

Responses to VSEA candidate questionnaire

June 6, 2016

Carl Etnier, Democratic primary in Washington-5 (East Montpelier and Middlesex); also seeking Progressive nomination

1. Should the work of State government be performed by State employees?

Yes. The system of private correctional facilities the state uses is a particularly egregious example of what needs to be changed: it sends out of state both money/jobs and Vermonters whose rehabilitation chances would be improved if they were close to family. Plus the private corporations have an incentive to fail inmates' need for services, because recidivism and further sentences lead to more profit.

In the most recent budget, the state moved further in the wrong direction by privatizing the Risk Management Division.

Any future moves to privatize work done by state employees should be considered with a calculation of the effect on the state's economy of employing non-Vermonters (if applicable), and with the private contractor paying its employees at the same level with the same benefits as state employees currently performing the functions being privatized.

2. As an elected official, how would you improve the overall safety of state employees?

It's the responsibility of any workplace to provide a safe environment for its employees. I support measures like H. 878 and its funding to increase security at DCF facilities.

Guards and bulletproof glass at the work site are just one part of true safety. Lara Sobel was killed outside her building; her accused killer also allegedly killed three family members at home. It's important to look at the overall context of safety. Making Vermonters and their homes safer means reducing the opiate addiction problem through a combination of treatment and law enforcement—not just installing better locks on houses. Similarly, with state workers, I would look for non-obvious ways to increase safety. For example, I expect reducing excessive caseload levels for social workers could lead to better results in many ways, including worker safety.

Beyond DCF, highway workers, mental health workers, and law enforcement are among those employees whose safety requires especially close attention. It's front-line workers who have the experience and background to recommend effective further changes to protect state employee safety; as an elected official, I would be dedicated to making sure they are heard.

3. What is your plan to make the health care system more fair and equitable for working Vermonters?

I've lived in countries that can spend far less on health care per person than we do in this country and provide good health care to all citizens and other residents—so I know it can be done. Rather than giving up on single-payer health care, as the Shumlin administration did unilaterally, I'd like to see the legislature work with the administration to examine the choices that funding single-payer health care would mean—and then look for ways to fund those choices. There are serious obstacles to a one-state single-payer system when the state is constrained by a legacy of a system of employer-provide insurance benefits plus federal benefits and federal regulation of ERISA plans. However, the people's representatives should look at the benefits and costs of single-payer, together with the new administration (or separately, if there's no willing partner there).

In the near term, expanding Dr. Dynasaur and universal primary care are measures that I'd like to see the legislature work on.

4. Will you support collective bargaining and vote against "Right to Work" legislation in any form?

Yes. I am a union member (UAW Local 2322 at Goddard College) and a strong supporter of the rights of collective bargaining. I oppose "right to work" legislation, which gives employees incentives to be free riders on the backs of dues-paying brothers and sisters in the union and thereby weakens organized labor.

5. What do you see as the role of State employees and how would you support them in their role?

State employees are a key part of democratic governance. When the legislature and the governor reflect the will of Vermonters (however imperfectly) in crafting legislation, it's the employees who turn that into reality. They're working in public safety, environmental protection, consumer protection, and so many other fronts. If we treat our state employees well, we'll be in a far better position to maintain and improve our quality of life in Vermont.

Government can also function as a model employer, which has spillover effects on other workplaces.

I will as a legislator highlight the positive work of state employees and the value of an effective state workforce, and support decent pay and benefits and the right to collective bargaining.

6. What mechanisms would you put in place to avoid budget shortfalls?

There's no one fix for our budget issues—good services, a strong safety net, and affordable taxes are all important. That said, I'd like to make our tax system more progressive and to take a close look at special-interest tax incentives. Should we be exempting cloud-based computing from taxes? How can we better stimulate economic development than by giving over \$1 million to Global Foundries or soliciting foreign capital for tourist-oriented projects when we have unmet basic needs and large amounts of capital we control?

7. What approach would you take to make higher education more affordable for Vermonters?

Vermont is near the bottom when it comes to state support of higher education. We need to increase our funding, in a way targeted to make it more affordable to Vermonters. There are various interesting proposals to couple that to other results we'd like to see—free tuition for those who complete two years of service, or reimbursing part of the tuition cost for students who stay in Vermont and work a certain amount of time using the skills they obtained in higher education here. I'd like to see these and others considered, but the bottom line is healthy funding.

8. What would you do to ensure the viability of the state college system?

I am very interested in the initiatives from Anthony Pollina on this front: increasing funding tied to other economic indicators, increasing funding to the higher education trust fund, ending the portability of VSAC funds, proportional funding of state colleges and UVM based on the number of Vermonters attending, and returning to at least the 1980 ratio of state support versus tuition funding (50%/50%).

The American Council on Education has calculated that if Vermont continues its reduction in funding of higher education from 1980 levels, it will reach zero by 2032. We need to reverse that trend!

9. Do you support a livable wage for Vermonters? If so, what do you think that amount should be?

Yes. I support a predictable move to a state minimum wage of \$15 an hour over three to four years. And I'm proud to be a member of and elected Council member of Hunger Mountain Coop, whose goal it is to provide a livable wage (by Joint Fiscal Office standards) to all employees after at most a year of service.

10. Briefly state why the VSEA should endorse you and describe the type of assistance that you would be seeking from a VSEA endorsement.

I have been a union member in Sweden and here in Vermont. As a member of the relatively new bargaining unit of Goddard College staff members of UAW Local 2322, I've been asked to run for election to the local leadership in July, and I will. I support the rights of working Vermonters and of organized labor.

In my district, if I win the five-way August 9 Democratic primary, the November election will be relatively easy. I would like as much organizing support as VSEA can offer, from mailings and emails to phone banking. If possible a mailing from VSEA to your members in my district.

Thank you!