



2020 Primary Election Candidate Questionnaire Board of Commissioners - Mecklenburg County

The American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) of North Carolina, a nonpartisan organization, would like to provide voters with information about where candidates stand on important issues relating to the criminal legal system. Our goal is to educate voters about local candidates' positions on important issues.

All primary candidates for Mecklenburg County Commissioner are receiving this questionnaire. Responses will be made publicly available.

CANDIDATE NAME: Patricia (Pat) Cotham

In Mecklenburg County, as many as 90 percent of the people in jail are being held before their day in court and without being convicted of any crime. Some of those people will pay hard-earned money to secure their release before trial, but many who cannot afford to pay money bail could be stuck in jail for days or weeks.

Studies show that spending just three days in jail can cause a person to lose their job, home, or custody of their children. And research suggests that pretrial detention increases the likelihood that a person will be convicted and receive a longer sentence. All of these harms disproportionately affect people of color and people who are living in poverty.

There are many ways to reduce the harm caused by jailing people before trial, and Mecklenburg County court officials have taken some important steps to work toward solutions to this problem. But there is more that the County can do, and County Commissioners can play a key role by seeking opportunities to fund pretrial services programs and supporting reforms by the Sheriff's Department and the courts.

1. One way to prevent the harm of pretrial incarceration and to combat mass incarceration is to avoid booking people into the jail in the first place. Law enforcement officers have the discretion to issue a citation (a ticket with a court date) instead of arresting someone. This policy has been successfully implemented in other counties for certain lower-level charges. Issuing more citations can not only prevent harmful pretrial incarceration, but it can also reduce costly jail overcrowding and save law enforcement time and money.

As a county commissioner, would you support the Mecklenburg County Sheriff's Department's expanded use of citations instead of arrest warrants for lower-level charges?

Response (Please give a clear “yes” or “no” and any explanation):

Yes, plus I would also ask the city to advocate for the same process with CMPD. Judges have told me that the worst part of their job is to put a “poor woman in jail for stealing diapers.”

2. Pretrial services programs are a key part of successful policies to keep people out of jail before their day in court and to help people get to their court dates. These programs range from basic supports such as court date reminders, court-based child care, and transportation vouchers, to programs such as mental health and substance use treatment and no-fee electronic monitoring.

As a county commissioner, would you commit to supporting pretrial services, and seek funding to expand pretrial services in your county?

Response (Please give a clear “yes” or “no” and any explanation):

YES (in my loud voice). I first learned the value of Pre-trial services around 2009 when the non-profit where I worked had three people work in this role of pre-trial services. Later the county hired them to continue their work as it proved to be valuable. Criminalizing the poor has gone on way too long. Helping people be their best self is more important than criminalizing them and robbing them of hope. Support services can make a difference not only for the individual but for his/her family, job etc.

3. Pretrial services programs work hand-in-hand with court-system reforms to prevent the harms that come with requiring payment of secured money bonds in order to be released. In Mecklenburg County, judges, magistrates, and the district attorney's office have made the first of many steps needed to implement meaningful reforms to the pretrial system.

As a county commissioner, will you encourage and support the pretrial reform efforts of the court-system actors in your county, and seek funding to facilitate those reforms where relevant?

Response (Please give a clear “yes” or “no” and any explanation):

(Again in my loud voice) -YES!