

UNITE! CANDIDATE QUESTIONNAIRE 2020

We want our questionnaire to help UNITE members understand why you are running for office, how you fit in to our movement, and where you stand on issues that concern us. Please feel free to add or elaborate. Email back to info@uniteforpa.com

BACKGROUND

Name: Jessica Benham

Office and district you are running for: State Representative, District 36

Party Affiliation: Democrat

POWER AND POLITICS

Tell us about yourself and why you are running for this office. We are interested in learning about your policy priorities and also about how you understand the role of elections and elected officials in movement-building. (250-500 words)

Throughout my work, I commit to cross-movement solidarity, firmly believing that marginalized people must work together to build power. As the co-founder of the Pittsburgh Center for Autistic Advocacy, I have worked to build a movement committed to intersectional justice for all Autistic and disabled people, collaborating across movements with organizations focused on justice in healthcare, prisons, reproduction, environment, unions, housing, transportation, and more. I have fought against the forced institutionalization of disabled people, stood with others against the injustices perpetrated against Trans people at the Allegheny County Jail, advocated against legislation that would take away reproductive freedoms, and fought for a comprehensive overhaul of our healthcare system to ensure universal coverage. As a graduate worker at the University of Pittsburgh, I stood with my colleagues against my union-busting employer, demanding the right to a fair union election.

At the time, I believed that my role was in issue-based advocacy and community organizing, but not in electoral politics. I didn't see many (if any) politicians working to advance the concerns of my communities, or those of other often-marginalized groups. Then, at a house party in early 2018, I met Sara Innamorato and Summer Lee. In meeting them, I realized that electoral politics could involve people who fought for the issues impacting our communities, instead of representing special interests. I volunteered on Sara and Summer's campaigns in 2018. In 2019, I ran the canvassing operation for Liv Bennett and Bethany Hallam in South Pittsburgh. People in my community who noticed the work I was doing began to ask if I would consider

running. At first I laughed, because there are very few openly Autistic people in elected office anywhere in our country, but as more people asked, I began to feel called to serve in this way.

Disability is frequently left out of conversations about progressive values. I consistently look to the broad cultural and systemic reasons why disability is sidelined. One key reason is the lack of disabled people in elected office and other leadership roles. I would be the first openly Autistic woman elected to a state legislature anywhere in the United States. I would also be the first out LGBTQ+ woman elected to the Pennsylvania state legislature, in a state that does not have civil rights protections for LGBTQ+ people enshrined in law.

Elected officials can and should be movement leaders in the fight for justice. Their role, of course, includes working on legislation in Harrisburg and providing excellent constituent services. But more than that, elected officials should be participants in community organizing in the district – sometimes, this looks like actively organizing people around a particular issue or cause, but other times, this looks like showing up, demonstrating solidarity, and listening.

Tell us about the communities you plan to engage during your campaign and how you will work with them during and after your campaign. (250-500 words)

There are many more groups than I could list in 500 words, but I'm hopeful that the examples below illustrate my willingness to engage with all my potential constituents.

I have long made it a habit to attend the meetings of the neighborhood-based community groups in the district, because I make it a priority to understand the concerns of these groups. Neighborhood groups are not always representative of neighborhoods as a whole, but do offer a unique opportunity to interface with many outspoken community members at one time.

I want to prioritize communities in District 36 that are plagued by flooding and landslides, due to a lack of effective water management infrastructure. While the U.S. Army Corp of Engineers, various municipalities, water and sewer management authorities, community partners, and other organizations have worked together to study and develop plans to address the impacts of past flooding and decrease the likelihood of future flooding, they deserve a partner at the state level who is willing to fight for the necessary funding to complete much needed infrastructure updates.

I'm interested in engaging with groups with whom I share identity, like disabled people and LGBTQ people, but I'm also particularly interested in connecting with groups whose identities I do not share. For example, District 36 has a growing immigrant population, particularly Latinx, Bhutanese, and Nepali immigrants, which are concentrated in the Carrick and Brentwood areas of the district. I have already connected with organizations serving Latinx individuals in the district, and look forward to learning more and building stronger relationships with them. I'm also in the process of setting up meetings with individuals from the Bhutanese Community Association.

single-payer legislation that does not take the needs of these populations into account. As a disabled person with chronic healthcare concerns, I have experienced the inability to afford necessary health coverage and believe that the voices of people with disabilities belong in conversations about health care system overhauls. I'll fight to protect the Medicaid expansion that has benefited over 3,000,000 residents, fight for people with disabilities and seniors to receive long-term support and services in their own homes.

2. Do you support guaranteed access to abortion services as part of any present or future healthcare system?

Yes No

Comments: _____

3. Do you support LGBTQ specific healthcare as part of any present or future healthcare system?

Yes No

Comments: _____

4. Do you support legally mandated paid family leave/paid sick days?

Yes No

Comments: _____

5. Do you support initiatives to limit the costs of prescription drug prices, such as Ohio's Drug Price Standards Initiative?

Yes No

Comments: _____

Housing and Public Services

6. What policies, if any, would you support to protect existing residents against rising housing costs?

Comments: I would be in support of equitable zoning policies that would allow multi-family homes in areas currently zoned single-family. I would be supportive of policies allowing local municipalities to legislate rent control. I would support policies that would encourage less speculation in the real estate market, particularly looking at the ways in which landlords are taxed.

7. Do you support measures to improve accessible, affordable, integrated housing options so that people with disabilities can live in the communities where they work or are seeking work?

Yes No

Comments: As a disabled person, I'm well aware of the lack of affordable accessible housing in Allegheny County. I have friends who are going into debt specifically because they have to spend more than abled people on housing to ensure accessibility

8. Do you support legislation that would allocate additional funds to maintain and repair our public infrastructure, including lead line replacement?

Yes _____ No _____

Comments: _____

9. Do you support public banking initiatives?

Yes _____ No _____

Comments: *I'm particularly intrigued by the idea of bringing back post office banking.*

10. What improvements, if any, would you suggest for public transportation?

Comments: *We desperately need more funding for public transit to expand service areas, frequency, and accessibility. While the state has a measure of control over funding for public transportation, this will also mean lobbying and working with partners at the federal level to ensure that every municipality and transit system has the resources it needs. We must also guarantee that these resources are equitably distributed. We should partner with the ATU to advocate for better training, particularly around accessibility and safety, and the additional jobs that more frequent buses and more expansive routes would bring.*

11. Would you support legislation banning the privatization of our water and sewage systems?

Yes _____ No _____

Comments: _____

Work

12. Do you support policies and legislation that make it easier for workers to organize unions?

Yes _____ No _____

Comments: _____

13. Do you support legislation enshrining the right to strike, including sympathy strikes?

Yes _____ No _____

Comments: _____

14. Do you support raising the minimum wage to \$15/hr or higher?

Yes _____ No _____

Comments: _____

15. Do you support legislation to increase employment opportunities for adults living with disabilities?

Yes _____ No _____

Comments: *These should not just be employment opportunities – we also need to end the practice of subminimum wage for people with disabilities (as well as tipped workers, incarcerated workers, and others making subminimum wage).*

Education -

16. Do you support providing universal pre-K and/or childcare programs through our public school systems?

Yes No

Comments: All children should have access to high quality early childhood education as part of the public school system. Children who access high-quality early learning experiences are far more likely to succeed in K-12 school and in life. But it's not enough to simply have access to early childhood programs, public early education should be welcoming, supportive, and inclusive for all students, including children of color, children with disabilities, and children of families who are immigrants and refugees. For many children with disabilities and developmental delays, preschool is the time that these disabilities are first identified, so when we're failing to meet their needs or excluding them from programs, we're denying children the services they're entitled to under law and need to succeed. Early childhood programs and educators should have the resources and supports they need to provide high quality early education to all children.

17. What is your position on charter schools?

Comments: Charter schools are public schools under the law and need to be held to the same standards of transparency and accountability as traditional public schools. Many charter schools fail to deliver better outcomes than traditional schools and have historically underserved our most educationally vulnerable students, including students with disabilities, English learners, and highly mobile students, leaving districts with less resources to meet the needs of students who often require the most support. Charter schools', especially cyber charter schools', funding should be aligned to the real, actual cost of serving students- which would provide a significant savings to school districts. At the same time, we need to increase the state share of education funding - in basic education, special education, and career and technical education - so that all schools have the resources they need for students to succeed.

18. What is your stance on free tuition for university students?

Comments: I support it. I think it would make most sense to start with free 2-year schools and trade school, then expand to free public universities.

Environment

19. Do you support the build-out of new petrochemical infrastructure in Pennsylvania?

Yes No

Comments: I would be hesitant to support the build-out of new petrochemical infrastructure in Pennsylvania, given the lack of regulations, lack of appropriate fines, and ongoing problems with current infrastructure. In my view, petrochemical companies should focus on fixing the problems with their current infrastructure instead of asking to

build more. The environmental issues inherent in the petrochemical industry put the health and safety of our region at risk.

However, I want to do more to create a table for this discussion where trade unions feel welcome, because if we want to accomplish anything on this policy issue, it's going to have to be all of us together. Their commitment to worker protections and family-sustaining wages is one that is critical to building a future that works for everyone. I know from my conversations with union leaders that they do want to have discussions about conservation and the future of work, and I look forward to continuing my conversations about this issue with both workers and environmental activists.

20. Do you support legislation to counteract rising emission rates and resultant climate change?

Yes _____ No _____

Comments: _____

21. Is it possible to both protect the environment while also creating and maintaining good union jobs in Allegheny County? If so, how?

Yes _____ No _____

Comments: _____

Criminal Justice and Police Reform

22. Do you support any police accountability or oversight measures, such as citizen review boards?

Yes _____ No _____

Comments: _____

23. Do you support the full legalization of cannabis?

Yes _____ No _____

Comments: I support decriminalization, but I can't support blanket legalization without guarantees that legalization will benefit communities that have been harmed by the so-called "war on drugs." I'm concerned that legalization at this time would result in a system in which white, wealthy people will be able to benefit, while the communities that have historically been over-policed will not see any benefit.

24. Do you support the decriminalization of other drugs such as cocaine, heroin, and/or methamphetamines?

Yes _____ No _____

Comments: _____

25. Do you support the abolition of ICE?

Yes _____ No _____

Comments: While the state government can't abolish ICE, we can take steps to prevent local law enforcement from cooperating with ICE.

Strengthening Our Democracy and Public Finance

26. Do you support the expansion of mail balloting, early voting, and other access-increasing measures?

Yes _____ No _____

Comments: _____

27. Do you support automatic voter registration?

Yes _____ No _____

Comments: _____

28. Do you support voter ID laws?

Yes _____ No _____

Comments: _____

29. Do you support campaign finance reform legislation that would limit the amount and frequency by which rich individuals and corporations can influence individual campaigns?

Yes _____ No _____

Comments: _____

30. Do you support the continued existence of "tax loopholes" that allow corporate entities to pay a lesser tax burden than they would otherwise be mandated by state or federal law?

Yes _____ No _____

Comments: _____

31. What is your stance on UPMC's standing as a non profit? Should their non profit status be challenged?

Yes _____ No _____

Comments: *UPMC has abused their standing as a non-profit. They do not pay their workers well enough and have opposed unionization. They own substantial property, but pay no taxes on it, while benefiting from local government supportive of their expansion.*