



UTEC Youth-Led State Senate Series

VOTER GUIDE

Special Election for Massachusetts State Senate (1st Middlesex District)

Election Date: March 3, 2026



About this guide: Young adults at UTEC developed these questions and invited candidates running in the March 3 Special General Election to respond. The questions reflect the priorities and lived experiences of young people in our community, including housing, employment, and criminal justice reform. Each candidate on the ballot was invited to answer the same questions, and their responses are shared here to help voters make informed decisions.

Candidates:

State Representative Vanna Howard (Democrat)



Candidate's responses are presented as spoken during a filmed interview at UTEC. Minor edits were made to remove verbal repetitions and filler words for readability. No wording or meaning has been altered. Watch the full interview here:
www.utecinc.org/UTECvotes.

Joseph Espinola III (Unenrolled / Independent)



Candidate's responses were submitted electronically by the candidate and are presented exactly as received.

Sam Meas (Republican)



Candidate did not respond.

<p align="center">State Representative Vanna Howard (Democrat)</p>	<p align="center">Joseph Espinola III (Unenrolled / Independent)</p>	<p align="center">Sam Meas (Republican)</p>
<p align="center">Can you share what motivated you to run for this position and what you'd focus on first if elected?</p>		
<p>I ran for state representative for the same reason I am running as a candidate for the state senate now. My professional career has always been about helping people. And my lived experience, coming here as an immigrant and refugee not speaking English, it wasn't easy. But this community and this state supported me and helped me and my family. So, I just want to give back. I have dedicated my life to giving back - to make a difference, to make positive change, and to make vital contributions to our communities.</p>	<p>I have believed in community involvement since I was young, and that commitment has guided me throughout my life. When I looked at the ballot for our next State Senator, I did not see enough candidates who reflected my values and priorities. Rather than accept limited choices, I decided to put my name on the ballot. If elected, my first focus would be listening to constituents, restoring accountability, and addressing issues that have been overlooked to ensure state government works for the people it serves.</p>	<p><i>No response submitted.</i></p>
<p align="center">Housing is really expensive for young adults and it can be difficult to navigate housing resources. How do you see the current housing situation in the state, and what would you do to make housing more stable and affordable?</p>		
<p>I was proud to vote and testify in support of the Homes Affordability Act which dedicated a little more than \$5 billion to supporting housing, especially housing for our young adults who experience homelessness and young adults aging out of foster homes. The city has started a housing trust fund to support that as well. So, the more supply, the lower the cost of rental housing. I was proud to help ensure that our young adults have safe, suitable housing. When I say housing that's affordable, I know what that means, as I experienced homelessness myself. I also understand what it means to be a young mom. I was in my early 20s when I became homeless as a young mom. And so, it wasn't easy, but again, this community helped me through it. I know what it's like to have safe housing, a safe community, and a roof over your head. Before you can begin to think about your health, your job or anything else, you must first have a safe home, safe housing.</p>	<p>The high cost of housing in our state is a significant challenge, especially for young adults, first-time homebuyers, and renters. Many people struggle to find stable, affordable options, and navigating the available resources can be confusing and overwhelming. I believe we need a comprehensive approach to address this issue. That means expanding affordable housing development, incentivizing the creation of diverse housing options including workforce and mixed-income units, and increasing transparency and support around existing housing resources so people can access them more easily. I would also support policies that protect tenants from sudden rent increases and displacement, and promote programs that help first-time buyers with down payment assistance and financial education. My goal is to make housing more accessible and stable for all residents by ensuring both short-term relief and long-term solutions are part of our state's strategy.</p>	<p><i>No response submitted.</i></p>

Senator Kennedy was a strong supporter of UTEC and helped support funding every year for our mattress recycling social enterprise. If you're elected, would you continue to advocate for funding for the mattress recycling social enterprise line item in the state budget?

Absolutely. I worked closely with Senator Kennedy on the mattress recycling program. We discussed statewide legislation for the mattress recycling program, and I'm also a customer of that program. It's a great program. What a legacy to leave for our future generations to focus on recycling and conservation. And so, Senator Kennedy and I, didn't just work on that one important piece of legislation. But for the last three budget sessions, he was able to bring in \$500,000 each budget for that. We have been collaborating for many years, not just on that one program. When he ran for the Senate seat in 2018, I was there door-knocking for him, believed in him, supported him, and endorsed him. We worked great together, and it's such a huge loss, but what a legacy to leave for a few generations, that mattress program that he started. So, yes.

Yes. If elected, I would continue to advocate for funding for UTEC and the mattress recycling social enterprise line item in the state budget. Programs like this provide real environmental benefits while creating job training and employment opportunities for young people. They are smart investments that strengthen our communities, support sustainability, and deliver measurable results.

No response submitted.

In terms of the overall budget, do you have any other ideas or priorities to best support organizations like UTEC?

I have supported UTEC since I became a representative. This is my third term, my fifth year, and I have supported all the line items for violence prevention and for the emerging re-entry adult program. So, I always supported Gregg Croteau, and he always reaches out. Along with many of my colleagues, I collaborated with UTEC to ensure we consistently supported those line items. We collaborated on bringing more funding for UTEC for all the many amazing programs that have been proven to be a success, and so it can be continued. It's about collaboration, and I have worked closely with UTEC on making sure that UTEC continues to receive appropriate funding to continue all the many programs that have been proven successful.

Beyond specific line items, I believe the state should prioritize stable, predictable funding for organizations like UTEC so they can plan, grow, and expand their impact. I would support multi-year funding commitments, streamlined grant processes, and better coordination across state agencies to reduce administrative burdens on community-based organizations. I also support investing in workforce development, behavioral health, re-entry services, and social enterprises that provide job training and wraparound support. These programs prevent deeper system involvement, save taxpayer dollars long-term, and strengthen communities by addressing root causes rather than symptoms.

No response submitted.

We advocate for legislation called Raise the Age, which would gradually raise the age of juvenile convictions to include 21-year-olds. Is this something you support? Why or why not?

I do support it. I worked closely with the lead sponsors of this bill. And a Celtics basketball player, Jaylen Brown, came to the State House to advocate for it. Yes, I am in support of that initiative. As we all know, the brain develops later in life. I'm not for extended terms for a juvenile in general but except for the most serious crimes, and so like I said, our brain develops later in life. So, we need to look at all the proven support. If there's no support, we should try a pilot program to see if it's proven to be a success or not. So, let's do a pilot program and see how that goes.

Yes, I support Raise the Age legislation. Young adults are still developing emotionally and cognitively, and evidence shows they respond better to rehabilitative approaches than to adult incarceration. Expanding juvenile jurisdiction up to age 21 allows the justice system to focus on accountability paired with education, treatment, and support. This approach improves public safety, reduces recidivism, and gives young people a real opportunity to turn their lives around—while still holding individuals responsible for their actions.

No response submitted.

A lot of young people want to work, but face barriers to getting jobs, especially those with a criminal history. How would you help create more job opportunities for young people, especially those impacted by past criminal involvement?

Our young adults should have a second chance, okay? And what UTEC is providing is a proven success. Providing them with training and job skills to make sure that they lead a path towards a job and a future. And regardless of your background, everyone should have a second chance to work on improving their lives. And so yes, what UTEC is doing with a young adult for the re-entry program is making sure that they provide wraparound services, training, and mental health services so that they can be a successful young adult. I will continue to support UTEC to make sure that our young adults thrive and survive at the same time.

Many young people want to work but face real barriers to employment, particularly those with past criminal involvement. I believe the state has a responsibility to remove unnecessary obstacles and create pathways to meaningful jobs. I would support expanding job training, apprenticeship, and paid transitional employment programs, especially those that partner with community-based organizations that already have trusted relationships with young people. I also support fair hiring practices, including “ban the box,” record-sealing and expungement reforms, and incentives for employers who hire justice-involved individuals. By investing in workforce development and second-chance employment, we can strengthen the economy, reduce recidivism, and help young people build stable, productive futures.

No response submitted.

Many young people struggle to find mental health services that are affordable and easy to access. What would you do to make sure everyone can get the mental health care they need?

I was proud to vote in the last budget to support funding for mental health and substance abuse in millions of dollars. I work closely with the chair of the mental health and substance abuse committee. And it's really a continuation of my previous job at Lowell Community Health Center. I have a great deal of knowledge when it comes to mental health because I want to do everything to avoid tragedies to our young adults, to families, but also to perhaps those incarcerated. So, I will continue to advocate. Because of that personal experience that I had working for Lowell Community Health Center, I will advocate for mental health services for the community, but also for our young adults. I understand the issues of our young adults and especially mental health. So, we want to do everything we can. I commit to advocate to make sure that our young adults move on the right path and provide them with all the resources available to them.

Access to affordable, timely mental health care remains a major challenge, especially for young people. Too many residents face long wait times, high costs, or difficulty navigating the system. I would support expanding funding for community-based mental health services, increasing the mental health workforce, and integrating mental health care into schools, primary care, and youth-serving organizations. I also support improving access to crisis services, reducing insurance barriers, and investing in prevention and early intervention. Mental health care should be treated as essential health care. My goal is to ensure services are accessible, affordable, and responsive so everyone can get the support they need when they need it.

No response submitted.

It can be really difficult to navigate basic services like the RMV and other state agencies. How would you work to make these services more accessible and less frustrating for people?

Having worked for Congresswoman Niki Tsongas for 12 years and now as a State Rep, I work closely with the RMV to ensure that our community receives the proper license and proper ID. Because without your ID, you can't get housing, you can't get jobs. I was honored that Speaker Mariano had the confidence in me to appoint me to serve on the Commission on Structural Racism in Corrections. On that commission, I visited many prisons and the Houses of Corrections. The first thing that incarcerated men and women talk about is that when they leave jail or prison they left without any proper identification. And so, we were able to speak with the DOC's staff to make sure that before they are being released, they have all the proper identification. So, we still have a lot more work to do, but that was the first thing that our formerly incarcerated men and women asked for is to make sure that they have that proper identification. I also serve on the Racial Equity, Civil Rights, and Inclusion Committee and to make sure that everyone is treated with fairness and with equity.

Too many people find it frustrating and time-consuming to navigate basic services like the RMV and other state agencies. Long wait times, unclear requirements, and limited access create unnecessary barriers, especially for working families and young people. I would support simplifying processes, improving online and in-person access, and increasing transparency so people know exactly what is required before they show up. That includes better customer service training, extended hours where possible, and clearer communication across agencies. Government services should work for the people who rely on them. My focus would be on making state agencies more efficient, user-friendly, and accountable so residents can access essential services without unnecessary stress or delay.

No response submitted.

Do you support second chances and clean slate policies for young people, and how would you advance these efforts in the legislature?

I would want to read the language first, but again, like I mentioned earlier, young adults should receive a second chance. They should receive a second chance, including training and other kinds of life skills to help them find a path towards jobs and skill development. Again, I'm not one to extend terms for a juvenile in general, but except perhaps for the most serious crimes. But yes, second chances include training and any mental health services and wraparound services, so they can be on the right path towards a job and a future.

Yes, I strongly support second chances and clean slate policies for young people. A single mistake should not permanently limit someone's ability to work, secure housing, or build a stable future—especially for young people who are still growing and changing. In the legislature, I would advocate for expanded record sealing and expungement, automatic clean slate provisions, and policies that reduce unnecessary collateral consequences of past involvement with the justice system. I would also support investments in reentry services, education, and workforce development, and work closely with community-based organizations that provide proven second-chance pathways. Second chances strengthen families, improve public safety, and help communities thrive by allowing people to move forward and contribute.

No response submitted.