

Williams -22- House



AFT-Maryland Candidate Questionnaire for 2022 Candidates

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—whose members work for the city—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 region and 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 Metropolitan Baltimore AFL-CIO Council and the Maryland and DC AFL-CIO State Federation; the council and state federation will announce its final endorsements in early 2022. However, because we are a large contingency within the Baltimore 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. It may be returned to

Todd Reynolds, Political Coordinator
AFT-Maryland, AFL-CIO
5800 Metro Drive, Suite 100
Baltimore, MD 21215

Fax: 410-764-3008
Email: treynolds@aftmd.org

Please return this completed questionnaire no later than January 7th, 2022. If you have any questions, please contact Todd Reynolds, AFT-Maryland Political Coordinator, at 410-764-3030.

2022 Candidate Questionnaire
AFT-Maryland

Candidate for the Maryland House of Delegates – District 22

Candidate's name: Nicole A. Williams

Address: _____

Phone: _____

Email: _____

Occupation: Attorney Who is your employer? Rees Broome, PC

May we make your answers to our questionnaire public? Yes

Party affiliation (circle one):

Democrat Republican Independent Other (please specify) _____

Have you received an endorsement from a labor union? If so, which ones?

Not this election cycle but I have in previous election cycle.

Have you ever held elected office? When? Yes. I was elected to the Prince George's County Democratic Central Committee in 2014. I also currently serve as State Delegate in the Maryland General Assembly representing District 22.

General

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? I have been a champion for working people during my entire political career and involvement in the community.

2. Have you ever been a member of a union? If yes, please give the union name, local number, and dates active. Yes, I was a member of the Teamsters Local 922 when I worked as a tour guide at Tourmobile in the 1990's as a college student to help pay for my college expenses.

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, I would be happy to sponsor such legislation or support any such legislation filed by one of my colleagues to grant public employees the right to engage in collective bargaining.

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, I will sponsor or support legislation to tie the minimum wage to the rate of inflation.

State service/public employee issues and rights

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? Yes, I do support binding arbitration for employees, and I support strengthening those rights for public employees that fall under my jurisdiction.

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? I am hoping that we will have a Governor elected this year that will work with the General Assembly to proposed increase salaries in the upcoming budget, that the salaries will increase automatically based on inflation and that we will develop a plan to deal with the large number of vacancies that we are seeing all throughout our state agencies which is causing burnout amongst our state employees who do stay.

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? I think that the local government should try and do all that it can to keep healthcare costs low for its employees. Insurance is not my strong suit, but I am happy to support my colleagues who have a greater expertise on this issue with legislation to address this issue.

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 employee retirement plans as defined benefit/pension plans. My mom worked for over 40 years for the Federal Government. She was offered a pension plan when she started working for the Federal Government and maintained her pension option during her entire time in government. She is now retired and was able to comfortably retire because she knew the amount of income, she would receive each month.

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 do support prescription drug benefits for retirees. I am not certain under what circumstances I would agree for a reduction in benefits. The only way I would support such a change is if we went to a universal health care system and then such benefits would not need to be provided by the State.

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, we must make efforts to increase the recruitment and retention of qualified state, county and city employees. If we do not, our existing staff will become burned out and this also hampers employee morale. I do think we should make staffing a priority.

Public Education

11. General: What do you think are the major challenges facing Maryland's public education today? If elected, how would you help solve these problems? I think there are so many challenges facing our public schools today from keeping our children safe as we try to navigate through this COVID pandemic, keeping our schools open and dealing with the learning loss that we saw

among some of our students during the virtual learning period. We also have aging school infrastructure that we need to address.

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 handwringing 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? While a member of the Maryland General Assembly I voted in favor of the Blueprint legislation. I also voted to override the Governor's Veto of the Blueprint legislation. I will continue to support the funding that was adopted in the bill and ensure that each year the budget contains the funding required to full pay for the Blueprint legislation.

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? I think it is important to ensure that all of our State employees are receiving a living wage including our paraprofessionals. We need to make sure that there is money in the budget to increase the salaries of our PSRPs.

14. Public School Construction and Renovation.

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? I am happy to work with my colleagues in the Appropriations Committee to see what we can do in the Capital Budget to increase the program.

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? As a state that was once number one in the nation in terms of education, we need to work to get back towards that reputation. One of the ways that we can do that as a State is to maintain oversight of our charter schools to ensure that they are meeting the same standards that we would hold for our public 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 am not a fan of using taxpayer dollars to fund private schools or to pay tuition for children to attend a private school. Nor do I believe we should provide tax breaks to corporations that fund scholarships for private schools. I think that money should be invested in improving our public schools. If parents wish to place their child in a private school, I believe that is perfectly fine. However, as a state we should focus on ensuring that our public schools are the best in the nation.

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? Yes, I will work to ensure that school districts follow the law to prevent public schools from hiring employees from nonprofit organizations. I know that there are certain support service jobs within our public schools that do not require the employee to have certain credentials. However, for those that do then I believe that we need hire those who meet the credential requirements and that the non-profit employees should be part of the union just like all other employees within our school system.

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 need to do more to support our teachers, such as bonuses, increase pay, sufficient time for training and classroom development as well as smaller class sizes. We have been asking our teachers to do more with less over the past few years.

19. Elected versus an appointed school board.

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? Here in Prince George's County, we are undergoing the same debate, what is the best structure for our local school board. I think the structure of the Baltimore City School Board should be based on what the residents of Baltimore City believe is in their best interest for the children of Baltimore City. I am willing to support whatever structure the residents believe is best.

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? I am not an education expert and I am not going to represent that I know all of the answers about the best way to educate and test our children. I know that there are certain tests that are required because of various federal laws and regulations enacted over the years that affect the education funding we receive from the federal government. I think we should continue with those tests. However, outside of that, I think we should exam the need for additional testing and explore if the time could be better spent on classroom instruction.

Vision for Baltimore Metropolitan Area and Maryland in General

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? I do not think that this new system is effective. The purpose of the Red Line was to transport residents faster across the city. However, there have been studies and news articles that have reported that the revisions have not resulted in shorter commute times. Several students in Baltimore City especially those in middle and high school rely on the bus system to get to and from school. Many times, a student must transfer buses in order to get to school. If one bus is late, then that affects the ability of the student to arrive at school on time. This affects the child's classroom instruction and negatively affects the child's attendance record.

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? Yes, I think we should close these corporate loopholes to ensure that corporations that do business here in Maryland are paying their fair share in taxes. I am willing to sponsor and/or support legislation that would make our state tax code fairer.

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 do not support privatization or contracting various state or local government jobs. As I mentioned earlier, my mother previously worked for the Federal Government. As a governmental worker, she shared that the jobs that were assigned to contractors actually created additional work for the government employees because the contractual employees were not authorized or had the required clearances to proceed a project forward once it reached a certain point. This did not result in a cost savings to the government or to our taxpayers. Additionally, the contract workers were not held to the same accountability standards as those employed directly by the government.

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? As I stated earlier, I do not support outsourcing operations that are performed by our state, county or city government. Regarding the closure of these state facilities, I would want some additional information about the matter as this is not a subject, I am intimately familiar with.

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? Yes, I do support increasing private and public resources for treatment for mental health and addiction services for Maryland residents.

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? I believe that those who can get vaccinated should be vaccinated for the greater good of society as a whole. I think managers should encourage their employees to get vaccinated to protect their co-workers and their families such as providing bonuses to those who get vaccinated and paid time off for those who need to take time to get vaccinated. There is a debate about whether government and private businesses can mandate vaccination as a condition of employment. I am not opposed to such mandates but there are legal and constitutional questions which we need to resolve.