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1st Middlesex candidates get quizzed by UTEC

LOWELL -- UTEC, for years, could rely on an advocate in the State Senate: Eileen Donoghue. But with her departure from the Statehouse -- she's now the Lowell city manager -- UTEC officials wanted to learn about the six candidates vying to succeed her in the 1st Middlesex Senate District.

The five Democrats and one Republican in the race recently visited UTEC for a tour, and were briefed on the organization's policy platform.

After the tour, the Senate candidates were interviewed about UTEC's priorities. All of the candidates pledged that they would support UTEC's platform on Beacon Hill.

Adrien "Duke" Vega, 19, works in UTEC's wood shop. He said the candidates' responses were helpful as he prepares to vote in his first Senate election.

"They definitely gave enough information on who they are, and how they would address the issues UTEC is concerned about," Vega said.

The candidates answered five questions during the Senate Series at UTEC. The Democrats competing in the Sept. 4 primary are City Councilor Edward Kennedy, City Councilor Rodney Elliott, former City Councilor

Bill Martin, John Drinkwater of the Massachusetts AFL-CIO, and former Westford School Committee member Terry Ryan. The lone Republican is Lowell's John MacDonald.

Here are the questions UTEC asked, and selected summaries from the candidates' answers.

* As you learned today UTEC is doing work behind the walls of correctional facilities, which results in reduced recidivism for young adults ages 18 to 24.

Currently there is no dedicated funding source from state government to specifically fund young-adult programming pre-release while in jail, and post-release. If elected would you support a new budget line item to fund these critical services?

-- **Drinkwater:** Young adults need support services that start behind the walls and continue beyond when they leave.

-- **Kennedy:** With my past experience as a legislative liaison for the Department of Youth Services, I have a keen interest in juvenile corrections and with what happens to young adults afterwards.

-- **Elliott:** I support legislation to reduce recidivism, and one way to do that is to provide funding to organizations like UTEC -- to continue providing jobs, training and support for these individuals.

* Recently, Gov. Baker and the Legislature invited the Council for State Governments to do an assessment of Massachusetts' criminal justice system. CSG recommended that a transitional youth probation pilot be funded for five years to serve 18 to 24 year-olds and UTEC was awarded the contract. CSG recommended that this get funded at \$750,000 for year one and \$1.2 million for the following four years. If elected would you help us carry this funding increase through the Senate budget in Fiscal 2020?

-- **Martin:** It's exciting to hear that UTEC received this recent award, and it's important to keep that funding in the follow-up years.

-- **Ryan:** It's very important to give them a track to make progress. When they come out (of prison), they'll be that much ahead and prepared to take the next step.

-- **MacDonald:** I would help carry this initiative through, and be a champion for UTEC. I've seen firsthand UTEC's impact here in Lowell.

* UTEC gets funding from the Safe and Successful Youth Initiative and the Shannon Anti-Gang Grants, which have seen continued support by the Legislature. If elected would you work to help secure level or increased funding for the SSYI program and the Shannon Grants to help the City of Lowell and UTEC continue to combat youth violence?

-- **Drinkwater:** The more money that goes into programs like Shannon Grants means the more jobs that can be provided. Access to a good job just makes such a difference.

-- **Elliott:** These funds are important, helping keep kids on the right track and give them a good future.

* What is one area regarding criminal justice reform that you think the Legislature needs to work on?

-- **Martin:** The recent criminal justice bill doesn't address background checks. Some sort of definition and standards around the notion of background checks may be the next wave of reform.

-- **Kennedy:** Whatever we can do to provide young offenders with skills to get a meaningful job. I think that's important and is the best thing we can do.

* UTEC is very focused on increasing the amount of mental health and substance abuse counseling services for our young people. Would you be supportive of new funding that would increase counseling services for both pre-release (while incarcerated) and post-release? Moreover, do you have

any other ideas to best address these mental health and substance abuse challenges for the young adults we serve?

-- **Ryan:** I would love to work with UTEC on new strategies and policies, and drive them home. You guys (UTECE) are the ones on the front line. You guys are working with the people.

-- **MacDonald:** I'm a proponent for creating a PTSD task force, concentrating on mental health. We need to bring together experts from around the medical community, and find ways to deal with mental-health issues for our veterans, first responders and youth.

Follow Rick Sobey on Twitter @rsobeyLSun.