential. We deserve a future where we invest in good paying jobs from companies that focus on energy efficiency, solar, and wind projects. We need climate policies in our General Assembly that put people to work rebuilding our infrastructure, developing green technologies and manufacturing, and focusing on climate change adaptation. Our legislature must learn how to pivot away from industries that may not exist by 2050 and towards new opportunities and growth.

4. The first bill amending the State's Human Relations Act barring discrimination in housing, employment and public accommodations based on gender identity and sexual orientation was introduced in 1976. PA still does not have a law on the books that accomplishes this. What action would you support to ensure protection of our LGBTQ community?

Pennsylvania must update our non-discrimination laws to ensure protections for our LGBTQ community. All Pennsylvania residents deserve to live free from discrimination and I would support any legislation put forward to preserve that freedom. I support legislation put forward by Rep Dan Frankel and supported by numerous other House Democrats in HB 1404.

5. When you become a state legislator, what specific steps would you take to attempt to improve the ethical rules in the PA General Assembly?

When elected, I will push forward ethical rules for the General Assembly. I support our March on Harrisburg and the gift bans and I strongly believe in public disclosure. Taxpayers should be able to easily access exactly how their tax dollars are being spent, including if those tax dollars are being spent to pay out on sexual harassment. We need legislators who will push forward #MeToo ethics rules for the PA General Assembly and legislation that protects Pennsylvanians.

Legislators are accountable to the people.

6. In recent years, the General Assembly has attempted to constrict women's reproductive rights. What is your position on this important issue?

In the past, the General Assembly has put forward legislation that would constrict women's reproductive rights and attempt to punish women exercising their constitutional right to access healthcare. I believe that the General Assembly's job is to legislate, not to act as doctors for their constituents. In late 2019 the General Assembly voted to force women to endure suffering and unspecified expenses to bury the remains of a miscarriage or abortion. We need a legislature that stops trying to constricting women's rights to reproductive freedom and instead focuses on how to actually help residents by ensuring affordable and accessible healthcare.

7. What are your plans for improving basic education in this state? Should the rules for funding charter schools be changed?

Sadly, Pennsylvania has the most inequitable spending per student in the entire United States. We need adequate and equitable funding for Pre-K-12 by increasing state funding. We need to be using the fair funding formula to ensure that all students have access to education that takes into account the unique needs of their local communities. I believe that there is a place for charter schools in Pennsylvania, but we must change the rules and hold them to the same standards as all other public schools.

8. State government support for tuition at state-supported and state-related institutions ranks among the lowest in the nation, helping to push the cost of attending public colleges up 66% in the last 15 years, after adjusting for inflation. Indeed, PA ranks number 1 in the nation for highest student debt. High tuition costs have also resulted in a decline in attendance of low and middle income students. How would you address this conundrum?

Pennsylvania has a lack of affordable, accessible higher education due to many years of under-investment. Our cost of higher learning and the cost of living have skyrocketed, but our wages have remained comparatively stagnant, which leads to skyrocketing student loan debt. We need to rectify this cycle of under-investment by providing grants for Pennsylvania's public community colleges or four year state universities. We must make sure that attendance at our colleges and universities is attainable for our residents, especially those with low or middle income.

9. Should this state have stronger gun safety laws? If you agree what would you do?

I agree with the overwhelming majority of American's that we need stronger gun safety laws including background checks and closing the gun show loophole. We need to make sure that guns aren't getting into the hands of those who would do the rest of us harm. We have to stop letting the gun lobby dictate the conversation around gun safety in America. When the majority of Americans and the majority of Pennsylvanians want stronger gun safety laws, it is the legislature's responsibility to uphold the will of the people. The legislature works for the community, not special interest lobbyists.

10. Children who grow up in high-poverty neighborhoods where 30% or more of the households have income below the poverty level live with toxic stress caused by financial hardship and fear of violence. Chronic stress in children has been linked with diabetes, heart disease and stroke later in life, as well as depression, suicide and teen pregnancy. An Annie E Casey Foundation study found that 323,000 children in PA live in high poverty neighborhoods – 12% of our children. If elected, what legislation would you promote that could begin to address these issues?

Poverty in our society has been a huge, often ignored, issue in Cumberland County. We have drastic income inequality throughout our community that must be addressed. I support any legislation that provides Pennsylvanian's with clean air, clean water, healthy food, and adequate health care, housing, transportation, and education. Once we elect a legislature that cares about and works for all of the people, we can push forward legislation that increases the minimum wage, uses the fair funding formula for our schools, protects SNAP and addresses food insecurity.

11. The PA County Commissioners Association has repeatedly called for restoration of an \$84 million cut to mental health funding made in 2012-13 by then Governor Tom Corbett. Indeed, funding for mental health services has been virtually flat-lined since 2007-08. Meanwhile, more than 21% of those who need mental health services in PA can't get them. There are long waits for visits to psychiatrists and therapists. Few schools have social workers on staff that can address the significant mental health needs of children. What would you do to improve access to mental health services in the Commonwealth?

Lack of funding for our mental health services in Pennsylvania is costing us so much. When we fail to help people living with mental health issues, our prison population skyrockets. If help isn't available for everyone who needs it, we lose our loved ones to suicide. If the cost of going to the doctor is affordable, people may have nowhere to go and end up homeless. This is not how a society should treat the vulnerable. I would push for and support legislation that helps ensure low or no cost mental health services. We cannot continue to lose our family members, our veterans, our friends because the cost of health care is too high.

12. Despite boasting the highest gas tax in the country, and highways that are perpetually under construction, Pennsylvania still finishes 35th in the nation for the overall cost-effectiveness and condition of its highway system, according to a report by the Reason Foundation. Researchers found that overall, the state finished 25th for its overall fatality rate; 46th in structurally deficient bridges; 35th in traffic congestion; 32nd in urban Interstate pavement condition, and 32nd in rural Interstate pavement condition. What would you do to address these pressing infrastructure needs?

Pennsylvania needs to commit to a long-term statewide infrastructure plan. Pennsylvania will be further impacted by global warming and we will continue to see unsafe bridges, traffic congestion, poor pavement conditions, and other crumbling and dangerous infrastructure. Our long-term plan should be sustainable, eliminate pollution and green-house gas emissions as much as feasible, and be built or upgraded with energy-efficiency in mind.

13. What do you see as the 3 most important issues for your district?

One of the major issues anywhere in United States is healthcare. In Pennsylvania we lose our loved ones because they cannot afford the tests, treatments, and prescriptions that could save their lives. I think we all know someone who has skipped going to the doctor when sick because it was cost prohibitive for them. We do not have to live like this. All people deserve to live free and that means that healthcare needs to be affordable for everyone and accessible to everyone.

Sadly in Central Pennsylvania, we experience poor air quality in one out of every four of our days. The energy lobby and the transportation lobby make massive contributions to legislators and candidates in Pennsylvania and this all but guarantees that they get a bigger seat at the table than the rest of us. It's time that we put a stop to that and demand legislators that act in the best interests of our residents and not giving tax breaks to the corporations polluting our state and making us sick.

We absolutely have to change the tide of transparency in Pennsylvania. In the past 5 years, more than 500 complaints across our three branches of government led to \$2,000,000 being paid out as a result of sexual harassment or misconduct settlements. That \$2,000,000 was paid out by you, and me, and all of our neighbors because taxpayer money was used to settle sexual harassment or misconduct claims within our government. Not only were these sums of money paid out by us, we also paid for a study of the problem that led nowhere. The promise of a study of the problem was nothing more than a band-aid on the #MeToo movement.

While there are a lot of issues in my district, there is a common thread woven between them: a legislature that isn't standing up for the people. It doesn't have to be like this and we can fix it.

Candidate Name *

Tara Shakespeare

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