

SHSC 2023 Human Services Candidate Questionnaire

Seattle Human Services Coalition (SHSC) 2023 Candidate Questions

Email *

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What is your name? *

Sofia Aragon

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 at its core attempt to address issues of basic human needs. For example shelter assistance and child welfare services. I am most familiar with health services for children and adults and some experience with housing programs.

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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?

Lack of educational opportunities, employment opportunities, and lack of basic services are examples of root causes of poverty. Immigrant and refugees have additional or unique circumstances that create inequities and additional hardship or challenges. This is because immigrants and refugees may have obtained significant education and enjoyed full employment in their country of origin. However, they may face many barriers after immigration. My own family has experienced this. Examples of government action to address this is establishment of a minimum wage, access to affordable housing, accessible transportation, affordable or free education and job training. Unnecessary barriers for foreign trained professionals to practice their career in the US should be removed. The role of Government is to providing education and training opportunities as well as assistance to basic needs such as food and housing. The goal is to provide conditions in which individuals and families can achieve a level of self- sufficiency to have the quality of life to which they aspire and meaningfully contribute to their community.

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?

According to Webster's Dictionary, racism is a belief that race is a fundamental determinant of human traits and capacities that racial differences produce an inherent superiority of a particular race. Race is a social construct. Racism leads to discrimination, social inequalities, and health disparities. I see my role as an elected official to understand how laws and policy can contribute to systemic racism. Diversity, equity, and inclusion lenses can be used to identify and remove bias and racism in public policy development. As a nurse, I am most interested in rooting out racism and bias in public health. COVID-19 shed a light on the enormous gaps in our public health system which caused health disparities. Examples are that Hispanics or Latinos and Black/African American people experienced 3 times the death and hospitalization rates from COVID-19 compared to white people. In addition, Asians experienced increased hate crimes as a result of COVID-19. I am dedicated to reviewing current policies to root out bias that create and perpetuate inequities. This means improving training for health and human services providers, being more aware of and addressing the unique needs of diverse communities, and including affected communities when developing policy solutions.

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

Government often collects information about community with surveys. In terms of data collection, I would ensure that outreach and information are inclusive of diverse groups and representative of the community. Disaggregation needs to be considered to uncover inequities experienced by groups smaller in number, taking care to protect the privacy of individuals. Elected officials also have the opportunity to convene individuals and groups to collectively identify and discuss community needs and develop solutions. I would bring together individuals and organizations that represent different opinions and interests.

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

The root causes of homelessness include wages not keeping up with the cost of living, the absence of emergency temporary shelter, the lack of affordable housing, unaddressed mental health needs, and the impact of substance use disorder among the unhoused. According to the King County Opioid Dashboard, those experience homelessness is one of the most affected groups affected by the opioid crisis.

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

When examining trends in the yearly one-time count, a success indicator would be an overall decline in homelessness throughout the county. Other metrics I would like to see tracked are:

- Racial disparities decreasing over time among the homeless
- Increased availability of emergency short-term housing or shelter to close the gap between temporary and more stable or permanent affordable housing
- Increased availability of affordable housing
- Decreased trends in substance use disorder
- Increased availability of mental health services that serve the unhoused including inpatient, outpatient, and community based services

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? *

The role of the criminal legal system includes providing legal protection to survivors of gender-based violence such as facilitating restraining orders and clearing and avoiding backlog in the system so that help is provided in a timely way.

Examples of community-based alternatives in King County are:

- The Domestic Abuse Women's Network which "Supports, empowers and shelters survivors of domestic abuse in South King County"
- The YWCA which "uses a survivor-centered model to heal the harm caused by gender-based violence such as domestic violence, sexual assault, and commercial sexual exploitation on individuals, families, and our community. Our services utilize a culturally relevant practice and trauma-informed care approach."

I would also be interested in learning more about organizations that focus on the needs of diverse communities who face these issues but may have difficulty finding culturally appropriate care.

I would promote and support these organizations by providing funding and learning best practices with the hopes of providing sufficient access to effective services countywide.

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? *

With the County's resources, grant programs can provide needed funding to organizations that address gender-based violence. I would also encourage public-private partnerships to contribute to funding. I would also be interested in advocating for innovative programs to promote prevention and effective intervention. I would also examine best role of criminal justice in these issues and work to fill any gaps.

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? *

A successful program that my mother relied on in the last few years of her life was a program that allowed her to pay reduced property taxes. This helped stretch her limited budget immensely. I would encourage continuation of this program given the rising cost of housing. I would also work with employers to promote improved retirement savings and pension security. The county also has an opportunity to engage in affordable housing for seniors and access to affordable healthcare.

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

Housing affordability, public safety, and accessible transportation.

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, wages are behind inflation and wage increases can help issues of poverty, homelessness. The Seattle Consumer Price Index has seen double digit increases the last couple of years so 7% is a reasonable increase.

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

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? *

Childcare workers should be paid a living wage so that they are able to provide affordable childcare to their own children. In addition, any disincentive against promotions because of disqualification from a childcare subsidy should be removed. One idea would be to create a sliding scale system so that childcare workers do not experience a sudden and severe drop in income.

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

I am in support of increasing mental health services, including innovative ways to increase community based mental health services. For example, I would be in favor of supporting a co-response model for fire and police so that health professionals are the ones to respond to mental health crises. I supported the crisis center levy and support more prevention. For example, I would also include public awareness of ways to prevent mental health illness or risk factors that lead to mental health issues so that families and individuals have the opportunity to address the issue and prevent a crisis situation.

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 convene organizations engaged in providing meals and foodbanks to identify ways to enhance coordination and resources. I would map out where in the county there are a lack of food resources and low income communities. In addition, I would also map out where diverse communities tend to reside and explore the availability of culturally familiar food. I would explore investing county resources to have more culturally familiar food more available and provide incentives for diverse food vendors to establish themselves in diverse neighborhoods. As an elected official, I would work with state and federally elected officials to advocate for continued benefits such as SNAP and Farmer's Market nutrition program, the Seniors Farmers' market nutrition program, and Special supplemental nutrition program for women, infants and children.

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