

Groups React to Jointly Hosted Chittenden County State's Attorney Forum

Overview

As we near the primary election, which will serve as the de facto election for the Office of Chittenden County State's Attorney, our four organizations, the Lake Champlain Chamber, the Burlington Business Association, the South Burlington Business Association, and the Vermont Retail and Grocers Association invited the incumbent State's Attorney Sarah George and her challenger in the Democratic primary Ted Kenney to a forum. Issues of public safety and public order have been front of mind to our members as we've seen an increase in retail theft, auto theft, and gunfire incidents.

Stewart Ledbetter of MyNBC5 moderated the forum, and the event was attended by over 80 people and viewed by countless others since. Those in attendance included members of our organizations, legislators, campaign staffers, and other interested parties.

This document contains an analysis from the four organizations and some next steps. Two addendums accompanying this document provide an overview of questions asked and a summary of the environment in Chittenden County that led to the desire for this forum. This document should not be considered an endorsement of either candidate.

Analysis:

We observed the following things;

A Lack of Solutions:

Our four organizations were generally disappointed to have not heard solutions from either campaign. George did not feel there was a connection between any policies adopted by her office and issues that have arisen during her 5-year tenure and did not express an interest in any course of action beyond what she has already instituted. On the other hand, Kenney took aim at those policies as overly broad and blunt instruments and seemed to commit to sharpening the policies, but did not provide specifics, except for spending additional funds pooled between Chittenden County municipalities to provide proper training for implicit bias.

This was exemplified best by the comments the two traded around the current State's Attorney's office policy on "non-public safety traffic stops" such as a suspended license, broken brake light, or failure to signal. The crux of George's position was that George wanted to limit or effectively eliminate traffic stops to ensure better outcomes for people of color. Kenney thinks this reaction

is too severe and has unintended consequences that make communities less safe. Kenney cited that 40% of DUI enforcement occurs due to the type of stop the current SA is attempting to prevent.

Similarities Between the Two:

We walked away with a clear understanding that both candidates have a strong conviction to advance criminal justice reform and ensure equitable outcomes from our criminal justice system. Both candidates acknowledged the limitations of the office and that more support for social structures are needed to curb the inflow of cases into the State's Attorney's office. Both candidates expressed interest in restitution, or repayment, for victims of retail theft, however, neither put forth any substantive structure for that process. We heard both candidates express a willingness to host a Safe Injection Facility in the county, with George unequivocally supporting the creation of such a facility and Kenney supporting the legislative approach [vetoed by the Governor](#).

Differences in General Community Awareness:

Our organizations were frustrated with the lack of awareness of some issues expressed by the incumbent. This was used as a defense in several instances, however, lack of awareness is just as disappointing as a lack of knowledge. For example, when the moderator asked a question about frustration from the [firefighters' association](#) and [UVM nurses' union](#) in the county with the increase in the assaults on these public servants, the incumbent simply said that they were not aware of the issues until the two groups recently sought press attention. That is not an acceptable answer given the repeated notoriety of these issues in local news coverage and community forums (see addendum).

Similarly, George was asked by an attendee about her involvement and fundraising for [an organization](#) that has the goal of "abolishing" prisons and defers most of their organization's substantive positions [to a toolkit](#) that advocates that as prison pertains to "rapist, child molesters, and murders ... the 'need' to lock these people up is a false need." George is one of two members of the board of directors for the organization, which she called an "incredible nonprofit organization" and stated she "trusts their work." George stated that she does have some differences in end objectives, but she supports the work they are doing with regard to shutting down the Chittenden Regional Correctional Facility.

Differences in Views on Conditions of Release:

A constant area that the two candidates have sparred in is the conditions of release, even before their appearance at this forum. These terms that someone charged with a crime must adhere to represent the most significant distinction between the two candidates. Kenney was well researched on recent cases in which he believed inadequate conditions of release left individuals in the community where they were a danger to themselves and others. When George would push back about the adequacy of those conditions, Kenney was able to follow up with how George pursued those conditions only after subsequent crimes.

Candidates' Area of Focus:

We observed in their recurring language; George seems entirely focused on the victims of historical and systemic inequity, while Kenney seems focused on protecting victims with a commitment to advocating for more equitable outcomes. From our perspective, George seems adamant that ensuring equity requires not enforcing laws, while Kenney seems adamant that equity can be achieved in conjunction with enforcing the law. The discussion around non-public safety stops, outlined above, is emblematic of this. Our organizations think that the current trending belief that equity requires no enforcement of laws is destructive to our community and would prefer to see a less blunt approach taken to address historic inequality.

Conclusion:

This summary is meant to provide perspective on the two candidates on the ballot for Chittenden County State's Attorney for the current Democratic Primary. This document is in no way an endorsement of either candidate. We encourage feedback on our analysis and for you to watch the forum yourself, which is available on each of these organizations' websites and via [MyNBC5](#).

Next Steps:

Both of these candidates are on the democratic ballot. Since early voting is underway, you can vote any time between now and primary day, August 9th. There is no Republican running for this office, so the primary election between these two candidates will serve as the de facto election for the Chittenden County State's Attorney, which has a unique (for Vermont) four-year term length. This contest is on the backside of the ballot, so be sure to turn it over. As a reminder, you do not have to be a registered member of a political party to vote in a primary election in Vermont.

Media Coverage:

- [Sarah George accuses Ted Kenney of making her 'scapegoat' for uptick in crime - VTDigger](#)
- [Chittenden County State's Attorney primary candidates faceoff in virtual forum - MYNBC5](#)
- [Candidates for Chittenden County State's Attorney debate - WAMC](#)
- [Candidates for county prosecutor debate criminal justice](#) - Williston Observer

Addendum:

[Table of Questions and Candidate Responses](#)

[Media coverage on issues around crime](#)