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Democrats seeking Van Drew seat show differences at debate

MICHELLE BRUNETTI POST Staff Writer

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CUNNINGHAM

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Longport's Brigid Callahan Harrison, left, and Brigantine's Amy Kennedy are in a hard-fought primary battle to run against U.S. Rep. Jeff Van Drew, R-2nd, in November.

Charles Olson / for The Press

Thursday's 2nd congressional district primary debate between leading Democrats was polite and measured, with only Amy Kennedy suffering a direct attack over ties to a company that works in the for-profit prison system.

Vineland's Will Cunningham, Longport's Brigid Callahan Harrison, and Brigantine's Kennedy were mostly in agreement on major issues, such as favoring police and immigration reform, moving to all-clean energy by 2050, gun control, and taking steps to mitigate climate change.

But some differences stood out.

On health care reform, Cunningham said he is the only candidate in the race to support Medicare for All as an answer to the problem of access to health care and affordability of insurance. He holds a law degree from the University of Texas at Austin and left a job with

the House Oversight Committee in Washington, D.C. to run.

"My opponents aren't there, where they should be on this issue," Cunningham said. "In the pandemic black people died at three times the rate of white people. Access to care is the issue."

Sponsored by the William J. Hughes Center for Public Policy at Stockton University, the online event ran from 6 p.m. to 7 p.m. and the moderator was the center's Executive Director John Froomjian.

Harrison, a professor of politics and law at Montclair State University, said she supports a single-payer system that allows people to keep private insurance and sunsets agreements already made with labor unions.

Unions would then negotiate cost of living increases once the government eventually takes over the provision of health care, Harrison said.

Kennedy, a mental health advocate and former public school teacher, said she favors moving away from a system that ties health care to employment. She instead favors expansion of the ACA, and making sure "Medicare will be available to all those who want it."

The three were invited to the debate, Froomjian said, because they raised and spent enough money to have to file a first quarter campaign finance report with the Federal Election Commission. The other two Democrats still in the race are West Cape May Commissioner John Francis, an author and motivational speaker; and Robert Turkavage, of Brigantine, a retired FBI agent.

Cunningham was also the only candidate who said he favored enacting the Green New Deal, and said he would specifically move to fund multi-billion dollar Army Corps of Engineers projects to build flood control gates, levies and bulkheads.

Harrison stood out for being the only one to say she would lobby to have the federal government complete a 66-mile rail line connecting Atlantic City up the coast to the New Jersey Transit line that goes to New York City.

"We have great schools, beautiful views, Pinelands, the ocean," Harrison said, adding it would be a great place to live and commute to North Jersey or New York City. "Here we have no access to North Jersey or New York City by rail. It is certainly feasible for people to commute

that way."

Kennedy was the lone voice calling for more investment in infrastructure to make telecommuting more efficient, such as higher speed Internet infrastructure.

"People will be working and learning from home," Kennedy said. "Investment takes many forms."

The attack about Wellpath came twice, once when the candidates were answering a question about racial inequities and white privilege, and later when they were addressing immigration issues.

"Part of inequity in the system is the school-to-prison pipeline," Harrison said.

Then she asked why Kennedy accepted \$11,000 in campaign contributions from Wellpath, a for-profit company that provides medical services and mental health services to people in prisons and jails throughout the nation.

Harrison said Wellpath is "known to ... victimize black and brown people," and that there are allegations the company is implicated in the deaths of inmates and those held at Immigration and Customs Enforcement detention centers.

"I think this is a persistent attack Brigid has made on my campaign. Yet she has refused to take a pledge of not taking PAC money," Kennedy countered. "She herself is willing to take money from corporations, then criticizes my family for its involvement in mental health."

Later, when the attack came again, Kennedy answered more directly.

"I would agree there should not be ICE detention centers, but the people there should receive treatment for mental health," Kennedy said.

The debate happened as vote-by-mail ballots have arrived and many have already been completed and mailed to the Board of Elections. Gov. Phil Murphy ordered the July 7 primary be mostly vote-by-mail to avoid risk of spreading COVID-19 in polling places.

The Democratic winner will face the winner of the Republican primary, which is expected to be U.S. Rep. Jeff Van Drew, R-2nd. Van Drew switched parties to Republican late last year in a controversial move that lit a fire under the Democrats he had left behind.

Van Drew's GOP opponent Bob Patterson, who recently changed his permanent address to Ocean City, does not have much organizational support or campaign funding and is widely considered not much of a threat to the incumbent freshman.

Contact: 609-272-7219

mpost@pressofac.com

Twitter @MichelleBPost



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