

SHSC 2023 Human Services Candidate Questionnaire

Seattle Human Services Coalition (SHSC) 2023 Candidate Questions

Email *

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What is your name? *

Jorge L. Barón

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? *

I was privileged to serve as executive director of Northwest Immigrant Rights Project (NWIRP) for the past 15 years and as a staff attorney for 2 years prior to that. NWIRP proudly considers itself part of the network of nonprofit providers across the region that deliver high-quality human services to the community. Through my role at NWIRP, I developed close relationships with a range of human services providers, particularly those that focus on serving immigrant and refugee communities. I also had an opportunity to work on advocacy efforts to secure increased funding for human services providers, including efforts in which we partnered with SHSC and other coalitions, including the Equal Justice Coalition and the Coalition Ending Gender-Based Violence.

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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?

I believe the root causes of poverty are complex and wide-ranging but are tied to systemic forms of oppression. For instance, I believe that systemic racism has played and continues to play a critical role in preventing wealth-creation among communities of color and Black communities in particular. More generally, society has made systemic choices to disinvest in certain communities and to concentrate wealth among certain groups. We also have made it more difficult for workers to organize to be able to collectively assert their rights to be able to increase their economic power. The role of government (at all levels) should be to dismantle those systems of oppression, instead of exacerbating them (as they have often done) and to ensure that every resident of a community has access to essential supports in order to not only live but thrive.

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? *

I recognize that so many of the challenges we face as a county—and as a society—are driven by the ongoing impact of systemic racism. I believe it is essential to use a racial justice lens when evaluating policies in all issue areas.

While I have worked to educate myself on this issue over time, my most in-depth opportunity to learn about racism and how I can work against it came from the opportunity I had to participate in the two-day Undoing Racism workshop from the People's Institute for Survival and Beyond. During that workshop, I came to understand that racism exists when race prejudice is combined with institutional power. I also have come to recognize the deep impacts of racism across society, as a system of oppression that is maintained by institutions and that continues to oppress and control people of color.

As a community member and as a potential elected official, I believe that I need to be constantly working to dismantle systemic racism in all its forms. At the same time, I also recognize that I am constantly operating within systems that have been built to perpetuate systemic oppression.

It is for that reason that I have spent my entire legal career working on the intersection of the criminal legal system and the immigration systems because of how pervasive racism is in both of those systems. During law school, I spent both of my summers (2001, 2002) working at organizations representing people facing the death penalty in the Deep South: the Southern Center for Human Rights in Atlanta, and what was then called the Louisiana Crisis Assistance Center (now the Louisiana Capital Assistance Center) in New Orleans. My first experience with what prison conditions are like came from meeting with clients in places like Holman Prison in Southern Alabama and the infamous Angola Prison in Louisiana (both of those prisons are where the death rows in those states are located). One of the cases I worked on while in Louisiana was that of Corey Williams, who had significant intellectual disabilities and was only 16 when he was alleged to have killed someone, but who was nonetheless sentenced to death. He was later taken off death row and ultimately released from prison after many questions arose about his conviction (and to be clear, I was only a small part of that effort as many lawyers and law students ended up working on that case for 20 years).

For the past 19 years, I have been working to protect individuals and families who are being impacted by one of the most racist systems in our society: the immigration system. The racist roots of our immigration policies extend to the very founding of the United States and continue to this day, disproportionately impacting black and brown people. I have worked to redress these impacts, including at the county level, where the racial disparities within the immigration system have been exacerbated by its ties to the criminal legal system. I was part of a successful effort to disentangle those two systems (criminal legal and immigration) at the county level through the adoption of an ordinance that prevented county employees from collaborating with immigration enforcement.

It is within the immigration system that I have seen the deepest impacts of racism on working people as immigrant workers are often pitted against native-born workers in an effort to divide and undermine worker solidarity. I have advocated to advance the rights of immigrant workers to help ensure that unscrupulous employers could not take advantage of their immigration status in order to exploit them to the detriment of not only the immigrant workers themselves but all workers in the region.

If I have the privilege of serving as a councilmember, I intend to continue this work in a broader sense by using the power of my office to ensure that worker protections generally, and protections against

discrimination in particular, are fully enforced. I will also work to enhance the county's existing work for Equity, Racial and Social Justice to ensure that all county employees—including myself—have the tools to identify and address the biases we all have because of growing up and living in a society in which racism and anti-Blackness are pervasive.

I also intend to focus attention on the county's critical role in the criminal legal system, another system rife with racial disparities. I will particularly prioritize addressing racial disproportionalities in that system, such as the fact that nearly 40% of the people in "secure detention" in the King County jail system are Black, even though Black people only make up about 7% of the county's population.

And ultimately, I believe representation is a key piece of moving county level government in a new direction. Our county's past shortfalls for communities of color and for immigrant communities are baked into who is at the decision-making table. Right now, there are 137 seats on County Councils or Commissions across Washington State and only 3 seats are filled by people of color (2.2%) – even though 36% of our state's population are people of color. I would be the first non-white candidate to be elected to serve King County Council District 4, and the first Latino.

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

The first step I will take toward accountability to community needs is to ensure that I am listening and centering the voices of people most impacted by the decisions I will be asked to make in the decision-making process. In other words, I plan to take proactive steps to engage with those impacted communities rather than wait for them to come to me (what some people might call “having an open door”). To give some examples, based on my prior work, if there was an issue before the Council that disproportionately impacted immigrant and refugee communities, I would proactively engage with organizations like Washington Immigrant Solidarity Network, OneAmerica, and others in ensuring that the voices of those most directly impacted by a potential policy change can engage early on. Similarly, if a proposed policy issue is going to impact workers represented by a union (or that could be represented by a union), I would pro-actively engage with that union to understand their members’ perspective on the issue.

In addition to this pro-active, early engagement, I also would want to ensure that there is ongoing communication with these groups and community members as the legislative process plays out. As an advocate, I have experienced situations where the policy-makers heard our input but then we get shut out of the discussions and the negotiations happening behind closed doors and only learn the results after the fact. I want to create a more open and transparent process.

In my work over the past 15 years, I have sought to build genuine relationships with community members by being ready to respond to their identified needs and by developing long-term relationships. An example of that occurred over the past two years as leaders in the local Afghan-American community reached out to me and NWIRP for assistance with a new need created after the departure of U.S. forces from Afghanistan. A large number of Afghan community members were evacuated from their country and being relocated in places around the U.S., including here in WA. But they would need legal assistance to navigate their permanent immigration status because they were being given only temporary protection for two years. However, the existing delivery capacity would be insufficient to address this new need. We therefore got to work and collaborated with Afghan-American community members to successfully advocate for dedicated funding at the state level that enabled us to create a new program, the Afghan Community Project, to serve this new need.

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

With regard to homelessness, I recognize that we must address this ongoing crisis in our county with urgency, centering the experiences and needs of our unhoused neighbors. I am deeply conscious that the primary driver of the crisis is the lack of affordable housing and that any long-term strategy to address homelessness has to focus on ensuring sufficient housing is available in our communities.

We must take a comprehensive and inclusive approach to tackling the housing crisis. I will advocate for the development of affordable housing options that cater to the diverse needs of King County residents, including low-income families, seniors, and individuals experiencing homelessness.

I will support the implementation of robust tenant protections and rent stabilization measures. I understand the importance of preventing unjust evictions and displacement, and will work tirelessly to strengthen tenant rights and resources.

Housing affordability is interconnected with other social and economic factors. I'm committed to fostering partnerships with community organizations, local businesses, and government agencies to create solutions and increase affordable housing stock.

I understand the significance of equitable development and the need to address historical disparities. I will prioritize policies that promote equitable distribution of housing resources, reduce segregation, and combat housing discrimination.

At the same time, I recognize that we need to address the urgent immediate needs of our unhoused neighbors as we work on long-term strategies. Immediate shelter and support services are crucial to providing stability and dignity to individuals experiencing homelessness. Addressing factors that trigger or are exacerbated by homelessness will require expanding access to mental health services, substance use treatment, and increasing tenant protections. A robust support system will ensure that individuals experiencing homelessness receive the comprehensive care they need, and will keep people in their homes.

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

Obviously, the ultimate measure of success when it comes to the homelessness crisis is ensuring that we have adequate, permanent, and dignified housing available for every person in our community. However, as we make progress toward that ultimate goal, I believe we should be focusing on interim measures of success. For instance, I believe we should be acting with urgency to ensure we end unsheltered homelessness in the community. We can also focus on reducing the incidence of homelessness for particular populations like families with children and youth. Another area of deep concern for me is the availability of behavioral health treatment options for people in the community but especially for people experiencing homelessness. An important measure of success will therefore be ensuring that we have treatment slots available for people who need behavioral health care. Finally, we should also be tracking the availability of permanent housing for people with very low incomes (0-30% of the Area Median Income-AMI).

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? *

My perspective on these issue is informed by my experience as a staff attorney at Northwest Immigrant Rights Project where I worked for a period of time providing services to immigrant survivors of domestic and sexual violence, as well as my time advocating for policies that impact immigrant survivors when I served as executive director. I believe that there is an appropriate, limited role for the criminal legal system to hold individuals who engage in harm-causing behavior accountable. However, as your question points out, engagement with the criminal legal system proves inadequate for many survivors and, in many cases, actually leads to active harm to survivors. The other issue that is that the criminal legal system is costly for society (on many levels) and that the evidence is limited that the deterrence approach of the criminal legal system is effective in preventing domestic and sexual violence before it starts.

With that in mind, I would want to make sure we are investing in programs that are pro-actively focused on preventing violence in the first place. As an elected official, I would want to focus resources on approaches that community members (and especially directly impacted survivors) identify as effective in preventing violence. One specific resource would be the Mapping Project that was co-led by the Coalition Ending Gender-Based Violence and published in 2021 that identifies recommendations for public officials on effective approaches that merit expanded funding.

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? *

As I noted in the earlier question, I would want to make sure we as a community are investing resources in programs that are focused on violence prevention in the first place, as well as those that respond to the needs of those who have survived domestic and sexual violence. The organization I was proud to lead for the past 15 years (NWIRP) was part of that response network, supporting the needs of immigrant survivors of violence. In that role, I advocated for increased funding for services to support survivors, often in collaboration with coalitions like SHSC and the Coalition Ending Gender-Based Violence, and I will carry that understanding of the need to adequately fund these services into the County Council if I am given the opportunity to serve. I also think it will be essential for King County councilmembers to work with urgency with state legislators to develop progressive revenue options that will make it possible for the county to adequately invest in systems to respond to the needs of survivors.

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? *

As a community, we need to ensure that older adults are financially secure during their retirement years. In my discussions with voters around the district, I have heard many concerns from older adults about the impact that rising property taxes and the rising cost of living is having on them. I am grateful that the state legislature recently adopted changes to expand the eligibility requirements for exemptions for property taxes for seniors but I believe we need to go further to provide relief to people in the community. We also need to make sure that the county addresses with urgency the backlog of applications for exemptions, which are currently taking close to a year to adjudicate.

But even as we work on these areas, I am also a strong proponent of reforming our tax system at both the state and local levels to shift the burden of funding essential services away from regressive forms of taxation like the sales tax and, to a lesser extent, property taxes. The fact that the county in particular relies so heavily on those forms of taxation means that we place a disproportionate burden on those who are least able to afford those taxes, including seniors living on a fixed income. I will therefore want to work with state legislative partners to develop progressive revenue sources that the county can use to support essential services.

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

In addition to the financial security issues I outlined above, I believe we as a community need to invest in programs that help older adults to continue to thrive and live independently in older age. I would seek to expand investments in programs like adult day services that help to keep older adults with disabilities or certain medical conditions in their home so that these neighbors can get care at home rather than in an institution. I also support the expansion of senior centers that can help promote the health and social interaction of older adults. I have been and will continue to be an advocate for expanded investments in this area through the Veterans, Seniors, and Human Services Levy.

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?

While I am seeking to serve on the county council and will therefore not have the opportunity to vote on city-funded programs, I absolutely support policies to increase pay for human services workers. In fact, as executive director of Northwest Immigrant Rights Project, I joined SHSC to advocate for a higher rate for the Veterans, Seniors, and Human Services Levy (VSHSL) and one of the primary reasons for seeking such an increase was to ensure that VSHSL-funded programs could adequately compensate their workers. Governments at any level cannot truly fulfill their mission to create public goods and provide public services if, in doing so, they are not adequately compensating and protecting workers. But it is not simply a matter of values, it is a matter of good public policy: government work will be of a higher quality and have more impact if it performed by a workforce that is treated with dignity and receives a living wage. This is true no matter whether the work is done directly by county employees or indirectly by nonprofit contractors.

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?

Again, I add the caveat that I am seeking a county council position but I will absolutely support efforts at the county level to identify new revenue options that will allow us to increase compensation for human services providers.

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 idea whose time is long overdue. Childcare is a need to have, not a nice to have as it has been treated for far too long. Washington State has some of the most expensive childcare in the country. Childcare is hard to secure; its cost is an economic burden to parents; caregivers are largely underpaid; and the entire system continues to struggle to recover from the lingering impacts of the pandemic. The lack of childcare and the burden of it is holding families back; impacting our workforce; limiting our economy; and remains an enduring barrier to racial justice. King County has the opportunity as well as the imperative to lead and deliver.

As we move to realize universal childcare, there are upcoming interim steps to take. King County must build upon the success of the Seattle Preschool program and embrace a similar childcare access initiative in the upcoming renewal of the Best Starts for Kids Levy. Embracing a regional approach can help those living in areas of the County outside of the City have access to the same opportunities as their peers in the City. By investing in early childhood education and expanding affordable childcare options, King County can level the playing field for all its residents. This includes supporting low-income families, single parents, and parents of color who face disproportionate barriers to accessing quality childcare. Additionally, culturally responsive programming can address the unique needs of diverse communities, ensuring that every child receives an inclusive and equitable education.

As the question also highlights, we need to make sure the structure of our subsidies does not create disincentives for people to take on work. I have heard from many community members who have pointed out that taking on a good paying job or taking a full-time position after serving in a part-time position might not actually make financial sense because of the loss of county subsidies. I would work to improve the system so subsidies are phased out gradually, even as we continue to ensure that low-income families have access to adequate subsidies to make childcare affordable.

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

Our county and our state need to dramatically scale up services to support the behavioral health needs in our community. I am grateful that voters in King County approved the Crisis Care Centers levy earlier this year, which will provide an important set of resources for us to expand treatment and also to invest in the work force that provides this type of care. We need to ensure that the implementation of this new program will be managed well and that it will be responsive to the diverse set of needs in our community. At the same time, we need to recognize that even the expansion that will be made possible by CCC is not nearly enough to address the need of the community, particularly as we face the potential loss of other treatment options, like the closure of the Cascade Behavioral Health Hospital in Tukwila. We need to act with greater urgency and work with state partners to secure the resources needed for a dramatic expansion of behavioral health treatment services not only in King County but across the state.

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? *

Food insecurity in a region with as much wealth as King County is unacceptable. As I mentioned earlier, I have joined SHSC in advocating for increased funding for a range of human services programs supported by the Veterans, Seniors, and Human Services Levy precisely because I recognize the significant needs in the community and that we need to expand the resources available to address those needs. I have been actively using the platform of my campaign to encourage voters to approve the renewal of the levy to ensure we do not fall even further behind in serving the needs of our community. If I am elected as King County Councilmember, I will be an advocate to ensure that all residents of the county have access to reliable and culturally-specific nutrition. I will be particularly interested in ensuring that those community members who are not eligible for food assistance programs funded by the federal and state governments due to their immigration status have access to programs that will prevent food insecurity.

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