



Candidate Forum—Prepared Questions 2022

Helena City Commission and Mayor Candidate forum is hosted by YWCA Helena, Habitat for Humanity, The Friendship Center, Good Samaritan Ministries, and ACLU Montana. Candidates were asked the following questions for written response.
www.ywcahelena.org

Affordable Housing and Homelessness

Q Homelessness and a lack of affordable housing are growing issues in Helena. Individuals who are experiencing homelessness or are at risk of homelessness are at high risk of being victimized; experience an exacerbation of mental health and substance use struggles; experience challenges accessing food and hygiene; experience challenges accessing or utilizing childcare; experience challenges finding employment; and experience challenges accessing public benefits or other resources that would assist them with stability. What is your plan to address this issue?

A Sadly, homelessness and Affordable Housing are not unique to Helena. We can first reach out to the community stakeholders to build a task force that addresses these issues collectively and comprehensively. Nonprofit leaders, builders, landowners, large entities, and city employees all need a seat at the table. Secondly, the task force needs to hold public meetings and be transparent in fact-finding, research, and consensus-building. We need to start by researching what other jurisdictions have done or are currently doing to combat this issue and build a framework of what's working + how Helena compares + long-term solutions versus short-term solutions. I know the problem cannot be solved by the city alone, we need people to invest time, money, and ideas to create solutions. I commend the current commission for the efforts and community discussions they have started. I think the trust fund they have approved is a great start and something that can assist in the work in this area.

Nonprofit Support

Q What is your plan to support local nonprofits?

A We need better intersectionality with city employees and local nonprofit leadership. By creating more partnerships between the city and our strong nonprofit community, we can more easily identify areas for improvement, overlap, or ways to streamline parallel efforts. Trust-building is the foundation of this effort. I believe both the city and the work our nonprofits do are vital to the success of Helena. But I firmly believe we can be better if we are in sync and working towards the same goals. I can provide my time to help find those partnerships and support the tremendous work both the city and nonprofit sector do for the Helena Community.

Mental Health

Q Mental health resources in town have drastically decreased over the last couple of years, particularly with the closure of Journey Home and temporary closure of Our Place. Limited access to mental health services and very high caseloads for mental health providers are huge barrier for many individuals. What is your plan to address this issue?

A Better response and resources are and have been a prominent issue in Helena and Montana. Law Enforcement has taken the lead at the local level over the years as the first responders to mental health crises and, I believe, done an outstanding job. Crisis Intervention Team training has been a large part of that response. And the nonprofits, including NAMI along with great support from Mignon Waterman, were instrumental in funding and supporting this effort. But after identifying those in need is where the government has failed. I was a participant in getting the Journey Home established and it is a *Mental Health Continued.....*

shame it had to close. The city must work closely with the county on this issue as they and the State of Montana are the main resource of funds to address the needs of consumers in our community. We do a good job identifying those in need but the resources to help consumers after that point are very lacking. The city doesn't have the funds to address this large need and must continue to address it with the State and county. We need to be working closely with our local legislators, whom I believe have tried for years to address this, to continue our efforts at the Legislature. We need to make sure this is a top issue at the League of Cities so they can assist at the Legislature.

MMIW

Q Would you support and advocate for creating a response to murdered, missing Indigenous women, children, and two-spirit people that is led by Indigenous community members, is culturally authentic and healing, and provides justice for the victims of this violence? If so, what are your ideas?

A This has been an issue before numerous sessions of the Legislature. The Missing Indigenous Task Force (tasked with making recommendations to Law Enforcement and others) and the Missing Indigenous Persons Review Commission (make recommendations to LE and others, but also review the cases across Montana to develop a better understanding of these incidents and where improvements are needed) were formed. Both have a diverse membership and a long list of duties. Our Law Enforcement will review any recommendations that come from these two bodies and create a response per that advice.

Criminal Justice

Q Black Lives Matter, resource officers in school, the City's budget for policing. All were issues raised to the City commission last year and stem from lived experiences of unequal and disparate responses on communities of color than those of their white counterparts. If elected, you will have an opportunity to be part of conversations about how to create more just and fair systems in Helena. Do you believe this to be true? If so, what are the systems that need addressed and what leadership will you offer in those conversations?

A It is apparent there are citizens in the community who believe they have experienced unequal or disparate treatment due to their race. This is not only true at times to those citizens but also to others such as those with mental health needs, different sexual orientations, homeless, and others. What has proven effective is continuing training and education in this area. One that has worked well with Mental Health Consumers is Crisis Intervention Teams (CIT). I think training and communication similar to CIT could be developed in other areas of concern. Officers need to know what these citizens are seeing and feeling. It will require the nonprofits and other entities that are the voices for these citizens to help and be at the table. And especially open minds by all. But we can't just concentrate on law enforcement. These issues have been addressed in our community for years, and I think it has improved, but there are still incidents and issues. An example is how much our community has changed reference the different sexual orientations. Will there be issues in the future, yes. But we need to keep educating and addressing this with our citizens and especially our young.

Melinda Reed

Candidate - City Commission



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A I plan to build on the foundation laid by the current commission in establishing a Housing Trust Fund. I would seek to ensure that funding was contributed to the trust, and to work with partners including Habitat for Humanity, Helena Housing, other nonprofits, developers and housing advocates to leverage grants and other funding to expand Helena’s services for our unhoused population. In addition, I would continue ongoing discussions about providing additional shelter support services in our community and work to establish an actionable plan within the first year.

Criminal Justice

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A I believe that there is work to be done to create fair and just systems in Helena. As the former Executive Director of the Friendship Center, I experienced firsthand the disproportionate number of women of color who experienced domestic violence, were involved in the criminal justice system, and faced barriers to securing housing, among other issues. I believe that elected officials have a responsibility to listen to and act upon concerns around racial and social justice affecting their community, and I would offer to lead and support discussions around opportunities to identify and meaningfully address barriers to just and fair systems in Helena.

Mental Health

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A The city does not currently play a role in providing direct services related to mental health. I plan to work closely with Lewis and Clark County, which does provide services, and to prioritize allocating resources to providing mental health services for our city and county. In addition, the city can play a role in identifying and leveraging funding for mental health services, and commissioners can individually advocate for these needs with the state and beyond. I plan to continue listening and learning from community partners and will seek to support sustainable solutions.

Nonprofit Support

Q What is your plan to support local nonprofits?

A There are a number of ways the city can support local nonprofits. The city has supported direct funding for nonprofits in the past, and I would recommend a transparent process based on priorities identified by the community to provide small grants to local organizations. I would also work to ensure that the city was a good partner to local nonprofits, identify opportunities for collaboration and actively seek to coordinate as much as possible on issues related to housing and social services in particular.

MMIW

Q Would you support and advocate for creating a response to murdered, missing Indigenous women, children, and two-spirit people that is led by Indigenous community members, is culturally authentic and healing, and provides justice for the victims of this violence? If so, what are your ideas?

A Yes, I would support a culturally authentic response to murdered, missing Indigenous women, children and two-spirit people that is led by Indigenous community members. An important first step in the process would be to identify what support was needed by indigenous community members in order to develop a response. I would then want to ensure that I was doing everything I could to amplify the voices of Indigenous leaders and to advocate for meaningful justice.



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A I DO support and will advocate for the issues of our Native communities. I don't, however, believe government can fix this (or any) problem by itself. We need to collaborate with local non-profits, charities and churches and that already have programs in place or are willing to create them rather than trying to re-invent the wheel.

Criminal Justice

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A I believe the citizens of Montana, and Helena specifically, are 'different' than most of those around our nation. We definitely need just and fair systems that deal with real issues in Helena but we should not 'create' issues in Helena that aren't in the typical citizen of Helena's priority list just because it is on the forefront of the national scene. If our citizens really want to reduce the budget for city police or school resource officers, we need to have that discussion and base the commission decisions on that public input but we should never decide what Helena's citizens want based on what people in other places might want. Public input from Helena's citizens is critical in every decision.

Nonprofit Support

Q What is your plan to support local nonprofits?

A As a city, we need to do the research to find out which non-profits are actually making real-life differences and create the necessary collaborative grants or programs to bolster their efforts.

Affordable Housing and Homelessness

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A Again, collaboration with local non-profits, charities and churches is absolutely necessary. City government does not have the knowledge or the resources needed to handle our homeless issues on its own. There are numerous entities that have the passion, desire, experience and resources to work on the issue, especially if they are helped instead of hindered.

Mental Health

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A At the expense of sounding like a broken record, I again point to the numerous local non-profits, charities and churches that have the passion, desire, experience and resources to work on the issues related to mental health. We need to determine which ones really make a real-life difference and work alongside them to help remedy what has become a huge issue.



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Criminal Justice

Q Black Lives Matter, resource officers in school, the City's budget for policing. All were issues raised to the City commission last year and stem from lived experiences of unequal and disparate responses on communities of color than those of their white counterparts. If elected, you will have an opportunity to be part of conversations about how to create more just and fair systems in Helena. Do you believe this to be true? If so, what are the systems that need addressed and what leadership will you offer in those conversations?

A Helena city must serve all our citizens equitably. No exceptions. We must not tolerate discrimination against persons of color or minorities of any sort. This must be our 24/7 goal. As a commissioner I will work to see that city programs including law enforcement work seamlessly toward this goal. I support the Black Lives Matter movement. And I support city funding of the SRO program. I know the city and Helena school district are currently renegotiating an MOU that presumably will specify what our community expectations are for SROs working in Helena schools and continue city funding of these officers. If elected, I intend to be part of this conversation and others as they will no doubt develop.

Affordable Housing and Homelessness

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A You have packed a lot of "experience challenges" into this question that affordable housing by itself, whether it be rent or own, will not of its own accord successfully meet. But I agree affordable housing is a commanding variable without which other life challenges are infinitely more difficult to address. So, I am committed to doing what it takes to provide affordable housing to all our citizens and those who are just passing through. Folks who work in our city should be able to live in our city. And no one should ever die alone in one of our parks without access to shelter, food, and health care. Ever. The current commission has created the Helena Affordable Housing Trust. If elected, I will promote the growth in and the broadest utilization of this fund.

MMIW

Q Would you support and advocate for creating a response to murdered, missing Indigenous women, children, and two-spirit people that is led by Indigenous community members, is culturally authentic and healing, and provides justice for the victims of this violence? If so, what are your ideas?

A Helena city must engage our indigenous community members in any response it might consider re: murdered and missing indigenous persons. I would not presume the city knows what response to make without the recommendations of our indigenous community members. If this is not already the case, if elected, I will urge the city commission to invite our indigenous community to bring doable proposals forward for the commission's consideration. I lobbied the legislature for 40 years. I never asked them for their plans for how best to fund schools, kindergarten, state government employees, a statewide school employee health care pool, or public employee retirement. I took our plans to them. I never asked the board of public education to develop whatever school accreditation and teacher licensure standards it wanted. I carried our union proposals to them. I expect and welcome Helena advocacy groups to do the same with the city commission.

Nonprofit Support

Q What is your plan to support local nonprofits?

A Helena would be a desperate place to live without our robust community of nonprofits. We need them all from the arts to housing, food share to domestic security, parks to health care. In today's changing world, nonprofits even provide us the news. So far as we are fiscally able, I support robust collaboration with nonprofits that wish to make our city a better place to live and work. As on occasion may be necessary, I might support sharing our city budget and human resources with nonprofits that are working successfully on our citizens' behalf, especially those nonprofits that deal directly with people in need such as victims of domestic violence, food insecurity, homelessness, and physical and mental disabilities.

Mental Health

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A Helena city and existing nonprofit resources are too limited to provide the full array of mental health resources we so desperately need. We can try, but here we must ask the state and federal government to step in. Our job as a city is to work with our state and federal partners to secure the fiscal and human resources they are better positioned to provide. I am very familiar with lobbying the legislature and federal government for more. If elected, I will urge the city to be proactively engaged in working with those who can more adequately fund our community's mental health needs. If President Biden's massive Build Back Better Plan were to pass, Helena and communities all over America would have an opportunity to address health care in ways we have never before imagined.

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A I will provide the experienced leadership necessary to address the hard conversations needed in Helena. My background in education helps me show others how to understand what they are in control of and how to rise above their circumstances. I continue to mentor people and promote individualism, a focus on goals, how to access community resources, and friendship. I will continue to rationally discuss the issues that are creating division with our society. I believe Helena is a great place to create happiness and a comfortable living. We will continue to value our differences and respect those we disagree with. To paraphrase Mr. Rodgers, "You be you and I'll be me and we will live together in perfect harmony."

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A Accessing public benefits and resources is dependent on the individual. Every adult answers the question; what kind of shelter and sustenance am I willing to pay for or able to afford? For instance, Darin and I decided that one of us would provide childcare by putting off a career. The consequences of that decision were monetary, but we always had a roof over our head, food on the table, and a house filled with joy and laughter. Through the years, we have helped and mentored individuals and young married couples, welcomed a family in our home and cleaned up a city park that was trashed by homelessness and drug gangs. In Helena, the conversations I have engaged in with individuals who have come out of homelessness or in the process of gaining self-sufficiency gives me hope and pride that Helena is addressing the housing issue. I will continue to support those business that are hiring those struggling individuals. Helena has great non-profits with mission statements that directly address and provide resources for shelter and childcare. I have seen some neat rejuvenation projects that transform mobile home parks into tiny home parks that double the occupancy of privately owned homes. I will keep the discussions going so solutions can be found and implemented through non-profits.

MMIW

Q Would you support and advocate for creating a response to murdered, missing Indigenous women, children, and two-spirit people that is led by Indigenous community members, is culturally authentic and healing, and provides justice for the victims of this violence? If so, what are your ideas?

A In finding justice for victims of violence, I empathize and understand the struggle and the grieving process. I value life and real justice. Once elected, I will investigate the funding for detectives and mend the communication between city, county, state, and federal agencies that deal with these horrific circumstances. We need to stay on guard, report suspicious activities, and communicate with the goal of protecting property and life.

Nonprofit Support

Q What is your plan to support local nonprofits?

A Voluntary citizen support to non-profits is essential to the success of our society. The city is a provider of essential services only, but I will address any break down or red tape non-profit organizations are experiencing. Nonprofits have a top-notch volunteer work force and as a community we should do what we can to ensure they can operate as effectively as possible. I encourage the donation of time, resources, and money to all who are seeking to help non-profits address community needs. The rewards of volunteerism are many, such as new friends, joy, hope, and a sense of accomplishment at helping those in need. Keep up the great work Helena.

Mental Health

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A I will try to address the mental health issue, but Helena has a high ratio of therapists and non-profits that directly deal with mental health. Let's not forget that there are numerous spiritual institutions as well. We have numerous indoor gyms with a variety of price ranges that help with working out physical and mental frustrations. We also have year-round outdoor recreation, that I personally enjoy. Most importantly, I encourage Helena to continue to build mentorships, friendships, community and to participate in spiritual institutions because these are the key ingredients to developing meaningful lifestyles. Helena will and must stay mentally strong by reaching out to connect with others in this game we call LIFE.



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A As a man who has experienced inequities and injustices myself because of my physical make up, I believe it is not only my responsibility as Mayor but also my moral responsibility to ensure that systems of equity and justice are promoted throughout this community. I believe in the power of balance and empathy. I think systems and institutions can be improved and updated rather than abolished and torn down. This is how I will fundamentally approach issues of such specification.

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A Homelessness is an issue that is near and dear to my heart. I once lived through it and while there is no silver bullet to addressing this issue, I can commit that I will do everything in my power over the next 4 years to take meaningful and compassionate steps to address this issue in our community. I will make sure that all hands remain on deck, by hearing from and working with community stakeholders, individuals with lived experience of homelessness and other community partners with a vested interest in finding humane solutions for our neighbors that are struggling. As part of the plan to address these issues we were able to create the "housing Trust Fund." I will continue to make deliberate efforts to continue to get the needed stakeholders together for a permanent solution.

MMIW

Q Would you support and advocate for creating a response to murdered, missing Indigenous women, children, and two-spirit people that is led by Indigenous community members, is culturally authentic and healing, and provides justice for the victims of this violence? If so, what are your ideas?

A I would support and advocate for a response to what is an epidemic in our state and across this country. I would be open to launching an awareness campaign in Helena facilitated by the city commission that would aim at holding public information sessions led by first person voice advocates. I would also seek out federal support that could assist the city in promoting awareness, vigilance, and most importantly, action in preventing these tragedies from occurring in our communities.

Nonprofit Support

Q What is your plan to support local nonprofits?

A I believe necessary partners to any successful local government are nonprofits that understand the issues of the community. This is why I will continue to be a staunch advocate for partnering the city with local nonprofits. I will also ensure that wherever and whenever I can use my voice and platform to call for more resources for our local nonprofits—my voice is heard.

Mental Health

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A I too agree that mental health resources in our town are well below adequate. I will work with the city commission and the public to gain the best possible insight on how to implement and add more resources and support for mental health in our community. Much like homelessness, addressing mental health is a sensitive issue that requires more than one voice at the table. I will lead efforts to hold listening sessions that result in actionable steps the city can take to better support mental health in our community.