

# SHSC 2023 Human Services Candidate Questionnaire

Seattle Human Services Coalition (SHSC) 2023 Candidate Questions

Email \*

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What is your name? \*

Becka Johnson Poppe

For which position are you running? \*

Seattle City Council District 1

Seattle City Council District 2

Seattle City Council District 3

Seattle City Council District 4

Seattle City Council District 5

Seattle City Council District 6

Seattle City Council District 7

King County Council District 2

King County Council District 4

King County Council District 6

King County Council District 8

Other: .....

What is your understanding of Human Services? Which Human Service Providers are most familiar with? \*

Human Services refer to a wide range of programs and initiatives designed to meet the needs of individuals and families, particularly those who are vulnerable, marginalized, or facing significant challenges. It encompasses areas such as healthcare, mental health support, housing assistance, food security, child and family services, and more.

Some of the Human Service Providers I am most familiar with include:

- Nonprofit Organizations: I am a volunteer board member for YouthCare and the Doney Coe Pet Clinic. I am also a regular supporter of food banks, shelters, mental health clinics, youth development programs, and organizations that support survivors of domestic violence.
- Healthcare Providers: I am proud to be endorsed by SEIU Healthcare 1199NW and to have collaborated with many different healthcare providers.
- Education Institutions: As the former Director of Policy, Planning & State Operations for the UW, I have engaged with schools, colleges, and universities. I am proud to be endorsed by UW Young Democrats, Seattle Student Union, and many education advocates.
- Advocacy Groups: I have partnered with advocacy groups that represent and advocate for various marginalized communities, such as immigrants, refugees, people experiencing homelessness, LGBTQ+ individuals, and individuals with disabilities.

I am committed to building strong relationships with Human Service Providers, and to ensuring that the policies I advocate for on the King County Council are informed by the expertise and the lived experiences of the individuals and families they serve.

Further, if we are going to expect nonprofits to continue subsidizing work that governments would normally do, the county needs to be willing to pay more for its contracts so that organizations can appropriately compensate their professionals. Right now, it is clear that organizations are unable to recruit, retain, and adequately take care of their workers.

Service providers in fields like behavioral health and homelessness already face trauma and hardship in their daily work; they shouldn't have to worry about falling into homelessness themselves.

As I mentioned, I volunteer for YouthCare working to end youth homelessness and it's our frontline staff who make all the difference for our unhoused young people. I've advocated for wage increases because it's the right thing to do AND because the bottom line is: if we don't take care of our people, we lose them and we lose the vital, individual connections that make the work matter. To take care of our community, we need to take care of people.

In addition, there are underlying inequities in King County's RFP process that make it challenging for some CBO's without a wealth of knowledge and experience to participate. The County needs to diversify its pipeline of CBO's and think about how to make it more accessible and center organizations with lived experiences.

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What do you think is the root cause of poverty? What do you think the role of Government has in \* addressing institutionalized poverty?

What drives me to serve is knowing how easy it is for far too many people to go from 'making it work' to not making it work. For me, there was a moment where I was working three jobs, had a bank account with two digits, and got in a car accident. I had tons of support, so I was okay, but for far too many people, moments like that aren't okay. As a Councilmember, I can't stop every bad thing from happening, but I will work every single day to ensure that when a challenging thing does happen, that it doesn't upend someone's life.

I believe that the root cause of poverty is a combination of systemic injustices and economic disparities. Poverty is not a personal failing; it is a result of structural barriers that limit opportunities and perpetuate inequality.

One of the primary roles of government in addressing institutionalized poverty is to create and implement policies that promote equity, opportunity, and economic justice. This includes investing in education, job training programs, public resources, and affordable housing initiatives.

Additionally, it is crucial for the government to prioritize fair wages, worker protections, and accessible healthcare. Implementing a living wage and supporting workers' rights can help lift families out of poverty and ensure that everyone has a chance to thrive. We must also work towards universal healthcare to eliminate the financial burden of medical expenses, which can be a significant factor in pushing individuals and families into poverty.

Furthermore, government must address systemic barriers that disproportionately affect marginalized communities, such as racial discrimination and gender inequality. This includes promoting diversity and inclusion in all sectors, dismantling discriminatory practices, and providing targeted support to historically disadvantaged groups.

In summary, the role of government in addressing institutionalized poverty is multifaceted. It requires implementing policies that address systemic injustices, promote economic equity, and ensure that everyone has access to essential resources and opportunities.

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What is your understanding of racism and its impacts? What do you see as your role in addressing systemic racism? What solutions, ideas, or examples of policies would you offer toward ending the impact of racism and racial injustice? \*

As a progressive candidate for the King County Council, my understanding of racism goes beyond individual acts of prejudice. Racism is a systemic issue deeply rooted in historical and social structures that perpetuate inequality and discrimination based on race or ethnicity. It encompasses not only overt acts of bigotry but also implicit biases, institutional practices, and policies that disproportionately and systematically disadvantage marginalized communities.

The impacts of racism are far-reaching and pervasive. They manifest in stark racial disparities across education, healthcare, employment, housing, and criminal justice. Communities of color experience unequal access to resources, limited opportunities, and higher rates of poverty. Racism also inflicts significant emotional and psychological harm.

Addressing racism requires a comprehensive approach. I am committed to implementing policies that dismantle systemic barriers, promote equity, and ensure equal opportunities for all residents. This involves advocating for affordable housing, equitable educational funding, criminal justice reform, healthcare access, and economic development in marginalized communities. Additionally, I will prioritize fostering inclusive dialogues, promoting cultural competency, and supporting initiatives that empower underrepresented voices.

As an example, I am proud of my work to conceptualize and implement King County's first Climate Equity program. I had the honor to sit with communities experiencing the first and worst consequences of climate change and work hand-in-hand to create a \$20 million program that funded programs like home energy conversions for low-income communities and green affordable housing. I am committed to scaling up this work on County Council. The pandemic and climate change have exacerbated existing inequities and these issues are more important than ever.

Further, the County is a BIG employer and that means big opportunities to undo racism. I will work to address wage and opportunity disparities that continue to face women, people of color, and LGBTQIA+ folks. Protecting against discriminatory hiring practices, pay inequities, and unfair promotion opportunities is critical. In addition, insufficient wages disproportionately impact workers of color, and I will partner with labor to boost wages for our frontline workers.

Lastly, part of my job as a County Councilmember will be to recognize that the areas where needs are greatest—whether it's gun violence, public health disparities, urban heat, etc.—may not be places in my district. But to undo systemic oppression (and to bring longer-lasting benefits to my own district!) we must invest where needs are greatest

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As an elected official, what steps would you take to understand community needs? What is your \* approach to partnerships between communities and government?

The community in my district includes over 200,000 people. Having communities where everyone can thrive requires leaders who center community voices and the lived experiences of others. In the face of urgent issues, it can be tempting to move as quickly as possible, but it's critical that we do so without leaving folks behind. Too often we've seen folks sitting at the table making decisions about issues that don't affect them, but that's not good government.

At the county, I've been a strong advocate for 'participatory budgeting,' a concept that the New York Times describes as "revolutionary civics in action." Participatory budgeting centers the voices of community members in how we use our resources and creates a more equitable distribution of public resources. My work to conceptualize and stand up the County's first Climate Equity Bond illustrates my approach. Rather than approach community members with preconceived ideas for their feedback, I had the honor to sit with communities experiencing the first and worst consequences of climate change. I met with them for seven months and found a way to make their priorities a reality.

While in office, I will connect with communities and build a bridge to government by going out to meet community members where they are at through flexible hours and multiple opportunities for engagement such as,own halls, public hearings, coffee hours, regular email updates from my office, and more which will also be part of this process.

Further, I am committed to rapidly disclosing information and to doing so in forms and languages that are easily accessible for the public. I will leverage new technologies to make information about decisions and operations available to the public online. My office and I will solicit public feedback to understand what information is most needed and most useful to constituents.

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What do you believe are the root causes of the on-going homelessness crisis? \*

The root causes of the ongoing homelessness crisis in King County stem from a combination of factors. First and foremost, the lack of affordable housing is a significant driver. High housing costs and a shortage of affordable options force individuals and families into homelessness. We must prioritize the construction and preservation of affordable housing units and implement policies that promote affordability and tenant protections.

Secondly, income inequality contributes to homelessness. Insufficient wages and limited economic opportunities make it challenging for individuals to afford housing. We need to advocate for fair wages, support job training programs, and foster an inclusive economy that provides equal opportunities for all.

Mental health and addiction issues often intersect with homelessness, and insufficient access to supportive services perpetuates the cycle of homelessness. We must invest in robust mental health care, increase funding for addiction treatment programs, and adopt a compassionate approach that addresses these underlying challenges.

Furthermore, systemic racism and discrimination contribute to homelessness, disproportionately affecting communities of color, and community members who identify as LGBTIA+. We must confront and dismantle systemic inequalities embedded within our housing and social service systems by implementing equitable policies and ensuring equal access to resources.

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What would you say are some examples of metrics of success when it comes to the homelessness crisis? \*

While there is no single metric that can capture the complexity of this issue, there are several key indicators that can help us assess the success of our efforts:

- Reduction in overall homelessness population
- Reduction in unsheltered homelessness
- Increase in permanent housing placements
- Decrease in repeat homelessness
- Improved access to healthcare and mental health services
- Collaboration and community engagement
- Racial and gender equity

Regarding the last measure, addressing homelessness must include an intersectional approach that recognizes and rectifies the disparities faced by marginalized communities. Monitoring the progress towards achieving racial and gender equity in housing outcomes can help ensure fairness and justice in our efforts.

These metrics, among others, can help us evaluate the impact of our policies and programs, guide resource allocation, and inform necessary adjustments to better serve those experiencing homelessness in King County. It is essential to adopt an ongoing assessment framework to continuously learn, adapt, and improve our response to this pressing crisis.

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Survivors of domestic and sexual violence frequently enter the criminal legal system due to their victimization, but criminal legal responses are problematic for most survivors for a variety of reasons. This is especially true for Black, Indigenous, and other survivors of color, refugee and immigrant survivors, and gender non-conforming survivors. What do you see as the role of the criminal legal system in responding to gender-based violence? Do you know of any community-based alternatives to responding to violence and how you would promote or support them? \*

I am a survivor of multiple accounts of sexual assault. This topic hits home for me.

I believe the criminal legal system's role in responding to gender-based violence needs to be reevaluated and reformed. Traditional criminal responses often fail to address the unique needs of survivors, particularly those from marginalized communities such as Black, Indigenous, and other survivors of color, refugee and immigrant survivors, and gender non-conforming survivors.

To promote a more effective and inclusive approach, we must prioritize community-based alternatives to responding to violence. This involves investing in survivor-centered and trauma-informed services provided by community organizations. These services can offer counseling, support groups, crisis intervention, and advocacy tailored to the needs of survivors. By strengthening these resources, we ensure survivors have access to the support they need without further traumatization from the criminal legal system.

Furthermore, embracing restorative justice practices and community accountability models is crucial. These approaches focus on repairing harm, facilitating dialogue, and promoting healing for all parties involved. By engaging survivors, offenders, and the community in collaborative processes, we can foster accountability, transformation, and a sense of justice.

As a council member, I will work alongside community organizations, survivors, and experts to shape policies that center the needs and experiences of marginalized survivors. I will advocate for increased funding and resources to support community-based alternatives and ensure survivors have access to comprehensive, culturally responsive, and trauma-informed services. By reimagining the role of the criminal legal system and promoting community-based alternatives, we can create a more just and compassionate response to gender-based violence that supports the healing and empowerment of all survivors.

At least one-quarter to one-third of people in our community will experience gender-based violence in their lifetimes, yet solutions and responses to domestic violence, sexual assault, and trafficking are significantly under-funded. Given this, what specific solutions would you bring forward to address this systemic shortfall? \*

I am deeply and personally committed to addressing the systemic shortfall in funding and support for survivors of gender-based violence.

To support this and other critical work, King County and its elected officials should be relentless in the pursuit of authority from the state legislature to implement options that bring more progressive revenue in total from those who can afford it:

- Working to get an actual progressive income tax.
- Creating a county-level add-on to the new capital gains tax: a 1% county option from the numerous super-wealthy individuals in our county would generate a lot of money for the General Fund, which is sorely needed.
- Creating an optional county-level add-on to the State B&O tax.
- Buying down the retail sales tax rate by extending it to more services, such as professional and legal services that are used by wealthier consumers. Broadening the sales tax base would generate more revenue for high priority programs like Metro Transit, Mental Illness and Drug Dependency (MIDD), and Health Through Housing.
- Enacting higher estate taxes.

In addition, we need elected officials who can deliver real budget solutions in the absence of progressive revenue fixes. These should include:

- Identifying multi-benefit investments,
  - Multiplying dollars with matching funds and pilot projects that make the county competitive for larger dollars, and
  - Digging into base budgets to identify opportunities to redistribute resources and undo systemic racism. Like most governments, the county budgets on an incremental basis and decisions from the past are rarely revisited.
  - Getting more aggressive with our bonding strategy, which would give us more cash on-hand right now to fund critical needs that are only going to get more expensive the longer we wait.
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According to the GAO nearly half of all people over 55+ and approaching retirement have no retirement savings. When individuals begin to think about retirement, approximately 50% of them will have to depend solely on Social Security as they have no pensions. This is a big factor in the reason that more older adults continue working past expected retirement. What are some of your priorities in tackling elder poverty and ensuring that our older adults are taken care of? What are some actions elected officials can take to help prevent poverty for older adults? \*

-- I will work to increase the availability of affordable housing options for older adults. This involves supporting the development of affordable senior housing units and implementing policies that prevent displacement due to gentrification.

-- In addition, I will make sure that behavioral health services are available to everyone, including those with fixed incomes, such as individuals who are retired. Overall, I believe affordable and comprehensive healthcare for older adults is critical and I will support policies that provide healthcare coverage, including prescription drugs and long-term care services.

-- Part of taking care of older adults is making sure we prioritize the professionals who take care of them. I am proud to be endorsed by SEIU Healthcare 1199NW and I will fight for competitive pay and supportive, safe working conditions for all professionals in caring fields who support our older neighbors. This includes workers in organizations that King County contracts with.

-- King County itself employs over 15,000 people and I will work to address age discrimination and promote job opportunities for older adults.

-- I am dedicated to expanding inclusive social programs for older adults, such as meal delivery services, transportation assistance, and community engagement initiatives. Additionally, collaboration with nonprofit organizations specializing in supporting older adults is crucial. By working together and providing funding for programs addressing elder poverty, we can maximize the impact of our efforts.

-- Lastly, I will also advocate for the protection and expansion of Social Security benefits, fighting against any attempts to cut or privatize the program. Strengthening Social Security is crucial to provide a stable income foundation for older adults who lack retirement savings.

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What do you consider as some of the priorities for older adults living in the Seattle/King County areas? \*

- Expanding affordable housing options with age-friendly features.
- Improving access to quality healthcare, mental health support, and long-term care facilities.
- Enhancing public transportation for older adults with increased routes and age-friendly infrastructure.
- Creating opportunities for community engagement and intergenerational programs.
- Protecting and enhancing Social Security benefits, strengthening retirement savings, and addressing elder financial abuse.
- Implementing age-friendly regulations across sectors, ensuring older adults' needs are considered.
- Having strong advocates for older adults, who actively seek input and incorporate their perspectives.

City officials and nonprofit leaders agree that wages for human service workers do not reflect the education required, difficulty, or value of their work to build well-being. A 2022 City of Seattle funded study conducted by the University of Washington School of Social Work found that King County human service workers are paid at least 37 percent less than workers with comparable skill sets in other industries. The report provides several evidence-based recommendations that the City of Seattle can implement now to begin closing the gap. \*

The primary near-term recommendation in the report is an immediate seven percent increase to all City of Seattle funded human service contracts. This represents the minimum level of investment needed in the short term to address high rates of turnover and align human service worker pay with the rest of the labor market.

Will you support and prioritize funding for a seven percent increase in city-funded human service contracts to address systemic wage inequity?

Yes, absolutely.

Over the next few years, the City of Seattle will have an opportunity to build on these investments and support the substantial wage increases recommended by this report. We call on City leaders to work in concert with other public and private funders to identify the revenue necessary to pay the full cost of providing essential, lifesaving human services to all Seattle residents. \*

Will you commit to partnering with SHSC and other human service funders to secure the additional revenue necessary to close the 37 percent wage gap that human service workers face?

Yes, absolutely.

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Many childcare workers struggle to afford childcare. Childcare workers in our coalition hesitate \* to accept promotions because they are concerned that higher pay might disqualify them from receiving a childcare subsidy that they themselves rely on. This is causing quality childcare providers to leave the profession altogether. In a recent survey of former King County childcare workers, one of the main reasons cited for leaving the field was the need to provide affordable childcare to their own children. A lack of access to affordable childcare has ironically created a shortage of qualified early learning professionals. What solutions would you offer to make childcare more affordable and incentivize childcare worker retention?

Universal childcare is an 'economic imperative. It's one of the most powerful tools we have to correct inequities. Research shows that 90% of our kids' brain development happens between ages 1-5. And those same years of life are the hardest years for caregivers. It's a fragile time for families, and the way we fund childcare and early learning has the potential to set up multi-generational well-being, or to perpetuate harm. Providing lactation support, home visiting, and other services need to be part of the conversation.

We need high-quality childcare options for infants and toddlers, especially for low-income families and dual language families. We need accessible, affordable, high-quality childcare, alongside options that are off-hours, on weekends, and near to places of work. I was talking with a woman at the Unite Here Local 8 rally a few weeks ago. She is a mom of two, living an hour away from her work because she can't afford to live closer, and she needs to pay for childcare not just during her work hours, but also during her commute hours. That's layering injustices. Even for families who can afford it, finding access to childcare is really hard.

King County has its own levy process and we're funding childcare above and beyond state programs via our Best Starts for Kids (BSK) levy, but we're seeing that it's not enough. The County has a huge opportunity to lead and, as a County Councilmember, I would push for state and federal investments. There has been a massive influx of dollars lately to support this work, but it's temporary. King County tax payers can't be the ones to shoulder this burden in perpetuity, but we can model the way to do this correctly and work with our colleagues at the state and federal levels, such as Senator Murray and Representative Jayapal, our state-level colleagues like Senator Claire Wilson and Representative Kristine Reeves.

We currently have a mixed delivery model, meaning there are many ways to get childcare (e.g. nonprofit, private, government, church-based), and there is no wrong way to get care for your child. We need to move to a universal mixed delivery model, and we need to create the conditions of success for our small childcare businesses, which are often run by and staffed by women of color. These businesses deserve to be economically viable, and that will come through providing living wages for childcare workers, making sure that they can afford to live where they work and access childcare of their own. Further, it is critical that we use data—from nonprofit organizations like Washington STEM—to inform our government investments and partnerships around childcare and early learning.

This work is expensive, but there is plenty of research to show that the return on that investment is high. And regardless, it's the right thing to do.

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What are some ways that you would work to increase support available to folks struggling with mental health needs? \*

We need family-sustaining wages, not just living wages, for workers in behavioral health and other caring fields. Additionally, we should work towards providing comprehensive benefits packages for caring professionals. This includes access to affordable healthcare, paid sick leave, and retirement plans that offer financial security in their later years. These benefits are crucial for attracting and retaining a highly skilled and motivated workforce.

Before I got into public policy, I worked in mental health research for Stanford University, specifically looking at mood and anxiety disorders, which disproportionately impact members of the BIPOC community and people who identify as transgender, non-binary, and gender non-conforming. Like many of us, I've also had my own challenges with mental health, so this issue is near and dear.

To undo systemic oppression we must invest where needs are greatest. So when it comes to citing the crisis care centers, we have to be looking at where people are suffering from mental health challenges and how to space the centers to be accessible to the most people in need.

Gaining support from the community may be challenging with citing the centers. We need to make space for conversations, for people to voice their concerns and their ideas, and provide assurance that we will continue to reach out for feedback and continue to monitor the community experience near these centers.

To make sure the levy is successful and a connected step toward a broader system,

-- I support crisis responders working with police to provide safer and more effective services to the community.

-- I will advocate for an on-demand, unarmed crisis responder team on our metro buses.

-- I will advocate for competitive wages to hire and retain the behavioral health professionals required to ensure the success of crisis care centers.

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Food banks and free meal providers in the region have always struggled to meet the needs of the public. During the pandemic there was an increase in resources to local food banks. As the pandemic has waned, the resources are also receding, yet the demand for food bank services has increased, especially with cuts to SNAP benefits and inflation. What solutions would you offer to continue to meet the needs of people struggling with food insecurity and ensuring that neighborhoods across the City of Seattle have equitable access to the healthy, culturally familiar food? How do you ensure reliable food support is available despite a much-varied landscape of hunger relief organizations and mutual aid groups? \*

Investments and strategies that I will pursue include:

- Supporting and expanding programs such as farmers' markets, community gardens, and urban agriculture initiatives.
- Working to incentivize and attract grocery stores and markets in food deserts, ensuring that fresh and nutritious food is within reach for everyone.
- Promoting local food production can help foster food security and create sustainable communities. By strengthening our local food system, we can reduce our dependence on distant food sources, create jobs, and ensure that our residents have access to locally grown, fresh produce.
- Supporting free lunches and supplemental meals with our Best Starts for Kids Levy proceeds. I am dedicated to improving the nutritional quality of meals, and addressing barriers that prevent students from accessing these meals during weekends and holidays.
- Reducing food waste, since a significant amount of food goes to waste each year, while many people struggle with hunger. Composting programs and partnering with food banks, restaurants, and grocery stores to redirect surplus food to those in need.
- Strengthening food assistance programs such as SNAP and the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children. These programs are a critical safety net.

I have already been supporting this work as an advocate for immigrant and refugee farmers. I was able to protect and increase funding for County programs to support these farmers despite budget shortfalls.

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