



CHENOA SUMMERS

State Senate, District 20

Prior to running for office, Chenoa Summers has worked as a botany research assistant at Arkansas State and has served as an adjunct professor and the Director of the Student Success Center at University of Arkansas Community College at Batesville.

What is the biggest issue facing the state of Arkansas and how would you address this problem if elected?

The biggest issue facing Arkansas right now - and the situation is dire - is educator pay. Arkansas is among the worst for teacher salaries and retention, and we are increasingly losing our best and brightest to surrounding states that pay more. We need to give an immediate raise to all educators and raise minimum salaries as well as better support for part-time employees.

What would be your top 3 priorities for utilizing the surplus budget in Arkansas, if you had full power over the surplus?

If I had full power over the surplus, my top 3 priorities for utilizing it would be:

1. Given all teachers and support staff, K-12 and higher education, immediate \$4,000 raises and increasing the minimum starting salaries of K-12 teachers to \$42,000. I would also use the surplus to set a minimum starting salary for adjunct instructors along with benefits. Lastly, I would use the surplus to start a free community college program.
2. I would expand Medicaid to include more people to relieve low-income folks of medical debt and poverty. I would also put money towards expanding reproductive healthcare that is still legal like birth control (transitioning to over the counter) and sexual education programs.
3. I would put surplus money towards expanding voting rights like opening more polling locations in Arkansas moving towards a vote-by-text system.

How do you define public safety and what changes would you make to keep all communities safe?

Public safety is about keeping the public safe – from violence, crime, climate and weather disasters, and public health crises. I would like to see the demilitarization of police and loosening of drug laws (especially marijuana-related). I would also like to see Medicaid expanded to include better better mental health services, addiction recovery, and vaccination campaigns.

What (if any) changes do you believe are needed to the criminal legal system in Arkansas?

There are so many things we could do better here in Arkansas to reform the criminal legal system. Number one would be to make recreational marijuana legal and expunge criminal records related to marijuana. We could also better fund mental health and addiction recovery services to keep offenders out of the system.

The Arkansas Public Defenders Commission has been underfunded for many years. Would you support increasing funding to help bring the department in line with American Bar Association recommendations which cap caseloads at 150 felony cases per attorney? Why or why not?

Absolutely. I'm sure many folks are penalized simply because they cannot afford representation, and the public defenders working out there now are overworked and underpaid. We should provide incentives to become public defenders.

It has become common knowledge across the state of Arkansas that those facing health conditions concerning addiction and mental health are located at an increasing rate in the state prisons and local county jails. What solutions do you feel should be explored in this area?

Legalizing recreational marijuana couple with expunging criminal records related to marijuana would be a step in the right direction. Another thing we could do is fund rehabilitation services so that drug offenders can choose to go into recovery in a safe setting instead of going to jail. Another option would be to hire social workers to check in with folks in recovery.

Research indicates that juveniles that encounter the justice system in their youth will have a higher likelihood of entanglement with the adult criminal justice system. What strategies do you support to decrease this likelihood?

A problem that I'm sure is not unique to only Jonesboro is a lack of community centers - or community centers that are always booked up. We could give grants to cities to build new community centers with programs offered for young folks. We could better fund our libraries and schools to provide after-school programs for at-risk kids.

Neuroscience research has indicated that the human brain is not fully formed until approximately age 25, meaning that impulse control and long-term thinking can be impaired. Would you consider reclassifying how Arkansas young adults are treated in the adult system? Are there specific adjustments that should/could be made?

Absolutely. Adults aged 18-25 should be given an opportunity to give back to their community instead of immediate incarceration. For all adults, workforce training programs and free community college could help to train or retrain inmates so they have a chance to get a job upon completing sentencing.

Do you think we have a “parole problem” and how would you address it?

There is room for improvement when it comes to parole. For instance, the parolee should not be subject to paying to be “on parole.” That can keep folks in poverty. Marijuana should be legalized recreationally and should not be tested for. If someone comes up positive for another illegal drug or alcohol, they should be offered rehabilitation and counseling for addiction, not sent immediately to jail.

The Arkansas Department of Corrections identified reducing solitary confinement —a practice labeled torture under international law— as a major objective in their 2021–2022 Strategic Plan, however the number of people held in isolation continues to grow. Do you agree with the need to reduce solitary confinement in our state? Why or why not?

Absolutely. Solitary confinement should only be used in the most extreme cases and should be temporary, up to 48 hours, not a long-term solution. It is inhumane to subject any person, criminal or not, to those conditions and we should follow international law.