Nonprofits offer candidates insights into children’s issues

By Tessa Duvall  Wed, Jun 29, 2016 @ 12:26 pm | updated Wed, Jun 29, 2016 @ 4:54 pm

The vast array of needs of Florida kids were spelled out for dozens of candidates for local, state and congressional office at the Candidate for Kids First Coast Forum on Wednesday morning.

Hosted by the Tallahassee-based Children's Campaign alongside the Delores Barr Weaver Policy Center, the forum aimed to educate candidates on the issues surrounding child welfare, juvenile justice and mental health.

Among the attendees were candidates with the potential to shape local juvenile justice initiatives, including State Attorney candidates Angela Corey, the incumbent, and challenger Melissa Nelson, along with Public Defender challenger Charles Cofer. State Attorney candidate Wes White and incumbent Public Defender Matt Shirk were not in attendance.

“It was interesting to hear about the child welfare issues. I actually, when I started in Juvenile 34 ½ years ago, I did dependency, and it’s heart-breaking,” Corey said after the presentations. “That was very compelling. And then hearing [Jacksonville Sheriff’s Office Lt.] Lakesha [Burton] relate what we all know our kids go through in regards to violent crime was also really compelling.”

Burton had described the scene at a 2012 triple homicide that was witnessed by many children. The next day, Burton said, they were outside playing even though the scene was still blood-stained.

“They were so conditioned to see this type of violence that it really became their norm,” Burton said.

Corey said her office’s diversion programs take a “holistic approach” to working with juveniles.

“You can’t fix a child and then put them back into a bad environment,” she said.

Nelson said knowing juvenile offenders often have backgrounds that include abuse, sexual assault, human trafficking and child welfare involvement are all mitigating factors that should be considered in every case.
Nelson said she would use that information “to make informed and sound decisions about how that mitigation should be considered and evaluated in a specific case.”

Nelson said she would also like to work with community resources, such as the Delores Barr Weaver Policy Center, to connect juveniles in the justice system with the opportunities and resources they can provide.

Cofer, who is running for public defender, said he was surprised at the rate of mental health issues for kids in the juvenile justice system and that getting funding for mental-health services will be crucial.

“If we properly address that, we will get people out of this cycle of getting arrested, being housed in the jails when the root cause is mental health issues,” he said. “I think everybody understands it’s much more efficient to deal with mental health issues through the mental health system than the criminal justice system.”

‘A LOT OF WORK TO DO’

Roy Miller, president of The Children’s Campaign and an advocate for children for more than 40 years, said Florida isn’t doing as well for its children as it used to.

“We have a lot of work to do for kids in the state of Florida,” Miller said to the packed room at the Jesse Ball duPont Center.

Among the presentations given at the forum, advocates highlighted:

■ The need for more mental health providers. With Medicaid reimbursement rates unchanged since the 1990s, Florida struggles to attract new providers. Fewer than 20 percent of kids receive the mental health services they need.

■ When adjusted for inflation, money for child welfare has declined even as demand has increased. Large case loads lead to burnout of child welfare workers, with 1,400 case managers resigning each year at a cost to the state of $14 million.

■ Girls involved in the juvenile justice system have experienced high rates of physical and sexual abuse, and three-quarters of girls locked up have diagnosed mental health issues.

Miller said the Campaign has hosted these events for candidates since 1994, and have used them to educate those running for office on child-centered issues in a non-partisan way.

Miller said though some candidates will win and some will have to try again, they’re all leaders within their communities. It’s important for them to understand you “don’t pit kids against kids,” he said, adding that it’s not helpful to rob child welfare to fund juvenile justice.

Staff Writer Andrew Pantazi contributed to this report.

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