

## Durham Committee on the Affairs of Black People Political Action Committee Questionnaire for United States Senate

Name Jen Banwart

Position for which you are filing United States Senate

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Candidates wishing to be considered for an endorsement by DCABP PAC must submit a completed questionnaire and resume by the stated deadline, as well as participate in the interview process. This questionnaire is due no later than Saturday, March 12th, 2022 at 11:59pm. Please email your completed questionnaire as a pdf. file to pac.dcabp@gmail.com

### **1. What are your top three priorities as a U.S. Senator? Why is it important to address these issues and what are your recommendations?**

My top three priorities as a U.S. Senator are:

#### 1. Defend the Constitution

Defense of the freedoms outlined in the Constitution is foundational to the idea of America, and what makes America unique. We need leaders who will defend the rights of all citizens, and ensure that the government protects people through the enforcement of processes, documents, and laws as written - not based on personal thoughts and opinions. Constitutional indifference will quickly threaten the very freedoms that the government was created to protect.

#### 2. Defend America

A strategic and coordinated foreign policy is crucial to defending our country. Yet, over the past two decades, we've allowed our once-cohesive foreign policy strategy to fall away. Our proactive diplomacy has been replaced by reactive, tactical, and point-to-point actions. We need to establish common and enduring foreign policy goals across the executive and legislative branches that take into account our domestic challenges and priorities. We must be consistent in our approach, unwavering in our morals, and steadfast in our resolve. These are the virtues we need to restore in order to maintain our leadership role on the global stage. This is the best way to defend our nation. If we are going to care about human rights violations, then we need to care about ALL countries with human rights violations. If we are going to care about aggression, then we must care about ALL instances of nation-to-nation aggression. This quickly becomes complicated, and requires substantial expertise and time, but it's worth the investment.

### 3. Balance and Pass a Federal Budget

I believe that the most important job of federal legislators is to pass a prudent budget. On time. Every year. Congress has not passed a budget since 2006. As a result, each year, the federal government wastes vast sums of money as agencies and departments scramble to support a possible shutdown until a Continuing Resolution is passed. Continuing Resolutions also mean that governmental organizations receive their money late in the year, making it difficult to support goals and expenditures that they had planned in their programs due to the rush to spend - again, resulting in a waste of federal money. In other words, the inability of Congress to perform its most critical function hobbles the entire government. The effects of this ripple through our economy, and are felt by every citizen and business in our nation. We need strong voices that will push for greater accountability in Congress, and the experience to successfully navigate the budget process each year.

Success in these three areas is utilitarian – meaning all U.S. citizens will derive benefit through them: greater security, protection of freedoms, or economic stability. These areas also fall squarely within the stated scope of the federal government per Article One, Section Eight of the Constitution, and are areas that most North Carolinians agree are foundational to American prosperity.

### **2. How have you worked with Democrats and/or Republicans and extended your hand across party lines to work with people who take an opposite or drastically different position than you do? Can you identify a time when this has happened and how did you compromise? What did you learn from this process? And how will you work with those who oppose you if you are elected or re-elected.**

I spent twenty years working in the Executive Branch as a civilian intelligence analyst and leader for the Department of Defense. During my service, in accordance with The Hatch Act and other federal regulations, I was required to remain apolitical and work professionally with everyone – regardless of political party affiliation, world view, or any other personal preferences. While I am unable to give a specific example due to my lifelong responsibility to protect information gained while associated with the Department of Defense, I was frequently by-name requested to lead special cross-organizational teams because of my demonstrated ability to take people from very different points of view and quickly find a way forward. These experiences taught me how to strategize, negotiate, and compromise. More importantly, I learned and understood what it meant to be part of a team of leaders and work effectively. If elected, I will work with those who oppose me in the same way I work with anyone – understand their motivations, values, goals, and objectives; identify areas of mutual interest; move forward on identified areas; repeat.

**3. Mass shootings remain an unsettling issue in the US and this state. There were 600 such shootings in the US in 2020 compared to 417 in 2019. Over the last few years, we have witnessed mass shootings on military bases, churches, elementary schools, colleges and movie theaters. There was a mass shooting in Boone, NC April 28, 2021 and Ahsoskie, NC November 6, 2021. a. What are your proposals for addressing gun violence in North Carolina? b. Do you support restrictions on gun sales? If so, what type of restrictions would you support? If not, please explain.**

Looking at specific case studies of gun violence across North Carolina and America, one thing is quite clear: mental health challenges frequently co-exist with gun violence. In particular, mental health in young people and current or former military require better handling at the local and state level. The federal government can (and should) help by developing an effective communications strategy and outreach/education effort aimed at removing stigma from mental health, and ensuring more proactive and holistic health coverage for our active military and veteran communities.

Defense of the Constitution is one of my top priorities. As the right to bear arms is a freedom protected by the Constitution, I am going to be very conservative when considering any legislation that would infringe upon that freedom. The conversation is premature until we are able to gather and perform rigorous analysis on meaningful data.

The first step in any area of rigorous study is to define and codify terms. In this case, what comprises a mass shooting, and how do we count? In the absence of agreement, sizeable variance in the number of mass shooting exists across press, academia, non-profit, and government reporting. To this end, RAND Corporation published a table<sup>1</sup> showing how mass shootings were defined and counted by different organizations. Mass shooting fatalities reported across seven different “authoritative” sources for 2019 ranged anywhere from 73 to 628 deaths. Likewise, the number of events counted as mass shootings in 2019 ranged anywhere from 6 to 503. We need to come to a consensus on what the metrics are, and what they tell us, before we can discuss any further legislation.

**4. Do you support the Affordable Care Act? Why or why not? a. Do you support Medicaid expansion particularly in North Carolina? Explain why or why not? b. What recommendations do you have for further reducing the number of uninsured Americans or increasing access to healthcare? c. What is your position on telehealth access especially in rural areas? What would you propose as a way for these areas to be able to access telehealth?**

I believe that the Affordable Care Act (ACA) need to be completely overhauled. Instead of making health care affordable for all Americans, ACA resulted in many middle class families paying as much as three times the premiums they would have paid before the existence of ACA. Insurance companies – business people without medical credentials – are determining the standard of care instead of doctors working with patients. As a result, many patients are not receiving quality care, and many conditions are left to progress until they are much more serious. Many efforts have been made to revive ACA over the years – each of them costing more money. Most legislators – and even President Biden – acknowledge that ACA is not working as intended. Yet, the thought of renegotiating a health care plan that would be acceptable to all parties is so daunting, that no one is even bothering to try. This is

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.rand.org/research/gun-policy/analysis/essays/mass-shootings.html>

precisely how government programs become “too big to fail.” When ACA is finally redone, we need to either re-privatize insurance altogether, or pursue a public system that mimics the competition of a free market. This will be the only way to have a chance at making health insurance affordable for all North Carolinians and Americans.

I also do not support Medicaid expansion – largely for the reason that I outlined above – it is trying to put a band-aid on a bullet wound by offering states more money to make up for the failings of the Affordable Care Act. We need to fix Medicaid in a way that makes it a sustainable program. Americans cannot continue to spend money to make up for Medicaid shortcomings - we need to root out the problems and address them in a more systemic and permanent way.

I have no background in medicine, but I’ve heard North Carolinians tell stories about the nightmares of tele-health due to spotty internet across the state, and I’ve heard doctors and nurses lament about the challenges of treating patients without being able to do an exam. There have been great strides in medical technology over the past few years that make tele-health an option for people who would not have otherwise been able to get medical care, and in those cases, tele-health is preferable to no care at all. But, overall, tele-health is not positioned to be at the forefront of health care discussions in North Carolina.

**5. According to the American Council on Education, their study “on race and ethnicity in higher education found about 30 percent of all 2015–16 bachelor’s degree recipients graduated without debt, but only 14 percent of African-American graduates managed this. About one-third of African-American bachelor’s degree recipients accumulated \$40,000 or more in debt, compared with 18 percent overall and 13 percent of Hispanic graduates. The pattern among recipients of associate degrees and certificates is similar. a. Are you concerned about the affordability of higher education for African Americans? What do you see as the causes for such disparities and how would you address them? b. What is your position on expanding the debt forgiveness programs?**

Practically speaking, the challenge with executing a federal strategy to offset the rising price of tuition is that the aid will not be equal. When does the strategy apply, to whom, and for how long? Will recent graduates be grandfathered in? What would be the plan for ending the program or would it become another large, sustained government social program? Implementation of something like this can create greater inequality than just allowing the natural forces of the free market to determine appropriate pricing for college.

I also want to point out that there are SO many options in the public and private sectors to get tuition assistance that never existed before. Many parts of the government will reimburse tuition costs in exchange for a certain number of years of work, or to hire and retain people in a critical skill field. In the private sector, many companies are offering the benefits of tuition assistance and reimbursement - to include many customer service jobs (i.e. Starbucks) that are held by students who are working and need flexible hours/terms. The federal government also offers need-based assistance in the form of grants, and many states offer residents in-state tuition at state schools.

Overall, every time we mess with the free market economy, we end up paying so much more in the long run. Regulating markets just delays financial pain, or pushes it into other channels. In the case of tuition, some coarse federal options are - loans/aid, taxation, debt/deficit accrual, or some combination thereof. If we tax (in the current taxation structure), it will come back to you over years without any option for deferral, consolidation, or other means offered by student aid. If we rack up additional debt, we risk greater inflation - which means that you will be a student paying more money for all goods and services while you are paying for college and beyond. The medium-to-long term challenge of debt (deficit), is that it further indebts us to nations that do not share the ideals we hold up in America, and puts them in a position to devalue American currency, or even pin their currency to another nation's currency in extreme cases (in which case all markets would lose confidence in the American dollar and we risk financial collapse). A recent example of how federal regulation impacts individuals is COVID aid - which substantially affected labor markets on issues ranging from wage requirements to supply chains - which will take years to fully recover from. This is not to say that there is never occasion for federal government regulation, but rather to make the case that we must have the discipline to use it very sparingly, and only with extremely careful consideration for all potential impacts.

**6. North Carolina is home to over 1 million veterans and is home to the army base with the largest active duty population. What policy solutions or benefit improvements would you support for our veterans and military personnel?**

At the federal level, one of the best things we can do for military personnel is pass a budget on time. Each year in recent history, as Congress passes Continuing Resolution after Continuing Resolution for the first half of the year, the military – along with everyone else – has to work at risk. This has negative effects on recruiting, retention, travel, and overall force readiness. Continuing Resolutions also affect military organizations' ability to plan, and when a budget finally is passed, many plans can not be implemented and money is wasted or must be returned because it cannot be spent quickly enough.

Also at the federal level, we should also be ensuring that Cost of Living Allowances (COLAs) for active and retired military populations are keeping up with the actual cost of living, and that their medical benefits through the VA are providing a standard of care that is continuous and complete. Homelessness and untreated mental illness are not challenges that should exist in a community that served and sacrificed for the freedoms we enjoy in America. These goals are best met with the support/subcontracting of local non-profit organizations founded by veterans for veterans.

Finally, we must do everything we can to recover those missing in action (MIA) such that none of our service members are left behind, and none of our service families are left without closure. MIA missions rest squarely on the shoulders of Department of Defense and Department of State to resolve, and there are many missions that have not been recovered due to poor and neglected diplomacy, and a lack of a coordinated and cohesive foreign policy. We must do everything we can to bring all of our service members home to their families.

**7. The impact of covid on the US is undeniable: inequities along racial and economic lines are very pronounced. Speak to some of those impacts and how would you address them as a United States Senator.**

I believe that the worst of COVID challenges are behind us, but we see the biggest and longest lasting challenges from the federal response to COVID, rather than from COVID itself. We cannot go back and make different decisions, and the worst of COVID challenges is behind us. Moving forward, at the federal level, in order to restore American normalcy, we should focus on: restoring and protecting our free market economy, addressing learning lag in schools, and reinstating strategic and coordinated foreign policy efforts. By making the American economy stronger and ensuring that the next generation of Americans is not hobbled by the pandemic, we will offset some of the holdover effects of COVID.

**8. Have you ever attended racial equity training? If yes, which one(s) and what was something that you realized about yourself? How have you taken that knowledge and applied it to your work? If not, why haven't you attended a racial equity training?**

I am a trained political scientist. I've been continuously studying American and world history and domestic and international relations/policy since I was 17 years old. I've had academic and practitioner training on recognizing and appropriately addressing implicit and explicit bias. As a leader in the United States Government, I was also required to take annual EEO and bias training.

I've learned from extensive training that equity requires compassion and grace – character traits that cannot well be codified into universal rule of law or institutionalized in large organizations, as they are driven by a detailed understanding of personal circumstance and a solution that is tailored to the specific problem that needs solving. As a result, equity is best accomplished through private and localized organizations like non-profits, churches, and at the discretion of local governmental groups and individual decision makers as appropriate. Only through person to person, point to point relationships will America foster greater understanding of its wrongs and resulting impacts, and make appropriate decisions about how to appropriately address those wrongs and move forward.

**9. About you: a. What would you like the DCABP PAC to know about you that is not identified in your above responses? b. How have you collaborated with or contributed to the mission of the DCABP over the past five years? c. What does the DCABP mean to you? d. If elected, how will you collaborate with the DCABP? Give specific examples.**

I am not taking PAC money in the Primary because I believe strongly in campaign finance reform. Without appropriately scoping the role that PACs have in elections, citizens without substantial fundraising capability (which usually indicates a long career in politics) are effectively excluded from participating in government. I am also not taking pre-Primary endorsements because I believe that they take power away from voters and artificially shape Primary and General elections. That said, I will work professionally with any and all PACs during my candidacy and if I am elected to public office. Those relationships will be driven by data and areas of mutual interest PACs demonstrate with North Carolinians and Americans.