

LIBERTY CITY LESBIAN, GAY, BISEXUAL AND TRANSGENDER DEMOCRATIC CLUB

2009 DISTRICT ATTORNEY PRIMARY ELECTION QUESTIONNAIRE

Name: **R. Seth Williams**

Office Sought: **District Attorney of Philadelphia**

Date: **April 6, 2009**

1) What is your experience with the LGBT community both generally and/or professionally?

I have enjoyed a great working relationship with LGBT community members in my capacity as a prosecutor, private attorney, Inspector General of Philadelphia, and candidate for District Attorney.

2) How have you advanced, through professional and personal achievements, the rights of the LGBT community, racial and ethnic minorities, and persons with disabilities?

I have, throughout my life, consistently advanced the rights of all racial, ethnic and sexual minorities – from my organization of Penn State students to march for divestment from South Africa, to my consistent call for transparency from the District Attorney’s Office in the Nizah Morris investigation. As District Attorney of Philadelphia, I will never fail to support the rights of every citizen of Philadelphia.

3) Do you support the rights of LGBT people to the following:

a. Marriage?

b. Civil Unions?

c. Domestic Partnership?

d. Second-parent adoption?

e. Protection from workplace discrimination?

f. Protection from housing discrimination?

g. Protection from acts of violence based on their sexual orientation or gender identity?

Parts a through d of this question are not germane to the Office of District Attorney. The District Attorney’s Office has nothing to do with gay marriage as a matter of law.

Marriage for gay couples is not yet the law in Pennsylvania. I personally believe that mature, consenting gay, lesbian or transgendered adults should have every right and privilege afforded to all citizens: including the right to celebrate and legally ratify their commitment to each other, as do the rest of us.

The District Attorney, however, is duty bound to enforce the law as it exists, not as he or she would like it to be. The District Attorney cannot, and must not, arbitrarily enforce the laws they agree with while ignoring the ones they don’t.

What the law does presently cover is acts of discrimination or abuse, hate crimes, assault or threats based on a person’s sexual orientation. Rest assured that as District Attorney, I

will vigorously prosecute “gay bashers” or anyone else who attempts to rob a fellow citizen of their constitutional rights.

I believe that equal protection under the law means just that, and that members of the gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgendered community need a District Attorney who will protect them as free and equal citizens.

4) Do you consider transgender rights a civil rights issue? Explain your answer.

Yes. All basic human rights are civil rights. These include the right to be free from discrimination.

5) What would you do to actively enforce hate crimes legislation?

All instances of hate crimes will be vigorously prosecuted when I am elected District Attorney. I will work every day to minimize the often legitimate fears of victims and witnesses when they enter the justice system, and treat all victims of crime with dignity and respect.

6) Do you have any openly LGBT members of your staff? What will you do to make your office a safe place for openly LGBT staff members?

My office, whether as Inspector General of Philadelphia, a private attorney, or when I am elected District Attorney, will always be open to talented staffers who can fulfill the requirements of the office regardless of race, religion, sexual orientation or gender. I will not tolerate discrimination of any type.

7) How will you prioritize the creation of an LGBT liaison within the District Attorney’s office?

I fully support a permanent LGBT liaison within the DA’s office, and pledge to have that liaison fully functional soon after I am sworn in as District Attorney.

8) How will you support LGBT sensitivity training for Philadelphia police and prosecutors?

Such training is vital to the ongoing community relations efforts of our criminal justice system, and I will support the periodic rotation of prosecutors and senior staff to these trainings.

9) How would you support public accommodations for transgender individuals who work in your office or appear in the criminal justice system?

Every effort should be made to accommodate the comfort and convenience of any individuals requiring special needs. These should be examined fully on a case-by-case basis.

10) LGBT youth sometimes act out because of harassment at school or in the home due to their gender/sex identity. When ADAs prosecute cases against these members of our community, what will you do to prepare your staff to be sensitive to their issues? Additionally, LGBT youth who spend time in juvenile detention facilities face many dangers. What alternative sentences might you seek in their cases?

Again, as answered in question #8, I support sensitivity training on LGBT issues for all prosecutors and senior staff of the District Attorney’s Office. I also support alternative

sentencing for first time and non-violent offenders, using proven programs like Back on Track, which has been highly successful in San Francisco.

11) What has been the general nature of your practice and particular areas of concentration? Please describe any changes throughout the years?

Obviously, my practice as a civil attorney has been quite different from my years as a prosecutor. However, I believe that my experience in civil law has only added to my depth of knowledge and understanding of the law from both adversarial points of view.

12) Describe a few of the most significant cases you have litigated. Please give a summary of the substance of the cases, the citations if available, and why you believe they were significant.

I am proud of my body of work as a prosecutor, and of my work in the creation of the Repeat Offenders Unit. Citing individual cases is difficult, but I would say in general that it is always satisfying to see justice done and victims made whole.

13) State briefly why you are seeking the Democratic nomination to be DA in Philadelphia, and what qualities you believe you possess that would serve you especially well if you were elected to the office.

Philadelphia's criminal justice system is broken. I believe that among my opponents, I am the most qualified to fix it. I was a prosecutor longer, more recently, and I am the only one who supervised other prosecutors while at the DA's office. I founded, and served as chief of the Repeat Offenders Unit, and understand the burden that repeat offenders place on our system of justice. As District Attorney, I am determined to make Philadelphia a safer place for every citizen of every community.

14) What are the most pressing needs of reform in our judicial system in your opinion?

- 1. Fixing Philadelphia's broken, revolving-door system of justice.**
- 2. Identifying and targeting the worst repeat offenders.**
- 3. Strengthening partnerships with neighbors and communities, the police department, courts, parole board, and various law enforcement agencies.**

My priorities in addressing these are, first, to streamline the systems and communications that stall the justice system. Sixty percent of all felony cases, including a third of all gun cases, are dismissed at preliminary hearing because the prosecution is not ready to go forward. The District Attorney's Office must take advantage of the latest research, technology, and best practices to fix the system, and bring the Office into the 21st century.

Second, I will target hardened career criminals for long prison sentences, while taking advantage of proven programs to keep first-time offenders from becoming repeat offenders.

Third, through Community-Based Justice, I will forge new partnerships with neighbors and communities hardest hit by violent crime. Under this system, prosecutors and judges work directly with the police and neighbors in the community in identifying the neighborhood's crime problems and formulating solutions. This model has proven effective in large cities throughout the country.

15) For what organizations have you done pro-bono work?

N/A

16) Have you ever belonged to any organizations, associations or clubs that prohibit or limit its membership on the basis of race, color, religion, sexual orientation, gender, disability, national origin, sexual orientation or gender identity?

No. And I would never knowingly join such an organization.

17) Do you support a woman's right to choose?

I do. I support the law.

18) How would your office be more transparent than the previous administration?

I believe in full transparency in city government and support the public's right to know. All business conducted by my office, with the obvious exception of confidential investigations and information in support of the law, will be conducted openly and when possible, published on the District Attorney's Office web page.

As District Attorney, I will represent each and every citizen of Philadelphia. When I am elected, the District Attorney's Office will be seen as a protector of the community, not as an oppressor.

Please return by Friday April 3rd via e-mail to matt@libertycity.org

Or via mail to:

Liberty City Lesbian and Gay Democratic Club
C/o Matthew Woodcock
2302 Fitzwater Street, #1
Philadelphia, PA 19146