

Minnesota Now (MPR) | Minnesota Now Meet the Candidate: Ryan Winkler runs for Hennepin County Attorney 01G9ZGWNA417E7Z89C9GM1T9D5

KATHY WURZER: I know you're seeing a lot of candidate lawn signs popping up as we get closer to next Tuesday's primary. One of the races on the ballot is Hennepin County Attorney. For the first time in almost 25 years there will be a new Hennepin County Attorney after Mike Freeman announced he's retiring. The Hennepin County Attorney holds a key position in government. The County Attorney's office handles adult and juvenile crime, child protection, and other legal issues for the county.

There are seven candidates running for the office. And as of today, we've talked to all of them. The last conversation is with Ryan Winkler, a practicing attorney and DFL house majority leader. He lives in Golden Valley. Representative Winkler, welcome to the program.

RYAN Hi, Kathy.

WINKLER:

KATHY WURZER: You've said you're going to emphasize public safety while holding police accountable as Hennepin County Attorney. How will you make sure that happens?

RYAN WINKLER: Well, first of all, the level of violent crime that we are experiencing in Hennepin county in Minneapolis and the surrounding suburbs is completely unacceptable. We're almost getting calloused as we see person after person harmed. It could be homicides, shootings, carjacking.

It's not acceptable the way it is. The public is demanding a difference. They want to be safe. We have a justice system that people want to believe in and trust. That has its challenges. And the only way we are going to create more public safety and create the kind of police departments, the kind of justice system that everybody wants, is by building strong coalitions, by working closely with law enforcement, working with law enforcement leaders, working with community leaders, and building the kinds of strong networks, the kind of strong partnerships and relationships that is necessary for this all to function well.

KATHY WURZER: You were talking about holding police accountable. And I'm wondering, when it comes to getting these better officers, you announced this spring that you're going to create an expedited police training program for folks with strong moral character. What does that mean exactly?

RYAN WINKLER: There is a very strong tradition of hire for character, train for competence. That was pioneered in Ramsey County by Sheriff Matt Bostrom. We're starting to see that percolate up in other police departments across Minnesota. And the concept is you assess candidates for becoming police officers on the front end based on their commitment to community service. And if they show that they have the character and attributes of commitment to service and are interested in becoming officers, then you can train them to be competent and teach them the skills.

But trying to teach the skills of being community minded, of having empathy, having cultural competency, those things are much harder to train. And so start by hiring based on character. We were trying to create that pipeline because police chiefs are saying they're looking to hire more of those kind of police officers. But our current recruiting system is not producing enough of them.

KATHY WURZER: Of course, the county attorney's not in charge of hiring police. How do you plan to get this program enacted as county attorney?

RYAN WINKLER: I was proposing that as a state legislator. I think as county attorney I would continue to urge the state legislature to pursue that kind of idea. We did make some progress on it this last session. It's also possible that we could create more of these kind of programs at the local level.

Last night I heard from Interim Chief Amelia Huffman in Minneapolis that they are trying to do exactly that right now in Minneapolis. And the new community safety commissioner, Cedric Alexander, I talked with him a couple of weeks ago. And he expressed interest in exactly the same thing.

KATHY WURZER: Speaking of the legislature, you worked on passing that recent cannabis legislation bill through the state house which included criminal expungement for non-violent marijuana offenders. As Hennepin county attorney, will you expunge other non-violent crimes from people's records?

RYAN WINKLER: So the county attorney can play a role. Right now we have a state law that governs how expungements are completed. I think that the county attorney can help by not opposing people who apply for expungement and potentially even supporting some of those applications if justice is served by it.

When we look at our cannabis laws overall, we know that they are a product of mass incarceration, mass incarceration is one of the products, that there are deep racial disparities in how our cannabis laws have been enforced. And so it isn't just enough to create a legal product. We also have to look at repairing the damage caused by our criminal justice approach to cannabis prohibition.

KATHY WURZER: Each candidate we've talked to this week has also focused on juvenile crime because as you know with the recent spasm of carjackings, those were some pretty young individuals who were involved. What do you do to help these young people stay out of the system? Once they're in the system, how do you reform them? What's your plan?

RYAN WINKLER: So we moved away from incarceration as a model for dealing with juveniles. I think we went a bit overboard in making that switch and not having an effective system in place to monitor their behavior and monitor their location to make sure that they're getting the right kind of follow through. So it's sort of what we did with mental health. We closed our state institutions but never created an adequate community based system to support them.

And so we need to, I think, look at reopening the county home school or look at expanding the juvenile detention center, not as the whole answer but as part of the answer. If anyone is harming somebody through violence, is committing a gun crime, they need to have accountability. They need to be away from the community until they are able to function again like a constructive citizen and not harm people.

But for young people, we have to include the possibility of rehabilitation particularly as their brains develop. We need to make sure that there are pathways back out. And that requires a lot of constructive programming, a lot of intervention, not just incarceration. As you know, earlier in the year, there were a number of police chiefs in the West Metro who were not happy with current county attorney Mike Freeman, said he wasn't charging cases as they thought he should.

Communication wasn't great. What about communication between the County Attorney's office and other entities? How will you improve that? That has to be one of the top priorities for the next County Attorney.

I've had one on one conversations with many of those same police chiefs. And consistently, they say that they want to have not only input when charging policies are changed at the County Attorney's office but they want to better understand the direction the county attorney's office is trying to go. They want to be able to object or require or ask for clarification for charging decisions.

And none of those channels of communication currently really are robust. So I would do what I did at the state legislature, be very intentional about opening up lines of communication, making sure they know who to call if they have concerns, making sure that we are regularly, deliberately meeting together, talking through issues, and building relationships because you cannot show up at a crisis moment and not have anybody's phone number or not have a level of trust. That we have seen way too much of in recent years.

KATHY WURZLER: Before you go, I'm wondering about police who have been involved in shootings, killings of civilians, how do you plan to deal with those individuals? There have been of course problems with the grand jury system. Will the buck stop with you, will you make charging decisions? Will you send them on to the Attorney General's office? What do you plan to do?

RYAN WINKLER: I think we need to have a very clear process for charging police officers or considering charges against police officers particularly for murder and manslaughter. No one county attorney will have all the trust from every direction it takes to make those decisions individually.

I don't think that-- referring some cases to other counties and not others, I think that all suggests just politics. What I want is a procedure. So when the possibility of a charge happens, we have a process in place, a timeline in place that we have vetted ahead of time with the community so that we aren't in these high tension moments and wondering what political decisions are being made but rather have a process in place for referring decisions to a group of people, county attorney recommended people from metro counties who can make a recommendation on charging in one of those circumstances and then have that come back to the county attorney for a final decision.

KATHY WURZLER: All right, representative. Thank you so much.

RYAN WINKLER: Thank you, Kathy. Thanks for having these conversations.

KATHY WURZLER: Absolutely. It's been interesting to listen to all seven candidates. If you'd like to listen to each of the candidates and what they had to say, of course, we have the podcast posted at nprnews.org.

That was Ryan Winkler, candidate for Hennepin County Attorney. Early voting, by the way, in this race is happening right now. Primaries, I've mentioned, is August the 9th. You can sign up to vote when you get to your local polling station. You can find out how to register and where your local polling place is by visiting hennepin.us/residents/elections.