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**POLITICS**

# Community organization shares public safety concerns with candidates for DA and sheriff

Houston in Action's Liberation in Action Forum on Saturday was attended by Harris County Sheriff Ed Gonzalez and District Attorney candidate Sean Teare.

By **Tanya Babbar**, *Hearst Fellow*

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Attendees of Houston in Action's Liberation in Action Forum on October 12th, 2024  
Davis Darusman/Houston in Action

Instead of simply telling elected officials their concerns, a community organization put on plays this weekend to show candidates for Harris County District Attorney and Sheriff what changes they want to see in public safety and the justice system.

Houston in Action held a Liberation in Action Forum at Riverside Church Houston Saturday evening, where they used plays and personal testimony to tackle issues related to domestic violence and healthcare in the criminal justice system.

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To Dr. Dabrina Sandifer, who hosted Saturday's event, art is an equal opportunity maker.

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“When we watch a play, you have no choice but to sit and listen and absorb. Instead of someone barking their beliefs at you, or you get into a debate, when you watch these characters unfold and you get invested in the human side of them, you tend to empathize more,” Sandifer said.

Saturday’s efforts came through Houston in Action’s Public Safety Project, which aims to urge the next Harris County DA and Sheriff to implement policies and practices to reduce mass incarceration. The forum was attended by Harris County District Attorney Candidate, Sean Terre, and the current Harris County Sheriff Ed Gonzalez, who is also up for reelection next month.

Gonzalez said the event offered a way to listen to community members' experiences with country criminal justice system he’s been concerned with since the start of his career as sheriff eight years ago.

To Gonzalez, participants' plays and personal testimonies spoke to problems of over incarceration, the cradle-to-prison pipeline and long pretrial detention wait times.

"As sheriff, I can't control how people come through the door, but I want to advocate for people and see if we can find more alternatives to incarceration," Gonzalez said.

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"We over incarcerate people. We can't keep arresting people."

Gonzalez also spoke to attendees of his long running support for cite and release initiatives, which refer to law enforcement programs that aim to ticket non-violent offenders in misdemeanor cases

rather than arrest them.

Teare said that as a lawyer and an elected official, he feels community forums like the one on Saturday are vital for law enforcement and politicians to attend to gain a different perspective than what's shown in the courts.

"Most of the time, we see victims and the convicted in the courthouse, where they're traumatized and their ability to communicate is limited because they're fighting for their life," Teare said.

Teare, a former prosecutor in District Attorney Kim Ogg's office, unseated the two-term incumbent in the primary race back in March. Next month, he'll face Ogg and candidate Dan Simons for the role of District Attorney. In a speech Teare gave attendees at the conclusion of Saturday's event, he spoke of his campaign's plans to implement the first-ever Domestic Violence Bureau within the DA's office and a gun surrender program for safely storing weapons from domestic abusers as cases are being adjudicated.

Teare also spoke of his plans to support women's reproductive health as DA, if elected.

"We want to communicate to every OBGYN that my definition of "life-saving" is so broad. I don't care what Paxton wants to do," Teare told attendees.

Danifer, the event's host, emphasized that the forum was a nonpartisan event that all elected officials and candidates for upcoming elections were invited to.

Jail abuse, lack of support for domestic violence victims and difficulty accessing abortion care in high-risk pregnancies were all themes the forum's plays explored. Some attendees also gave personal testimonies based on their experiences with the criminal justice system.

Koretta Brown, the founder of Bridges to Empowerment, spoke about how her experience being incarcerated led her to start an organization dedicated to aiding formerly incarcerated people find employment. Brown also opened up about struggles she faced in the Harris County Jail.

"I was incarcerated in Harris County Jail, and it was absolutely understaffed and people were underpaid. It makes it difficult for them to take pride in their work," Brown said. "

Dianna Williams discussed watching her father, brother and son go through the carceral system due to substance abuse. Williams expressed concerns about jail overcrowding and long pretrial wait times. The Harris County jail has faced difficulties with overcrowding in recent years.

28 people died in the Harris County Jail in 2023. In late August, National Civil Rights Attorney Ben Crump filed two new lawsuits against Harris County in relation to the death of eight inmates.

“These are public health issues, not public safety concerns,” Williams said. “I can’t imagine getting a call that my loved one who is incarcerated passed away.”

Oct 14, 2024

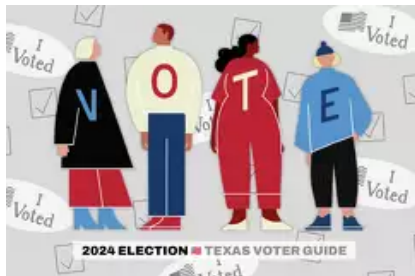


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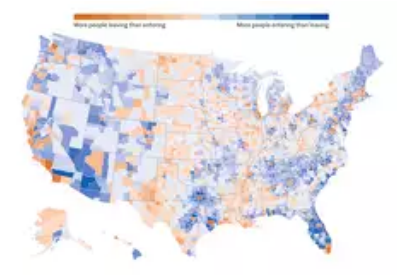
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