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AFT-Maryland Candidate Questionnaire for the 2022 Election

AFT-Maryland is a federation of local unions of the AFT within the state, including the Baltimore Teachers Union and the City Union of Baltimore, as well as state employee members of the Maryland Professional Employees Council, AFT Healthcare-Maryland, and the Maryland Classified Employees Association. Together, with the Baltimore County Federation of Public Employees, and Baltimore County Federation of Public Health Nurses, AFT-Maryland has thousands of members who work to make the state a better place for its residents.

The AFT-Maryland has prepared the following questionnaire for candidates running to represent us in Annapolis as a means to familiarize the candidates with issues that our members care about most. It also allows us the chance to see where the candidates stand on these issues.

AFT-Maryland locals participate fully in the endorsement process of the Maryland and DC AFL-CIO State Federation; the state federation will announce its final endorsements in early 2022. However, because we are a large contingency within the Maryland AFL-CIO, the unions of the AFT-Maryland have a heavy influence on who labor chooses as its candidates for endorsement.

Please take the time to complete this candidate questionnaire by no later than January 7th, 2022, at 5:00 p.m.

If you have any questions, please contact Todd Reynolds, AFT-Maryland Political Coordinator, at 410-764-3030 or treynolds@aftmd.org.



Candidate Information

Please note the AFT-Maryland plans to make these questionnaires public. However, personal information will be redacted.

Employer

CASA

Party affiliation

Democrat

Have you ever been endorsed by a labor union? If so, which one(s) and when?

Yes, SEIU 1199 in 2018.

Have you ever held elected office? If so, when?

No.

General Questions

1. The AFT-Maryland is a federation of numerous employee unions, including Baltimore City teachers and paraprofessional and school-related personnel (BTU); professional state workers (MPEC—Maryland Professional Employees Council), state healthcare professionals (AFT Healthcare-Maryland), state classified employees (MCEA—Maryland Classified Employees Association); as well county (BCFPE and BCFPHN) and city (CUB) employees. Why should we support your campaign?

Over the past two years, COVID highlighted our community's economic and social inequities. Some members of our leadership have been around for decades, but our community is still hurting. It shows that our community needs a person representing diverse voices, and we need bold, new leaders. I plan to be that fighter because I am a son of Prince George's County. I grew up in New Carrollton, attended school at St. Mary's Landover Hills, and graduated from Parkdale High School. As an Afro-Latino, gay man, I have fought for the voices of people from diverse backgrounds my entire life. I have a wealth of political experience as a staffer and strategist. I served as a staffer to Prince George's County Councilmember Thomas E. Dernoga, and the Maryland Legislative Latino Caucus. I worked as the deputy political director to Delegate Joseline Peña-Melnyk, and currently work at CASA as a Research and Policy Analyst. I have been blessed to gain a lot of recognition for my work. I was named the "Top 30 Under 30" by 93.9 WKYS in 2017 and the "Forty Under 40" by the Prince George's County Social Innovation Fund due to my inventive political strategies, immense work ethic, and devotion to the community. I received The Root's 2018 Young Futurist award and the Daily Record's 2020 class of the "Top 40 under 40, Very Important Professionals (VIP)" for Maryland. I will be on the side of working people, who haven't had a champion in a long time.

2. Have you ever been a member of a labor union? If yes, please give the name and date.

Yes, I'm a member of Communication Workers of America Local 32035 The Washington-Baltimore Newspaper Guild. I've been a member since October 2020 when I became an employee at CASA.

Questions on Worker Rights

3. Expanding the right to collective bargaining. Currently, a number of state and public school employees in Maryland have collective bargaining. However, many still do not. For example, state judiciary branch workers; grad students, adjuncts, and full-time faculty in the University of Maryland System; faculty at our state's community colleges; coordinators in community schools; and many county and city librarians; do not have the right to bargain collectively. If elected, will you sponsor and/or support legislation to grant these public employees the right to engage in collective bargaining with their employer?

Yes, If elected, I will sponsor and/or support legislation to grant those public employees the right to engage in collective bargaining with their employer.

4. Raising the minimum wage. Our members see every day the harmful impact of a minimum wage that does not keep up with rising costs of living throughout the region. While Maryland will raise its minimum wage to \$15 per hour in 2025, it still will not be indexed to inflation, and Marylanders working at this compensation level will continue to fall behind. If elected to office, will you author and/or support legislation to tie the minimum wage to the rate of inflation?

Yes, If elected I will author and/or support legislation to tie the minimum wage to the rate of inflation.

5. Binding arbitration in contract negotiations.

Maryland recognizes the importance of collective bargaining as a way to assure employees at the state, municipal, and school district level have a fair and democratic voice in the conditions that govern their employment. For many of those employees and their unions, when disagreements arise during negotiations, there is no mechanism by which those disputes can be resolved. In most cases when the parties reach an impasse, management can implement their proposals without the consent of the employees. Because of this, management often realizes there is no need to bargain in good faith. To fix this flaw, many states and local governments have implemented binding arbitration. When an impasse arises at the bargaining table, management and the union agree to take their case to an objective, third party arbitrator. The arbitrator hears the case, and issues a ruling that both management and the employees must agree to. There is some form of binding arbitration for state employees in Connecticut, Delaware, and Maine, and Baltimore County offers binding arbitration for its municipal employees, for example.

Do you support objective, binding arbitration for contract negotiations for school district, city, county, and state employees? As an elected official, would you support strengthening those rights for the public employees that fall under your jurisdiction?

Absolutely - I currently have binding arbitration in the CBA between my union CWA and CASA. I've seen it work and would support strengthening those rights for the public employees in Prince George's County.

6. Public employee compensation. Under the current governor's administration, it is rare for state workers to get the compensation they deserve, even though the state has often had a budget surplus. As a result, too many public agencies have staffing problems, as many employees leave for better compensation in the private sector. What is your plan to assure state, county, and municipal employees (including workers employed at BCCC, the Maryland School for the Deaf, and all public, state-supported higher education institutions throughout the state) that their compensation levels will be financially competitive with the private sector?

This is a time for the government to get innovative - we definitely need to raise the pay to be on par or competitive against private sector opportunities but I also think we could provide employment incentives so we don't lose the talent we have at our public institutions. Some examples of incentives are additional tax credits for those who purchase homes in Maryland, assist employees pay off student loan debt, and provide pandemic bonuses for our employees who are on the frontlines everyday.

7. Health insurance transparency. Audits and budget analysis show some government healthcare surplus funds are being diverted for use in unrelated areas. In effect, employees are therefore paying much higher than their negotiated healthcare splits for employer self-insured healthcare coverage. What should a public body (the state, the municipality, or the local school system) do with money refunded to employees' health insurance programs? As an elected official, will you sponsor legislation that would force government employers with self-funded insurance programs to be more transparent with actual claim cost, rebates and other refund programs?

Transparency is essential to build trust in our government institutions. If elected, I will sponsor legislation that would force government employers with self-funded insurance programs to be more transparent with actual claim cost, rebates and other refund programs.

8. Retirement for public employees: defined benefit versus defined contribution. Most Maryland public employees have defined benefit retirement plans like a pension. This allows employees to plan for their retirement because they know exactly how much income they will be receiving. With defined contribution retirement plans like a 401(k), employees contemplating retirement are never quite sure when the right time is to retire because of changes in their plan's investments. Do you support keeping public employee retirement plans as defined benefit/pension plans?

Yes, I support keeping public employees retirement plans as defined benefit.

9. Prescription drugs for retired state employees. The State of Maryland is currently being sued by a group of retired state employees over the loss of their prescription drug coverage. Their position is the state has backed out of the promised retiree prescription drug benefit. Do you support full health benefits for retirees including prescription drug benefits? Under what circumstances, if any, would you agree to a reduction in benefits for retirees?

I support full health benefits for retirees including prescription drug benefits. Under no circumstances would I agree to a reduction in benefits.

10. Appropriate staffing levels. This past fall, numerous news reports confirmed what many state employees have already known: that staffing in a number of state agencies have fallen to levels that the safety of workers and the ability to carry out their duties has been compromised. For example, the Maryland Department of Health has not been able to admit court-ordered patients to state mental health facilities in accordance with the law due to the lack of staff. Likewise, the State Investment Park Commission found that park ranger staffing levels are too low to meet the demand of Maryland Residents wanting to visit our state's parks. The most recent state analysis shows nearly every state agency has at least a 10% vacancy rate, with some of the larger agencies having a vacancy rate over 15%! Would you support efforts to increase recruitment and retention of qualified state, county and city employees? Would you make funding of additional staff a priority?

Yes, I would support efforts to increase recruitment and retention of qualified state, county and city employees. I also would make funding of additional staff a priority.

11. General [for candidates running for Governor, Comptroller, or for office in Baltimore City legislative districts only]: What do you think are the three biggest problems facing Baltimore City public schools? If elected, how will you solve these problems?

12. Education funding. The state has enacted the Blueprint for Maryland's Future, an ambitious plan developed by bipartisan education experts and stakeholders. The Blueprint will provide a world-class education our students need. Despite hand-wringing from the current governor, the state has the funding to pay for the Blueprint through Fiscal Year 2026. Beginning in FY 2027, the state will have to make decisions regarding revenues to continue to provide every student in the state the education they need. If elected, how would you propose the state fund the Blueprint? How will you advocate for these necessary revenues?

I'm in support of the Blueprint for Maryland's Future and believe it sets us on the right course to begin tackling the issues facing our scholars and educators. I believe additional revenue is needed if we truly want to address the needs in public education. We raise this additional funds by creating new industries in Maryland that the state then taxes and regulates. We also raise the funds by closing tax loopholes to ensure corporations and the wealthy pay their fair share.

13. Living Wage for Paraprofessionals. One element that was unfortunately unresolved by the Kirwan Commission recommendations was the pay for Paraprofessionals and School Related Personnel (PSRPs). For too many PSRPs throughout the state, their compensation levels are not enough to be considered a living wage. Will PSRP compensation be a high priority for you if you are elected to office? How can the state better show its appreciation to PSRPs working in our state's public schools?

Yes, I will support PSRP receiving higher wages. It's time Maryland began treating all working people with dignity.

14. Public School Construction and Renovation [for candidates running for Governor, Comptroller, or for office in Baltimore City legislative districts only]. In 2013, the state passed the 21st Century Schools Program, which allowed the Baltimore Public School System and the Maryland Stadium Authority to leverage bonds to renovate roughly 25 public school buildings. While a good start, Baltimore city still has the largest portfolio of aging and obsolete school buildings in the state; therefore, the program needs to be expanded. If elected, what will your administration do to assure more aging school buildings in Baltimore city will be eligible for renovations?

15. Public charter schools and local oversight. There are over 50 public charter schools in the state of Maryland, and the vast majority of them reside in Baltimore city. Private, out-of-state charter school operators have previously wished to weaken the state law overseeing charter schools to make teachers and staff employees of the charter board rather than employees of the local school district. This would remove all protections that teachers and staff have under their collective bargaining agreements. It would limit oversight of these privately run public charter schools by taking them out from under the purview of the local school boards. It would also give the private operators a "blank check waiver" from any local school board policy. Should charter school teachers and staff be considered employees of the charter school or of the local school board? Should oversight of these schools be weakened?

Any school that takes public funding should be accountable to taxpayers. Private schools must agree to anti-discrimination policies, teacher certification, and employee and student protection. Charter Schools in Maryland should be governed by local school boards. I do not support weakening oversight of Charter Schools.

16. School vouchers and the BOOST program. Maryland is a state that diverts public funding to send students to private schools - the BOOST school voucher program. While the program is not codified in law, the governor's budget every year has re-directed millions of dollars of public funds to these private schools, many of which discriminate against students and families who don't adhere to that school's beliefs such as gay marriage. If elected to office, what will be your plan regarding Maryland's BOOST school voucher program? Should the state ever give public dollars to students to attend a private school? Would you support tax breaks to corporations that fund student scholarships for private k-12 schools?

I believe that public schools are the heart of our educational system, so I will oppose anything that drains funds from our school system. Every dollar we spend on aid for private and religious schools is money we're taking away from public school educators, students, and support facilities. I believe that we should ultimately aim to eliminate funding for nonpublic schools throughout the state, but I understand that this process may take time. I support a gradual decrease in funding before eventually removing it and reallocating it to Maryland public schools. I would not support tax breaks to corporations that fund student scholarships for private education.

17. School Staffing. In too many of our public schools, administrators are not following the law and are hiring people who are employees of non-profit organizations, some of whom are uncredentialed and untrained. Because they are not direct hires of the school district, they are not covered by the collective bargaining contract, nor are they held to the same accountability standards as certificated employees. If elected, will you work to ensure that school districts follow the law to prevent public schools from hiring employees from nonprofit organizations, circumventing the collective bargaining agreement? Under any circumstances is it acceptable to you for a school to hire an uncredentialed and non-unionized employee to be involved in the education of Maryland students?

I will work to prevent public schools from hiring employees from nonprofit organizations, circumventing the collective bargaining agreement. Under no circumstances is it acceptable for a school to hire an uncredentialed and non-unionized employee to be involved in the education of Maryland students. When school administrators circumvent the law they ultimately are hurting our students.

18. Teacher recruitment and retention. The global pandemic has exacerbated the increasingly challenging problem of teacher retention and recruitment. Far too often, experienced, successful educators are made to leave our school systems. Newly hired teachers in some alternative teacher education programs stay in the classroom for an average of 3 years. How can the state enact legislation to support the retention of the highest quality educators, and recruit more to their ranks?

We're in a time where the government needs to start thinking innovatively and develop solutions. To recruit and retain qualified educators we have to provide competitive compensation and retirement benefits. Using California's Teacher Housing Act of 2016 as a model I plan to work in the General Assembly to provide housing subsidies for teachers using our Federal Low Income Housing Tax Credit in addition to American Rescue Plan dollars to help provide housing assistance to our teachers and give them an incentive to invest in Maryland and the communities they teach.

19. Elected versus an appointed school board [for candidates running for Governor, Comptroller, or for office in Baltimore City legislative districts only]. In 2022, the citizens of Baltimore city will finally be allowed to elect two additional members to the school board. Baltimore city is currently the only jurisdiction in the state whose entire School Board of Commissioners is appointed. In 2022 the board will expand from 10 to 12 seats, with the two additional seats being elected rather than appointed. Of the 23 other Maryland county school boards, 19 are fully elected, and four are an appointed/elected hybrid, with only Wicomico County having more appointed than elected positions. If elected, would you support legislation transitioning Baltimore city to a fully elected or hybrid board with the majority of seats being elected? What is the optimal structure for Baltimore City's School Board and why?

20. Standardized testing in the schools. In our state's public school system, instruction time in our classrooms is often pushed aside so that students may prepare for and take a plethora of standardized tests. What is your view on standardized testing in our state's public schools? If elected, what policy positions would you take regarding the number of standardized tests required of our students?

When we take a look at our schools and plan to evaluate them with a broader lens than simply standardized testing, we'll understand the full scope of what is affecting our students' achievement. I support the 2017 Protect Our Schools Act that was passed in Maryland. We can better eliminate hurdles to student success both in and outside the classroom when we begin evaluating our students as whole people and seek to meet their needs.

Vision for Maryland

21. Transportation. When Governor Hogan cancelled the Red Line rail project, he replaced it with a revision of the MTA regional bus lines and renamed the system the Baltimore Link. How effective do you believe this new bus plan has been? How can the state improve the transportation needs of its residents?

We need to begin making much larger investments in our public transportation infrastructure. A modern transportation system is the hallmark of a thriving society. Studies consistently show that increased transportation leads to reduced poverty rates, lower unemployment, and better healthcare. In Annapolis, I will support: Expanding our transportation system to ensure that every member of our community can navigate the region with ease. Green transport initiatives that make commuting more affordable and accessible. A project to make our state highways safer for cyclists and pedestrians while also including safety improvements for drivers. The completion of the Last and First Mile connectivity for the Purple Line.

22. Revenues and closing unfair tax loopholes. In order for the state, county, city, and local school system to continue to provide the services to Maryland residents that they deserve, do you believe the state must work to close loopholes in our tax structure? From things like instituting combined reporting (where out-of-state corporations no longer avoid paying taxes on the revenues they generate in Maryland) or a carried interest tax (where wealthy hedge fund managers pay the same income rate that the rest of Maryland residents pay), would you introduce and/or support legislation that would make our state tax code more fair?

We should work on revising our income tax structure and close all corporate tax loopholes. The wealthiest members of society and big corporations should pay their fair share of taxes to help fund our public institutions.

23. Privatization, General. As public employees, each of our members works for an entity that is directly accountable to the residents we serve. Far too often, when jurisdictions and school districts choose to contract out or privatize those services, the level of accountability changes with those services. A private company or nonprofit is accountable to its board of directors or shareholders, and not necessarily to the residents that rely on its services. In addition, their employees are seldom unionized. If elected, would you support any plans to privatize and/or farm out work to a private company or nonprofit in our state and local governments or local school systems? If so, why?

I will not support any plans to privatize and/or farm out work to a private company.

24. Privatization, specific. On September 2, 2021, the Maryland Department of Health announced the Facilities Master Plan, which includes plans to close Western Maryland Hospital Center in Hagerstown and Deer's Head Hospital in Salisbury within the next 5 years by transferring patients to private facilities. In many cases, these facilities offer the only long-term care options for Maryland residents on dialysis or who are dealing with chronic respiratory problems. If elected, would you support the plan to close these state facilities? Would you support outsourcing state, county or city operations?

If elected, I would like to meet with impacted residents, leadership of the Maryland Department of Health, and the employees who potentially lose their jobs to figure out the best solution. To me outsourcing shouldn't be an option till all other options are extensively explored.

25. State's mental health and addiction crisis. The need for mental health and addiction services has increased during the pandemic. Mental health beds in the state hospital system are filled with court ordered patients. If elected, would you support increasing private and public resources for treatment to be sure all Maryland residents have access to the care they need?

We need to have adequate capacity in our healthcare facilities for mental health and addiction services, every Marylander deserves to have access to care. This hit close to home for my family - in 2017 when we were dealing with a family member needed mental health care it was almost impossible to have them receive treatment in Maryland. That is why I support increasing private and public resources for treatment.

26. Vaccines and working with unions to return to work. The COVID-19 pandemic has of course been a challenge for the safety of Maryland residents and our members who have been returning to work. While we hope that the worst of the pandemic is behind us, we know from past experiences with mutations of this novel virus, recovery and a return to normalcy may not be linear. Vaccines must be a part of a comprehensive strategy to get past the pandemic, as well as an important tool for fighting public health threats in the future. What role do you believe unions and management have in constructing a plan to vaccinate their workforce? What in your mind is the way unions and management can work together to make sure represented employees are offered a COVID-19 vaccine?

COVID-19 has impacted all of us. The health and safety of your members and Maryland residents is priority number one. I firmly believe that a multi pronged solution that includes mask mandates for both vaccinated and unvaccinated, social distancing, while also having vaccine mandates in place with a weekly testing requirement for exceptions made for health and religious reasons. This only works if we have open communication between unions and management. Only together can we navigate through this pandemic safely.

Thank You!

Thank you for taking the time to complete this candidate questionnaire. If you have any questions, please contact Todd Reynolds, AFT-Maryland Political Coordinator, at (410) 764-3030, or treynolds@aftmd.org.



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