



DOUG PETERSON

State Senate, District 35

Prior to running for office, Doug Peterson worked as an Air Traffic Controller for 35 years before retiring and currently volunteers with his local food bank and resale shop.

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

Our state and our country are badly in need of criminal justice reform. One in five incarcerated people in the world are in the USA. Arkansas has the 6th highest incarceration rate in the US. Our recidivism rate is higher than most of the rest of the world. Half of the prisoners on Arkansas death row are racial minorities when they make up about 18% of our state's population. What does this accomplish? Is this just? Are we somehow better or safer because of it? We must do better. The path forward is not locking more people up, but addressing the root causes of criminal behavior. The solution will be a broad based attack directed at poverty, improving educational outcomes starting with preschool, enhanced employment opportunities that come in a thriving economy, alternative sentencing, improved mental health and drug treatment options, decriminalizing victimless crimes, and other solutions as we uncover them.

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

Return the surplus to Arkansas taxpayers through reduced future tax rates.

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

Public safety is a delicate balance between citizens being free from aggression and exercising unfettered individual freedom. No free society can be completely safe. Our challenge is to maximize individual freedom while maintaining a reasonable level of collective security. Our current state seems to exceed reasonable limits on governmental intervention without a reasonable return of community safety. We must seek new solutions by attacking root causes of poverty, which is a major contributor to high rates of engagement with the criminal justice system, alternative sentencing, increased commitment to mental health and addiction recovery programs, and adjustments to our punitive justice model.

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

Reduce dependence on cash bail. Eliminate criminalization of mental health issues, drug abuse and victimless crimes. Eliminate qualified immunity. Aggressive retraining of law enforcement to create a zero tolerance culture for corruption and abuse. Migrate away from a punitive incarceration model to increased focus on rehabilitation and restitution.

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?

Yes. Any examination of death row populations or serious crime convictions reveals some common factors. Poverty is a prime example. Representation is another. Rich people with expensive lawyers don't tend to end up in prison. That needle dramatically skews when a defendant is represented by an overworked public defender. This is not justice.

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?

Eliminating criminalization of mental health issues and drug abuse is critical step. Mental health intervention should be conducted by specialists, not police officers. Drug court and other diversion programs can create an alternate path out of prison into recovery. Decriminalizing marijuana and other drugs can reduce prison populations and law enforcement workloads without decreasing public safety. These programs can be funded from law enforcement and prison system savings at a net lower cost.

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?

Reducing poverty, economic success, presence of a father, and early childhood development programs all show improvements in juvenile and adult outcomes, including arrests and imprisonment. This is a big problem with complex, generations long solutions. We must take the long view and embrace a variety of solutions that build success, equality, and health over the long term.

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?

Yes. A focus on retraining, rehabilitation and behavior modification in young adults is more likely to produce positive results than simple punitive incarceration for everyone over the age of 17.

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

Yes, from the perspective that we tend to have arbitrary and harsh post release rule enforcement that is not balanced by necessary support systems that help parolees succeed. Relatively minor infractions can trigger harsh consequences and these consequences frequently appear to be racially biased. Assisting parolees with transportation, employment, scheduling, and life skills training can be more effective and less costly than imprisonment.

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?

Yes. The preponderance of evidence suggests that it is overused. It can be effective, but it needs to be restricted so that it is not the automatic disciplinary response, but is prudently limited to cases where it effectively mitigates threats to the physical safety of inmates or guards.