

## 2020 COBB COUNTY SHERIFF'S CANDIDATES RESPONSES



Neil Warren (R)



Gregory B. Gilstrap (D)



James Herndon (D)



Craig Owens (D)

**Public Safety** – The Sheriff's Office plays a vital role in immigration enforcement, as 47 percent of individuals deported come from county jails. Cobb County currently participates in Immigration & Customs Enforcement's (ICE) 287(g) program, which deputizes sheriff to carry out the work of immigration enforcement. Counties with 287(g) programs have a troubling history of racially profiling drivers. In addition, according to the Georgia Budget and Policy Institute it is costly for local law enforcement to hold individuals past the time of their release, costing "an estimated \$88 million from 2008 to 2017, or about \$9 million a year statewide on average over a decade." **Do you support the 287(g) program? (Yes/No) Please explain.**

Failed to Respond.

I do not support the 287(g) program because it discriminate and separate families. However, I will abide by the Constitution which I am sworn to do. During my 2004 campaign for Sheriff of Cobb County, I didn't support 287(g); my decision has not changed. Sheriff Warren was the first Sheriff of Cobb County to enter into an agreement with the ICE program. I will be the first Sheriff of Cobb County to end the agreement.

I do not support the 287(g) program which wastes taxpayer resources, but most importantly has targeted minorities, separated families and instilled fear into our community. I have repeatedly mentioned during my campaign that I will eliminate this program in my very first day as Sheriff. You can find a record of this in the press (AJC, La Vision and El Nuevo Georgia.)

No. Under Sheriff Owens, it would end. The federal government may prioritize the deportation of nonviolent community members, but I do not. This is about our values and what kind of county we want to be. Additionally, many of the issues in the Cobb County Adult Detention Center are made worse by a lack of manpower. I will take the resources currently devoted to the 287g program and hire qualified staff, including Spanish-speakers.

**Money Bail System** – Former DeKalb District Attorney J. Tom Morgan opined in the Atlanta Journal Constitution that "money bail unfairly punishes the poor, overcrowds our jails, and allows wealthy defendants to buy their way to freedom." In Georgia, nearly 20,000 residents suffer in prolonged pre-trial detention, although they are presumed innocent, because of their inability to pay bond. Individuals are at risk of irreversible mental and physical health problems; loss of employment and housing; increased costs of family care, and predatory lending by bail bondsmen. The Sheriff plays a tremendously influential role in the public discussion on the use of money bail. **Do you support ending the money bail system? (Yes/No) Please explain.**

Failed to Respond.

I support ending the money bail system which unfairly targets the poor due to their inability to afford bail. It causes overcrowded detention centers, while allowing wealthy defendants to pay their way to freedom. Taxpayers pay more taxes enabling the continued housing of detainees who haven't been convicted of a crime. Overcrowded conditions have a detrimental effect on detainees and families such as loss of employment, mental and physical health, housing, and child custody.

Yes, and I will advocate for an end to the money bail system. Non-violent offenders in pre-trial detention do not need to sit in jail for months at a time, just because they cannot afford bail. I will seek solutions to save tax payers money and not destroy families because they are too poor to afford bail for non-violent offenses.

Unfortunately, bail reform can't be mandated by the Sheriff, but no one should stay incarcerated because they can't afford to post bail. Some reforms, like in California, have ended cash bail but opened the door to "Risk Assessment Tools", alternatives that often fail to account for how poverty and racial discrimination impact individuals. As Sheriff, I would organize a coalition to support the agencies and detainees involved - and push this conversation forward.

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**Mental Health** – Studies show that individualized community-based mental health services lowers the risk of recidivism. While data on how many individuals in Georgia jails suffer from mental health issues vary by county, according to the Atlanta Journal Constitution, it is projected that anywhere from 15% to 50% of the population suffers from mental health issues. To address these issues, county sheriffs have engaged in efforts to address problems in jails, from diverting individuals from jail to treatment programs to supporting justice reform efforts to increase funding to mental health services and institutions. **How will you ensure jail safety and to address the special needs of those with mental illnesses? Please explain.**

Failed to Respond.

1) Mental health evaluations by trained professionals to provide a diagnosis, education, and medication. 2) Social Workers to provide Post-release referrals for community-based treatment. 3) Officers to receive training in crisis de-escalation, signs and symptoms for effective engagement with those presenting and/ or diagnosed. 4) In-jail programs for education, such as Alcohol Anonymous and coping skills groups. 5) If level of care higher than staff, place detainees on 1013 for evaluation to a mental health facility.

Currently arrestees coming into the Cobb County jail are not screened for mental health problems/issues other than to ask one question – Do you feel suicidal? I will screen each person coming into custody of the Cobb Sheriff's Office for not only medical issues but mental health issues, both diagnosed and undiagnosed. In Cobb County, based on my firsthand experience, I would estimate that at least 40% of the population need mental health care [omitted].

Mental illness and mental health are medical issues. I believe they should be treated with the same respect that you would give a broken bone. The next medical provider for the Detention Center must be able to provide modern, adequate mental health services. Detention, even when done humanely, can be a traumatic experience. I will appoint a Board of Medical Advisors, experts in various fields of treatment, to review all questionable cases and recommend solutions.

**Criminal Justice Reform** – Under Georgia statute, sheriffs have the power to release individuals pre-trial and without the requirement of bail. Every year, hundreds of individuals in Georgia are jailed for minor traffic infractions. For undocumented immigrants, arrests for traffic violations will likely lead to their deportation. Even for U.S. citizens, traffic violations are considered criminal offenses and could lead to high fines and individuals being placed on probation and/or in jail. **Do you support reform efforts to decriminalize traffic violations in Georgia? (Yes/No) Please explain.**

Failed to Respond.

Yes, I support decriminalizing traffic violations in Georgia. Decriminalizing traffic violations would reduce the overcrowding of detention centers. Individuals who are detained due to non-violent offenses such as traffic infractions should not be housed with violent offenders. All traffic infractions are not the same and would have to be dealt with case by case.

Yes, I intend to utilize this statute whenever possible, as allowed by law. (DUIs, sex offenses, child and domestic violence, on probation or parole are some of the exceptions where a sheriff cannot allow bail on a license). As sheriff, I believe if we can save money, restore a person back to the community to keep them with their family, to keep them working and to decrease the jail population then I will fully utilize [omitted].

Yes. The constant fear of deportation hurts everyone. If a parent is deported, isn't their child more susceptible to gang recruitment or trafficking? If you can't alert law enforcement to an emergency, our community is actually less safe. Cobb County PD's policy is to issue citations and not arrests for traffic violations. As Sheriff, I would advocate for a similar policy among municipal departments and deprioritize incarceration for nonviolent, minor offenses.

**Jail Conditions** – Georgia has one of the highest rates of imprisonment in the United States, with some of the deadliest jail conditions for individuals detained. In 2019, seven people died while in custody at the Cobb County jail. Six of the individuals died due to "medical emergencies," – two of the cases remain under investigation and one case was ruled a suicide. Every year, the Cobb County Sheriff oversees 25,000 detained in its jail, with more than 2,000 individuals housed every day. **How will you ensure jail safety and protect the health and safety of those detained at the jail? Please explain.**

Failed to Respond.

I will review all Health and Safety incidents, including detainees' concerns, and the structure and operations of the Cobb County Sheriff's Department to make certain State and Federal guidelines are met. Also, evaluate the current medical staff, its operations, procedures and licensing. Additionally, appoint an overseer to monitor and report deficiencies or concerns needed for improvement. After which, I will make any necessary changes to protect detainees as well as employees Health and Safety.

I will seek a new quality healthcare provider for the jail and seek better training for current and future detention officers. I will work to bring the Sheriff's Office's up to proper standards of care and seek alternatives to incarcerations for those with mental illness and problems with addiction. I will seek National Accreditation and keep an open line of direct communication with NGO's and elected officials who are concerned about the conditions of the jail.

First, we must train existing staff and hire more-while increasing diversity among the deputies. Second, we must fundamentally prioritize medical needs. That means establishing the position of Chief Medical Advisor that reports only to me, and not the medical provider. Third, there should be an independent investigation into the conditions at the Detention Center with public findings and accountability. Delays in responding to medical requests will become a thing of the past.