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## Eight Phila. DA Candidates Fight to Distinguish Themselves

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The tone at the Philadelphia District Attorney Candidates' Forum on Monday evening at Drexel University Thomas R. Kline School of Law was set when undergraduate student Shahmar Beasley asked the candidates what distinguished them from each other.

All eight candidates running to fill the seat that embattled District Attorney R. Seth Williams is set to vacate attended the event. The discussion touched on a wide range of high-profile issues, from immigration enforcement and stop-and-frisk to Williams' legal and ethical woes. But, throughout the two-hour event, which was moderated by Thomas R. Kline, the candidates continually sought to distinguish themselves in a race that is increasingly centered on two issues: public integrity and the expansion of diversionary programs.

Former Philadelphia Municipal Court Judge Teresa Carr Deni highlighted her experience on the bench and as an active Democrat.

When it was brought up that numerous city Democrats, including Williams, have faced corruption

charges, Deni did not hesitate to offer a defense.

"You cannot hold these committee people and even these ward leaders responsible when individuals fail," she said, noting that her father, an immigrant, had been able to rise through the ranks of the Democratic Party.

When it came to policy, Deni said she would bring more multilingual attorneys into the office, and ensure that women and minority attorneys would be paid equally for their work.

Tariq El-Shabazz, who was a defense attorney before spending several months as first deputy district attorney under Williams, pushed to distance himself from the office under Williams. On several occasions El-Shabazz said that, although many members of the office are very hardworking and ethical, he said there is a "counter-culture" of prosecutors who have a "very warped view of how to prosecute cases."

"The supervision by Williams with respect to very critical issues of justice was not well done, and because of that, people took advantage," El-Shabazz said. "There is a lot of injustice that occurred."

Over the past few months, El-Shabazz has received criticism for

owing \$137,000 in taxes, and Kline asked him to specifically address the issue.

According to El-Shabazz, the tax debts arose from businesses he operated in Philadelphia. He said he was audited for several years, and, as he disputed the findings of the Internal Revenue Service, penalties and interest continued to accrue.

"I'm a very good litigator. I'm very persuasive, but I didn't persuade the IRS," he said, adding that he has paid the tab down to \$74,000.

Beth Grossman had an easier time distinguishing herself from the other candidates, as she is the only Republican seeking the office. Calling herself a "law and order" candidate who believes in fiscal conservatism, she also noted that she switched her party affiliation from Democrat to Republican in 2013 specifically because of the corruption issues she was seeing.

"For a city that prides itself on being tough and scrappy fighters, it's amazing how willing the city is to accept so little from its representatives," she said.

Michael Untermeyer told the audience that he planned to follow a progressive agenda, but differentiated himself by saying he would focus prosecutions on white-collar

crimes and would stop prosecuting drug-related offenses.

When Kline asked if that ran the gamut from marijuana to heroin, Untermeyer said it did, adding he would also push for the decriminalization of marijuana.

Despite switching parties and seeking re-election to various offices in Philadelphia over the past few years, Untermeyer said he has "always run as a reform candidate."

Former Assistant U.S. Attorney Joe Khan, however, rebutted that assertion saying Untermeyer had pushed "regressive, racist and sexist ideas" in prior races, specifically pointing to a video Untermeyer used in his 2011 bid for City Council, which was later pulled.

Khan largely painted himself as the anti-Donald Trump candidate. He made several references to the president, who he characterized as scapegoating Muslim immigrants, and said he would use the office to "fill the gaps" that may be left by federal enforcement agencies on civil rights issues and environmental crimes.

On the local level, Khan said he also would stem an outgrowth of supervisors at the DA's office, and would focus on prosecuting more serious crimes. Specifically, he said the office should spend less time and money on lab testing in potential drug cases, and instead work to clear out a backlog of untested rape kits.

"We need to look at the money and say, 'What are our priorities,'" Khan said.

The candidate who most clearly sought to take up the mantle of Williams' implementation of diversionary programs and criminal jus-

tice reforms was Jack O'Neill. The 35-year-old O'Neill touted his history as a prosecutor in the homicide unit, and said that he wanted to expand diversionary programs that he helped start under Williams.

"I came into the DA's office when progressive reforms were sweeping across the country," he said. "It was not the DA's office of the '80s and '90s. We are not the nasty conservatives people have made us out to be."

In a race that has largely focused on progressive reforms, Larry Krasner repeatedly told the crowd he was the most progressive candidate at the forum. Krasner noted that he had never worked in government, but he was running because he is "tired of seeing society's resources spent building jails, rather than school, which are a remedy for crime."

Specifically, Krasner said he would do away with the death penalty, push for lower sentencing schemes and work to overhaul the city's cash bail system, which he said criminalized poverty.

When Kline asked him how he expected line ADAs and police officers to support him given his career in criminal defense, Krasner said he didn't expect any problems.

"I do see an issue with one union official, who I see as a throwback to the Rizzo era," Krasner said, adding that he is on good terms with many in the DA's office and has often represented police accused of committing crimes. "When things need to be fixed on the inside, I got calls from the DAs."

Rich Negrin said that, unlike the others, he was not a candidate with a specific agenda, but he, instead,

plans to bring a pragmatic approach to the office.

"I want to build opportunities for your people. Not to fight crime, but to prevent crime," he said. "I'm not a progressive candidate, I'm a progressive leader."

Negrin, who served as city managing director during the Nutter administration, distanced himself from former Mayor Michael Nutter's support of stop-and-frisk, and said he would work to ensure that the controversial tactics would only be used in accordance with the law under Terry v. Ohio.