

Minnesota Now (MPR) | Meet the Candidate: Paul Ostrow runs for Hennepin County Attorney
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CATHY WURZER: So I mentioned all this week I'm interviewing candidates running to be the new Hennepin County Attorney. The Hennepin County attorney has a lot of power. That office oversees criminal prosecutions. They also have a hand in protecting elders from fraud and cases that involve child protection. Mike Freeman has been in that job for 24 years. He is not seeking re-election.

There are seven people running to take his place. I just spoke with candidate, Martha Holton Dimick. Now another candidate joins me. Paul Ostrow is a former Minneapolis City Council member, and he was president of that body. He's currently an assistant county attorney in Anoka County. And he lives in Northeast Minneapolis. Welcome to the program.

PAUL OSTROW: Cathy, it's really a pleasure to be on. Thank you so much.

CATHY WURZER: Thanks for being here. You've heard some politicians tout themselves as being tough on crime. What does that phrase mean to you as you set a policy agenda if you were to become Hennepin County Attorney?

PAUL OSTROW: Well, thank you, Cathy. Let me first of all say I'm the only candidate running for this position as a nonpartisan. And this is a nonpartisan position by law. And the reason I emphasize that in responding to your question is that because we're running a nonpartisan campaign, we don't have the support of any particular political faction or political party. So this campaign has really needed to be a campaign of ideas.

And I would encourage people to go to our website at ostrowforhennepincounty.com. We have a specific 10-point plan on violent crime. So if you want to know my views on what it means to be, quote, unquote, "tough on crime," that will tell you that. And it includes most importantly, ending catch and release. We have far too many repeat offenders, those on probation and parole who are released without bail or conditions.

It means getting a handle on this horrible fentanyl epidemic and carjacking. It means holding people accountable. But it also means, Cathy, and this is not a choice and it's not a balance, we can do both and we can do both well. It means that we think about issues of racial equity. It means that we look at how we limit the collateral consequences for people that come into contact with the law enforcement and the criminal justice system.

So I am not a fan of slogans. I'm not a fan of tough on crime. One of my things is a group I've been involved in called No Labels. I think these simplistic type of slogans probably have done us more harm than good.

CATHY WURZER: So let's go back to what you mentioned about repeat offenders. And when there was that big jump in carjackings in Hennepin County, Minneapolis police said 75% of the suspects arrested were repeat offenders. And as you know, investigators say they see the same names being arrested, which folks have been in our criminal justice system for quite a while. So as county attorney. How do you stop what appears to many to be a revolving door for offenders?

PAUL OSTROW: Well, that's a great point. I practice in Anoka County and we do things differently there, to be quite candid with you. I will tell you that I've spoken to police chiefs. in Hennepin County. And they will tell you that literally people that steal automobiles in Hennepin County ask what county they are in. And they're relieved when they find out they're in Hennepin County because of the fact that they're not even seeing a judge. They're just being released.

We made a huge mistake several years ago, Cathy, when we closed the ranch in Minnetonka. Saint Paul did a similar-- Ramsey County did a similar thing. We need a place for pre-adjudication detention that is safe for the more violent offenders. The juvenile offenders, way too many of those juvenile carjackers are being released back home. Their parents don't want that. It's not even safe for the kids, and it's certainly not safe for the community.

CATHY You mentioned the ranch. We're talking about the Hennepin County home school and Totem Town in Saint Paul.

WURZER: So what do you do to help these troubled kids?

PAUL OSTROW: Well, on that point I would take a lead with the county board who I think made a big mistake on this, and let's have a state-of-the-art facility here. One that certainly addresses trauma, one that addresses addiction, but one that both keeps the public safe and detains the more violent juveniles and gets them the support and treatment that they need. That's the first thing that I would do.

I think we need much more oversight of some of the diversion programs in Hennepin / way too many of the juveniles, we're losing track of them. I think the County attorney's office has to take a much more active role in that. And you know, as a budget chair and council president, that's the kind of thing I did in terms of looking at programs. Are they effective, are they not effective? I think the County attorney's office needs to play a bigger role in making sure that some of these supervision programs are doing what they set out to do.

CATHY Some of these younger offenders get into the system as you know for lower level offenses. Marijuana possession

WURZER: convictions come to mind. Do you support expunging records for some of these lower level offenses?

PAUL OSTROW: I absolutely do. I was a strong supporter of the Clean Slate Act. I thought the legislature was really unfortunate. Both Democrats and Republicans failed. Frankly, Democrats failed by voting against the carjacking bill and against a common sense fentanyl bill. But Republicans failed by blocking the clean slate legislation, which had broad support across the business community.

Right now, it is required that you bring a formal motion to get an expungement. And frankly, that's just foolish. How many people know that? How many people are we missing? We need to have automatic expungement for certain offenses. I not live in a mass incarceration state. What we do live in is a state that likes to make people felons.

And that's got to change because that does not in the interest of public safety to make people with low level offenses felons for the rest of their life. It makes it harder for them to work, harder for them to go to school, harder for them to find housing. So I'm all for holding serious offenders accountable, but very much for finding ways to address these low level offenses and allowing people to get those off their records.

CATHY Hennepin County Attorney's Office, as you know, has come under heavy criticism over the years for how it's

WURZER: handled officer-involved civilian shootings. Mike Freeman moved away from using grand juries in these cases. How would you handle them as county attorney?

PAUL OSTROW: Well, I do think we need to look at major reform to the grand jury process. I have some significant concerns with what's happened in some of the police prosecutions. I will say, I think that it was frankly, a travesty that Kim Potter was-- that her charges were increased in response to a protest. That's not the way the criminal justice system is supposed to work.

I think law enforcement is concerned about that. But the grand jury process is not trusted because it is not public. So I think we need to look really hard at how we can make that process transparent and accountable. I will say also that I'm the one candidate in this campaign that's actually in a constructive way addressed the problems with the Minneapolis Police Department.

90% of the sustained violations in Minneapolis are currently being hidden from the public in a manner that I do believe is unlawful. And I've been involved in litigation for that reason. This is unique to the MPD. It does a disservice to all of the good officers. I can tell you that the good officers don't like the bad officers.

And they are being victimized themselves or at least their reputation is being harmed by the failure to properly discipline those among them who need to be disciplined. So I will have a very strong view of the openness and transparency. And that's going to be an important part of how I handle police cases.

CATHY WURZER: Just to be really clear, it sounds like you would still rely perhaps on the grand jury system when looking at officer-involved killings. Because obviously, the Hennepin County Attorney's Office has moved to deciding cases themselves or it can refer cases to other County attorneys to decide or work with the attorney general's office.

PAUL OSTROW: I think there are going to be some cases like a Derek Chauvin where frankly, that was so clear that it made sense that was something that the county attorney's office could charge. I think there are a number of other circumstances where if it is transparent-- I want to be really clear about this-- and if the evidence is properly presented and all of the evidence is presented that there will be some circumstances in which calling a grand jury on these cases will be necessary and appropriate. But not all. I think some of those will be cases that can go straight to a complaint.

CATHY WURZER: You've used the word transparency here a couple of times. You've said that your intention is to have the most transparent and accountable county attorney's office in the history of Hennepin County. So what are the means to getting to that goal?

PAUL OSTROW: Well, there are several. One is that we will have state-of-the-art dashboard that will tell people what we are charging, what we are not charging. If we decline a case, that will be a public record that will be immediately accessible to people. We will keep records that relate to racial disparities and be very public about that. We will keep records about what bail we are requesting and what bail is in fact granted by the court. The public has a right to know that.

They need to hold us accountable. They certainly need to question judges when they do disagree. I also have talked about having public meetings even in the community, biannual public hearings where people can raise their concerns in a public way. I am not at all a fan of closed door meetings to discuss and find solutions to very public problems. So we will have those difficult conversations and they will be in public.

CATHY WURZER: Before you go, I'm curious as to why you would want the job of Hennepin County Attorney.

PAUL OSTROW: That is a fair and a great question. And the simple answer is that my parents taught me that you do as much good in this world for as long as you can do it. And I do think my talents and experience meet this moment. I think there's incredible solutions we can come up with, and that work excites me. I know it's a tough job, but I am very excited about the things we can get done.

CATHY All right. Paul Ostrow, I appreciate your time. Thank you so much.

WURZER:

PAUL OSTROW: Thank you, Cathy. It's always a pleasure to be with you.

CATHY Paul Ostrow is a candidate for Hennepin County Attorney. Earlier in the show, we talked with Martha Holton
WURZER: Dimick. Tomorrow, we'll chat with two more candidates, Mary Moriarty and Tad Jude. Early voting in this race is happening right now. Primary election day is August 9. If you live in Hennepin County, you can find your polling place on the Secretary of State's website.