

SHSC 2023 Human Services Candidate Questionnaire

Seattle Human Services Coalition (SHSC) 2023 Candidate Questions

Email *

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What is your name? *

Nilu Jenks

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 is a collection of both government and nonprofit organizations that cover the many different needs of people in a community at different stages and needs of our lives from youth to seniors. My understanding is that these are services offered more on a community level while also meeting individual needs: food access, domestic violence interventions, youth/senior opportunities, housing access, etc. With a broad network of human services providers, there is no community need that is not touched by these important community resources. I am most familiar with the Hunger Intervention Program (HIP), Community Passageways, Solid Ground, KSARC, Rainier Beach Urban Farm and Wetlands, Fare Start, and Casa Latina.

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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?

The root cause of poverty is our system that has been founded on racism/colonialism, classism, and the fallacy that we live in a meritocracy. We have underfunded our education system, have a medical system that puts an unbelievable number of people into bankruptcy, and generally lack a social services network system that actually stabilizes people and allows them to escape poverty. Meanwhile, we pretend poverty is due to moral failure. The ramifications of slavery, redlining, and racist banking practices have deepened our inequities. Lack of investment in public schools and the rising costs of college have made it harder to achieve a quality education. Suppressed wages, part-time schedules, and the decline of unions have moved many down the economic ladder instead of up, while reductions in top marginal tax rates for the wealthy have transferred wealth up instead of down. I could go on.

I absolutely believe that our government has a role in addressing poverty. From creating progressive revenue sources to raising the minimum wage, from demanding equity in our school funding to direct investments in underserved communities, and from providing supportive regulations for unions to enforcing workplace safety rules, governments can make better policy choices that build a better future and ultimately work for all of us. We must intentionally invest in communities that have been harmed and denied equity, especially because our current income inequality continues to be a driving force of these issues.

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 woman of color, I have directly experienced the impacts of racism, and I know how harmful it can be physically, emotionally, and psychologically. Even knocking doors in this election, I have had people refuse to touch the paper I have touched (definitely made some edits to my canvassing strategy!). Growing up Iranian-American, especially with parents who became undocumented in my early childhood, I saw how much inequity is in our world and how you need luck + health + opportunity, etc. so one can make it in our society.

I believe the first role of addressing systemic racism is acknowledging its huge impact and knowing we must put intentional effort and policy into repairing the harm. The impacts of systemic racism will not naturally disappear. We must make sure there is equitable access to education, healthcare, job training, seeing one's culture and identity celebrated, and opportunities for growth. As a City Councilmember, I believe my role is to advocate for and partner with communities and organizations working to address systemic racism. I would love to see more community stewardship of land, supporting small businesses owned by marginalized communities, and having priority hire labor practices. As climate change is a central part of my platform, environmental justice is a central theme of mine: tree and park access parity, access to cool spaces and protection from wildfire smoke and climate extremes, assistance to get cooling/filters for people's homes, etc.

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

I want to be someone who is available to my community with district office hours and who will focus on the needs of our workers, our students and their families, our immigrant populations, and help develop a sense of community across District 5. I strongly believe that no policies should be enacted without the participation of impacted communities and will work to bring people of all backgrounds into the political process. For the government to serve the people, it has to hear the people.

My campaign has been a reflection of how I will work on the City Council. I have been out in the community every day, listening, seeking input, learning and growing. It is inspiring and humbling to have earned support from many parts of District 5 and I know that I will return to these relationships for ideas, advice, and expertise if I am elected. I know that many communities will need direct outreach to hear their needs and doing so will be a priority of mine.

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

The peer-reviewed research is clear: our lack of affordable housing at all levels (coupled with the rising cost of living in our region) is the driving cause behind our homelessness crisis. Our region has a massive deficit of affordable housing: according to a recent study, King County has lost more than 120,000 affordable housing units since 2010, while its population has grown by more than 300,000 in that time. This lack of affordable housing keeps many working families at the edge of poverty just so they can (barely) afford a roof over their heads, and many of them slip into homelessness whenever an unexpected expense or crisis occurs. Wages have not kept pace with rising costs of food, housing, and healthcare. We know that many people are one crisis away from financial disaster. Unchecked rent increases, weak tenant protections, and lack of investment in subsidized housing are all factors that contribute to housing insecurity. Additionally, our broken healthcare system leaves people with no safety net, unmanageable debt, and untreated physical and mental illnesses. For many, medical or utility bills are what make them fall so far behind. Lastly, we have widespread presence of synthetic opioids that are contributing to numerous deaths and devastating addictions that contribute to poverty and that often play out in public spaces. While substance abuse is not new, this phase of highly addictive, cheap, and dangerous drugs is and we must fund treatment options and centers.

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

Some examples of metrics of success are having enough beds for everyone who is unhoused and an accurate region wide tracker that shows that availability. The wait times for and availability of permanent no- and very-low income housing are also a critical piece. We should know how many people moved from shelters to actual housing! I would also like to see a behavioral health response team that is actually funded and staffed. I would also like to see caseworkers paid a proper wage that covers the cost of living, so the incredible people doing this work are stable in their own work and homes.

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? *

One of the most traumatic things survivors have to go through is rehashing their trauma experience. We must make sure that domestic and sexual violence experts are present for all questioning to protect those who have been already traumatized.

Given the struggles with a criminal legal response, we need to fund alternative response teams such as the Fire Department's Health One team. I would also like to see community-based solutions such as counseling and support systems and trauma-informed care. Community education and prevention (starting with youth) will be important, housing support for those experience domestic or sexual violence, as well as providing economic initiative opportunities are important ways to help prevent violence and help give people the agency to leave violence.

Community-based alternatives that I am aware of are Mary's Place, ADWAS, and KCSARC. I would both advocate for these and similar orgs and help drive funds their way, but also I would look to build community-based partnerships to help extend their reach.

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? *

From reproductive care and abortion to gender affirming care, I will be a strong advocate to protect all people's rights to live and work in safety and dignity. The lack of investment in caring and justice for victims of sexual violence and trafficking is appalling. To me, budgets are moral statements of our priorities, and I will work to make sure the City of Seattle dedicates more funding and resources to these problems. This violence is also a driver of homelessness, especially for families with children, so I also want to make sure that there is funding support for people to not have to choose between shelter and violence.

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? *

Seattle needs to work on progressive tax revenue. I would love to see Seattle shift to a land value tax, which in other cities has helped drive greater revenue and development (also addresses affordable housing) and relieves pressure from property taxes that keep harming our elders living on a fixed income. I support the property tax reduction for seniors, and I want to make sure that we continue to work on our public transit, affordable housing, as well as meal services (and activities) so they can retire in peace. Also, we need to support working people today, so we make sure people have proper retirement plans that let people retire at a reasonable age.

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

Access to affordable housing is one big issue facing older adults in our area. Social housing is publicly-owned, permanently affordable housing that is available to people of low and moderate incomes. By bringing people of all income levels into a living area, the social housing model enriches and fosters a greater level of community, which is also very important to combatting the isolation and loneliness faced by some older adults. Social housing also provides rental stability, so people won't be priced out by rental increases, which are all too common. Our current profit-driven housing market does not serve the poor and elderly at all, and I will support strong investments in the social housing model to build a better future.

Over 50% of the people accessing our Bitter Lake food bank are seniors and that's just at one of our District 5 food banks. The Lake City Community Center just burned down, and it had been an important access point for many seniors for meals and activities. While a church has stepped in to be a place to serve meals 3 times a week, many have not returned to use the services at the church (smaller space). Rebuilding our community center and supporting our food banks are important to me.

Finally, I want to move toward a land value tax system, which would ideally reduce property taxes which is putting tremendous pressure on many of our seniors who are on a fixed income.

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, I strongly support this needed wage increase for our human service workers. When we undervalue this work, we undervalue entire segments of our community who rely on human service workers for essential care and support.

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.

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? *

It is infuriating that we need to address the question as a city when we really should address it as a nation. I remember my parents not having access to childcare when I was little, as I went with them to their jobs cleaning homes and they had no access to family support or other services. Families must have access to childcare to go to work, and we need to target investments in childcare deserts and provide funding contracts for care rather than subsidizing kids in an effort to create stable markets. The cost of childcare is exceeding that of college in some places, yet only 1 in every 6 low-income eligible children receive the assistance they need to access quality care. Building a workable childcare marketplace in WA will require a creative combination of employer support, increased tax incentives for families, vouchers, subsidized on-site care, and public/private partnerships. I'm eager to work on this problem at the city level to do whatever we can to improve the childcare marketplace (and workplace) for all and for our county and city employees.

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

I am grateful the crisis care levy passed, and I will strongly advocate to have at least one of these opened within Seattle. We must also support students and have counselors at all schools, because early identification and support is vital for people struggling with mental health needs. Seattle needs to train, staff, and fully fund a behavioral response team, so we can help people that are in crisis so we can connect them to help and further services. Funding a behavioral response team will be one of my priorities.

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? *

I would like to see more community kitchens in Seattle, would support urban farms and community gardens, and of course continue to support our food banks and outreach programs. Communities know best what their needs are so reaching out and partnering with them will be vital in making sure the most successful programs get funded and developed. The Food Equity Fund under the Seattle Department of Neighborhoods is one of the programs I would support.

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