

Minnesota Now (MPR) | Meet the Candidate: Jarvis Jones runs for Hennepin County Attorney
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INTERVIEWER: For the first time in 24 years, voters in Hennepin County will choose a new County attorney. That person holds a key job the County attorney's office oversees adult and juvenile criminal cases, child protection cases, and defends the County in other legal matters. The office has a \$65 million budget, and a staff of about 460. There are a record seven candidates running for that office and we're talking to every one of them before the August 9 primary. Today, Jarvis Jones joins us. Mr. Jones is an attorney who lives in Edina. He's on the line. Thanks for joining us.

JARVIS JONES: Thank you for having me.

INTERVIEWER: Now, Mr. Jones after a 30 year career as a lawyer mainly in corporate and business settings, I know you have executive management expertise. What experience with public safety and criminal law do you bring to the job?

JARVIS JONES: As you correctly noted, that is not my background. And many of the folks running against me they've been practicing in the criminal lawyer for 20, 30, 40 years. But I'll suggest to your audience one simple question. Are we happy with the way things are today? Has anything changed in the last 20, 40 years. And if you think they have, they have not. As far as safe streets which my candidacy is about safe streets, in all neighborhoods, including Minneapolis.

It's about treating people fairly and with dignity in all neighborhoods, including Minneapolis. And the third leg for my campaign is that we need to reform the criminal justice system and reduce the mass footprint or the footprint of mass incarceration. So what do you bring to the table Jarvis, is what I hear. I've always been one to make cultural changes. We need to make cultural systemic and organizational changes. And this change [INAUDIBLE] and that's something I do.

I'm also a bridge builder to reach out to people of Color and the broader community non-people of Color, to bring us together so we can start resolving some of the problems. And so as a change agent, bridge builder, that's what I bring. We need someone from outside the system, the folks inside the system, politicians, judges, who call balls and strikes. And we don't need a second public defender. We already have a public defender. So I bring fresh eyes, someone willing to make the changes necessary.

INTERVIEWER: Mr. Jones you mentioned safe streets as being one of the tenets of your campaign. And in an interview with the Sahan Journal you said, there are some folks who say lock them up. That's not the solution. Some people believe in spending more money. That's not the solution. And you described yourself as a change agent. What are the changes needed to battle rising crime if not a blend of those two solutions.

JARVIS JONES: I am misquoted there. I said locking them up alone is not going to resolve it. I said spending money alone is not going to resolve it. That's so to get what completely I said. Both have a place. Both. There will be no one as far as locking up. I don't say lock up. As an African-American, when we here lock them up we know historically and presently that means locking up disproportionately African-American men and women for the same crime committed by people who have less pigment in their skin or less melanin in their skin.

I'm for spending money, but that's not going to resolve it. We spend lots of money locking people up and lots of money on social programs. We need to do both, lock folks up. One of my pledges is we're going to take back our streets, our neighborhoods, and the downtown area. And at the same time we're going to treat people with dignity and respect. How we get there, though, is we need someone who could be in those troubled communities, diverse and troubled communities, and we do need someone who look like them to rebuild that trust in those communities.

I grew up in Chicago. It's a false belief if we think we're just going to spend our way out of this alone or lock everyone up. We need someone who's going to live in that community on a weekly basis. My first hire is going to be a community engagement liaison to work in these communities. I'm going to be in these communities on a weekly basis. My first three, six months I'm doing a listening tour in all of these communities, all communities.

INTERVIEWER: Let's talk about the young folks who are involved in the criminal justice system. I know you've said you feel that young people under 18 are being over criminalized for minor offenses. But shouldn't actions have consequences? Because small offenses can turn into more serious ones.

JARVIS JONES: My position on young people is pretty straightforward. What I said is we over criminalize for nonviolent, low level, minor offenses. Marijuana, for example. We over criminalize the homeless, people with addictions, mental health. This is my message. You look at different things I said out there it's very clear. One, I don't believe we put everyone these 14, 12-year-old we treat them like adults. Their minds are still developing.

However, the juvenile system is outdated. For many of these young people they believe it's a day camp and they're told that by certain people who abuse them. We should have stiffer sentences for those who use our young people to commit crime. And for the young people who decide to commit violent crimes carjacking, even I consider assault, it's a theory. When someone get beat up, and hurt, it's assault.

We need to reform the juvenile system where they don't just get out after 18 or when they reach a certain age. Not that they stay in the juvenile system, but their record isn't cleared unless they've shown they're going to be accountable going forward whether that's a year or two. So I'm going to work with the key stakeholders, including the politicians to reform the Justice system. So it's not day camp and they have more accountability for violent offenses not for nonviolent offenses. I believe in more diversion programs for youth.

INTERVIEWER: Let me ask you about something, of course, that's been quite controversial recently in the Hennepin County Attorney's Office actually more than recently the past few years. Of course, I'm talking about police shootings of civilians. Mike Freeman got away from using grand juries as he looked at Officer involved shootings. How do you deal with police involved shootings if you're Hennepin County Attorney.

JARVIS JONES: OK. Two to three messages. I'll try to be more specific. I'm not a politician. I don't have 15 seconds sound bites it's unfortunate. One, I think overwhelmingly, the majority of police officers want to do a good job, keep us safe and go home safely to their family. My brother and sister are first generation Chicago police officers in the inner city where I grew up. So I have great respect for police officers.

But the overwhelming, call it 90%, 95%, 98% the problem with the police department is a cultural problem. It starts at the top not just these officers. There's a mentality that allows the bad police officers like 5%, 10%, 2% I don't care, to violate their responsibility. And the other 95% police officers, on the street there's something called don't snitch, well a police officer has the same mentality. It's called the blue wall. So that's one problem.

So what am I going to do. I'm putting in place a internal independent investigation unit of senior attorneys who are managing line attorneys. These senior attorneys we're going to investigate anyone acting under the color law who violate their oath to the Hennepin County residents. That includes law enforcement, that includes prosecutors, that include public defenders or judiciary, who there's credible evidence to show they did not follow their oath.

So one, I'm going to hold them accountable. I don't think anyone should be above the law. But again, I want to say overwhelming majority of them I think do try to do a good job for us. So that's one thing I'm going to do. I'm going to put in this independent investigation unit to investigate not just law enforcement but anyone acting under the color law and criminal justice system.

Secondly, I want to make sure I get your second question which was grand jury. I think that's a cop out. I think there's a few cop outs. One, I know Keith Ellison well, good man. We will not be referring cases to Keith Ellison. That's my job to take the arrows and slings from the community. When I rule in favor of police officer you always make someone happy. So I don't believe we should be using a grand jury for misconduct by police. We don't need a special grand jury to look at the Chauvin and other cases determine that the police had violated the law. And so I will not be using a grand jury.

Also I'm going to stop the practice of keeping people of Color off these jury because of the pigment in their skin. The prosecutor's in my office are going to have to have a reason for taking people of Color off the jury other than the color of their skin. If they've got a reasonable basis they can explain it, then they do it with me. But they're going to have to have an explanation.

INTERVIEWER: At the beginning of our conversation, we talked a little bit about your legal experience. So I'm going to finish our conversation with this question. Why do you want this job?

JARVIS JONES: I've been a bridge builder all my life in the legal community. But it's been on the civic side. I was twice elected president of the Minnesota Minority Lawyers Association. I became the first African-American president of the Hennepin County Bar Association. I became the first and only president to this day of the Minnesota State Bar Association of 28,000 lawyers.

I'm doing it because I'm tired of reading headlines about our streets are unsafe. I'm tired of reading a headline the human rights department comes out with rampant racial disparity and people acting like these politicians, these judges, people in the criminal justice system talking about a lot of people I'm running against, they're shocked, they're surprised. I've been hearing about the same issue for 30 years. And what my message is to your audience, don't expect something different by electing criminal insiders, people who've been in the system for 20 or 30 years.

We need someone who's going to come in with fresh eyes and willing to make fundamental changes and work with all the key stakeholders law enforcement, the public defender's office, the judges, and probation officer, and bringing people together. And if you go to JarvisJonesHennepin.com look on the highlight on my website. You'll see I've been doing that for 30 years. Now, we're going to make some change on the criminal side.

INTERVIEWER: Well, I tell you what Mr. Jones, it's been a pleasure talking to you. Thank you so much.

JARVIS JONES: And thank you for this opportunity. And I really do appreciate it.

INTERVIEWER: That was Jarvis Jones, a candidate for Hennepin County Attorney. As you heard in our interview, Jones said he was misquoted a few times. You can go to SahanJournal.com and read what he had to say there. Early voting in this race is happening right now.

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