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Candidates weigh in on opioid crisis

What do statewide candidates say about the opioid crisis and public safety? The spread of opioid abuse claimed over 1,600 lives in Tennessee in 2016, and it is getting worse. Methamphetamine abuse, while not getting the headlines, has increased. Gun violence and murder are increasing. What proposals do our candidates have to help Tennesseans address these public safety issues? Each of the major candidates for governor and U.S. Senate were asked to tell our readers about their views on these matters.

GOVERNATORIAL CANDIDATES

REPUBLICANS
Diane Black

The opioid epidemic is a scourge on our society, and I firmly believe the next governor will be judged by how she handles this crisis. As I've traveled the state, I've sought input from the boots on the ground combating this epidemic. Working with the Attorneys General and Sheriffs on my Law and Order Coalition, we have developed a plan to go after the root cause of the crisis. We can significantly reduce the destructive impact of addiction if we: 1) prosecute pill mills; 2) sue manufacturers who mislead providers about the addictive nature of their drugs; 3) provide more resources to district attorneys, local law enforcement and the TBI; 4) regulate prescriptions using a real-time Controlled Substance Monitoring Database without adding administrative burdens to providers and; 5) protect patients by encouraging pharmacies and manufacturers to include emetics in their formulas.

The road to healing is a long and difficult one for our state, but I am confident that bold collaboration between government, health care providers and law enforcement will pave the way. We can't just stop at addiction. We have to broaden our view and look at crime as a whole.

As governor, I will be dedicated to giving law enforcement and schools the resources they need to be successful. I will work with school districts to provide a safe and secure environment, including armed school resource officers in every school and increased mental health screenings.

My administration will institute truth in sentencing for felony convictions and end the practice of allowing parole and probation violators to count their time in violation as time served.

As governor, I will get tough on repeat offenders, especially drug trafficking and domestic violence offenders. We can't keep letting repeat offenders walk the streets with our kids.

Randy Boyd

Opioids are decimating our communities, and this is a crisis that requires bold and decisive action. As I've traveled to all 95 counties, I've met countless people who talk about loved ones lost. These are real people, not just statistics and this alone demands our action. Last September I published a 10 Point Plan, which can be summarized into three strategies: Mobilize, Prevent, Recover.

We must mobilize all state resources to end this scourge and that begins with declaring a state of emergency to call this epidemic what it is. We will

then appoint a Chief Epidemic Officer to marshal those resources and prioritize this battle. We must also prevent more people from getting addicted and this means addressing the over-prescription of opioids. There is no excuse for prescribing twice the national average and being one of the top states in the country for dispensing these deadly pills. Educating doctors, patients, parents, and children about the danger of these drugs is a key component in prevention.

Finally, we must do a better job of helping with recovery. The place we send most addicts for recovery today is jail. We can't incarcerate our way out of this problem. There is a revolving door between those struggling with addiction and our jails. The good news: Providing proper treatment in addiction and mental health facilities is more effective, better for the addict, and cheaper than jail.

Tennessee needs to step up in a big way, not just for addiction, but for mental health in general. Over the last 50 years, the number of beds for treatment has been reduced by nearly 95%. The people didn't go away, they just ended up on the streets and in the jails. We can do better, we must do better, and as your Governor, we will do better.

Beth Harwell

As Speaker of the House, I appointed a task force in early 2017 to take an in-depth look at the opioid crisis in our state and make recommendations as to what should be done. I appreciate Governor Haslam incorporating several of the recommendations into the legislation he presented this year, and I am supportive of these efforts.

As governor, I would continue the work we have started this year. We cannot incarcerate our way out of this crisis, so I would prioritize treatment and funding for treatment to ensure people have access to the help they so desperately need to get clean. I would also step up our prevention efforts, because educating the public about this issue is part of the battle as well. And finally, we have to support our law enforcement as they fight this, and keep these drugs off the street.

Another public safety issue I have worked on is human trafficking, a scourge on our state. I had the chance a couple of years ago to see a human trafficking sting, spearheaded by the Tennessee Bureau of Investigation, from the inside. It is complex, life-saving, incredible work. As a legislator, combating human trafficking is something we often discuss, but seeing it firsthand absolutely cemented my belief that we must continue working to implement policies that will assist our law enforcement throughout the state in these operations.

The TBI has partnered with local enforcement and other agencies and non-profits to tackle this problem. In addition, End Slavery Tennessee — a wonderful organization — works with these agencies and the community at large to raise awareness about this issue and to provide long-term, comprehensive, specialized services. This is a perfect example of a public-private partnership that attacks a problem

from multiple angles. We are leading the nation as a state in our response to trafficking, but I've seen just how much work there is left to do, and as governor, I will support and continue those efforts.

Bill Lee

Over the last ten years, a collective failure by government, pharmaceutical companies, and some in the medical community have left us with an opioid crisis that is crippling our state. There's no quick fix, and the solution will require shared responsibility from state and local institutions, our medical providers, and faith and community leaders.

The state is currently taking several common-sense first steps that we can build upon. For instance, restricting the use of addictive opioids, particularly in TennCare is an important preventative step. Currently one in three patients on TennCare have at least one opioid prescription. We know that after five days of use, the risk of addiction for new users sharply increases. Lowering the overall rate of prescriptions is an important first step to solving this crisis.

Another step is to increase funding and support for law enforcement drug interdiction efforts, which is critical to combat the flow of drugs from China and Mexico and the new threat of fentanyl. To combat this epidemic, the role of law enforcement cannot be overvalued.

On rehabilitation, we need to look at the entire continuity of recovery by bringing addicts back into the community with meaningful connections and skills to start a new life. I am heavily involved in prison ministry and I know that the window for rehabilitation must happen months, if not years before an offender's release from prison. Our next governor has an opportunity to lead the Department of Corrections into a new strategy for healing offenders before their release.

Finally, we must address our mental health support system, by acknowledging the shortfalls in addiction treatment and support those working in mental health. For families in crisis, navigating the mental health system is often frustrating and complex, and we have to do better. As governor, I'll bring a comprehensive approach to overcoming our opioid crisis.

DEMOCRATS

Karl Dean

I have seen, as I'm sure many others have, the human toll the opioid crisis is having on our state. I have toured a Johnson City children's hospital that had to add space for premature babies born suffering from opioid withdrawals. I have heard from law enforcement, treatment providers and social workers on the challenges they are facing, both with criminal and mental health issues, related to opioids.

As governor, I would take a four-pronged approach:

- Public education about the dangers of opioids
- Ensuring that people addicted to opioids get the treatment they need
- Supporting law enforcement to arrest those who are profiting
- Eliminating over-prescription of narcotics

As Mayor of Nashville, public safety

was one of my top priorities and that was reflected in the city's operating budget. Even when other departments were being cut due to the recession, we protected funding for public safety. Over my eight years in office, we increased the Metro Nashville Police Department's budget. We also invested millions in building new precincts and our city's own crime lab. We also increased the number of police officers. In return, overall major crime was down when I left office than when my first term began, including record low homicide numbers in 2013 and 2014.

Our government's No. 1 job is to keep people safe, and so as governor, public safety would be a priority. I would be willing to have tough conversations across party lines to see what we can agree on in this state as it relates to gun safety and move from there to help keep our children and families safe. We should be working to keep guns out of the hands of dangerous people. Additionally, I would be in support of a ban on bump fire stocks, and we need to look at the age limit for purchasing an assault weapon. There are public safety reasons why you can't buy alcohol until you're 21, and those same public safety reasons logically apply to purchasing an assault weapon.

Craig Fitzhugh

The opioid and methamphetamine crisis is tearing up our state, especially in our rural areas. There has been a push in the legislature this year to address this crisis, and while I back those efforts, I do not believe that they go far enough. The governor proposed a plan, committing \$30 million to combating opioids. Less than half of that money comes from state funds. There are individual hospitals that have committed more funding to opioids. If our state had expanded Medicaid, we would have additional funds for opioids and methamphetamine issues, especially in the aforementioned rural areas. Tennessee has had more per capita hospital closures than any other state, almost all in our rural counties. Open hospitals offer more opportunities for treatment for opioid addiction.

Methamphetamine is a problem not just from its use but also from its creation. It can be created from just a few ingredients that can be easily found, and it ruins the homes it is created in and is very harmful to children. Education and prevention is key. We have slowed the growth of meth somewhat with roadblocks at our pharmacies, but more must be done, as law enforcement is being overwhelmed.

Gun violence is increasing. Not only are mass shootings on the rise—which have driven our children into the streets in protest—but the numbers of gun crimes occurring in our state have increased as well. According to the Tennessee Bureau of Investigation, gun crimes have increased 25% in the past 4 years. More firearms are being stolen and those guns are being used to commit crimes. We are also seeing an increase in gun crimes being committed by and against our young people. As governor I will work with law enforcement to make sure illegal, unlicensed guns are off our streets.



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Paid for by Terry Bell, Candidate

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