

State Senate District 19 candidates discuss intergenerational poverty

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MATT HERP/Standard-Examiner

State Senate District 19 candidate Deana Froerer, a Democrat, speaks to attendees and students during an intergenerational poverty town hall meeting Thursday, Sept. 22, 2016, at Ben Lomond High School.

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OGDEN — During a town hall meeting Thursday, both candidates in the state Senate District 19 (http://le.utah.gov/Documents/DistrictMaps/Senate_Dist19.pdf) race expressed deep care for people in poverty, and in particular, those who find themselves trapped in the cycle of two or more generations within a household relying on government subsidies to survive.

Sen. Allen Christensen (<http://senate.utah.gov/senators/district19.html>), R-North Ogden, and his

Democratic challenger [Deana Froerer](http://www.df4senate.com/bio/) (<http://www.df4senate.com/bio/>) answered questions about intergenerational poverty during the event held at [Ben Lomond High School](http://schools.ogdensd.org/benlomond/) (<http://schools.ogdensd.org/benlomond/>) and moderated by a student group called the Ben Lomond High School Latinos in Action Clan.

Severe weather Thursday afternoon put a damper on attendance, but the small crowd who came received insight into factors contributing to poverty, possible solutions and how the two candidates differed in their approach.

Christensen, a retired pediatric dentist who is seeking his fourth term in the state Senate, told students he grew up in subsidized housing in Ogden some six decades ago.

“That’s all my family could afford,” Christensen said, reminiscing about how his father, a warehouse worker at Defense Depot Ogden, repeatedly nagged him about getting an education. “I had a great family, something that many in this school district don’t have -- a complete loving family, three sisters, a brother and parents who stayed together, loved me and supported me ... that is a huge leg up.”

Christensen was the first in his family to get a college education as well as a professional degree.

“I had to support myself, get loans and do whatever I could. My parents helped me some, but I made it through,” Christensen said.

As a dentist and Head Start advisor on the side, Christensen said he served many Medicaid patients and struggling families and saw the face of poverty up close. And in his legislative capacity, Christensen chairs the [Social Services Appropriations Subcommittee](http://openstates.org/ut/committees/UTC000073/social-services-appropriations-subcommittee/) (<http://openstates.org/ut/committees/UTC000073/social-services-appropriations-subcommittee/>), a position where he oversees the stretching of limited dollars to address a huge list of needs around the state.

In the Ogden portion of Senate District 19, those poverty-related needs appear particularly stark, where 16 percent of households have a single female head of household, over one-third are Hispanic, more than 20 percent live below the [Federal Poverty Level](https://www.healthcare.gov/glossary/federal-poverty-level-FPL/) (<https://www.healthcare.gov/glossary/federal-poverty-level-FPL/>), and at least one in four receive food assistance, Christensen said.

When asked what the government could do differently to reduce Ogden’s rate of poverty, Christensen made it clear he didn’t want to just throw money at the problem that plagues 70 percent of Ben Lomond High School students.

“The simple way would be to write everybody a check. The problem with that is, I just took away all of your self pride and where’s it going to be tomorrow?” Christensen said. “And somebody has

to pay for that check. That means I take it away from him and him and him, and I give it to you. That's not cool."

As he apologized for "preaching," Christensen laid out the key he believes could help them up and out: "It's all in your attitude. If you want to be a gang member, that's where you'll end up — and there's no future in it."

He also addressed teen pregnancy as a major contributing factor to chronic poverty, asking the girls in the audience how many knew someone who wanted to get pregnant just to get on government assistance.

"I had a 13-year-old patient who told me she was finally going to have a baby and would get food stamps and get out of the house," Christensen said. "I said 'sweetheart, you'll get out of your house and you'll stay right there the rest of your life because there's no way to move on.'"

Froerer's life in six words

"Horse kicked, cancer licked, no stopping," Froerer said in summary of the forces that shaped her life. As one of eight children growing up on a farm, she remembers the day she rode an unsaddled horse across a ditch and ended up landing in a pile of stickers. The horse returned to give her a swift kick.

"All I could do at that moment was to get up and keep going," Froerer said. Then seven years ago she was diagnosed with cancer, the disease that took her father and also afflicted her sister. She beat it the first time, but said it returned two years ago "with a vengeance."

There were no easy answers, but Froerer said she finally found one through the Huntsman Cancer Institute (<http://www.huntsmancancer.org/>) at the University of Utah. "It took about a year but I got my health back," she said.

Those challenges had a profound effect on her.

"My whole life's view is driven by the fact that you don't know how long you've got here, but if you're feeling like you can do something to help people, that's what I want to do. So that's why I decided to step up and run for office," Froerer said.

Armed with a masters degree in business administration, Froerer currently teaches economics at Weber State University (<http://www.weber.edu/>) and financial literacy at DaVinci Academy (<http://davinciacademy.org/>) in Ogden. She and husband Lan Froerer reside in the upper Ogden Valley and have four children between the ages of 15 and 25.

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While Christensen struck the tone of a preacher at times during Thursday's session, Froerer waxed professorial, speaking to the simple nuts and bolts of household economics.

While everybody needs the basic four — clothing, food, shelter and transportation — healthcare and education are out of reach for some, Froerer said. And not everyone starts from the same point as they pursue their life's desires, she added.

"What do you have? You have you ... all your efforts of mind and muscle as a human being," Froerer said. "And then we have capital, or different amounts of stuff. Then lastly, there's technology. We don't all have the same technology available all the time. It's just simple differences that change your ability to get what you want."

But in the area surrounding Ben Lomond High School, Froerer said the median household income is \$29,000, a figure that increases in more affluent cities radiating outward from Ogden's central core.

"So when we look at the picture today, we've got this poverty that's rooted in a problem of economics we call limited means," Froerer said. "Our wants are insatiable, but our means are limited. So we have this clash and the word we use for it is scarcity."

Froerer agreed with Christensen that simply writing checks was not the answer. Instead, she would focus on bridge building and counseling at the high school and college level to steer low-income students toward the real jobs needed in today's workforce.

"My life has been transformed working in that particular school," Froerer said of DaVinci Academy. "It's ethnically diverse — and social and economic diversity abounds there."

Froerer said she specializes in "helping kids who don't have those parents you wish they had. In those situations, mentoring and counseling is much more the key."

Part of her job involves helping students with self exploration, where they discover their skills, interests and aptitudes.

"Then you want to tie self exploration to career exploration," Froerer said.

And when it comes to landing scholarships, Froerer warned that "it's not just an easy cakewalk, you need someone to help you through."

Acquiring a certified skill can help someone land a decent-paying job that can serve as cash-flow to fund their desired college degree, she added.

Student reaction

California native Michael Delgado, a senior at Ben Lomond High School, said his father exited his life after he divorced his mother when he was two, And his mother died about two years ago, so he now lives with his aunt in Ogden who is raising two sons, along with his brother who has autism.

"So I'm not really high importance," Delgado said matter-of-factly, keenly aware that it rests on him to make something of his life. After graduating in May with some college credits already in hand, he plans to start college in the fall, likely at Weber State University. But he also hopes to attend the University of Utah where scholarships might play a role.

"Some of it was like a pep talk. That's helpful, but we get that a lot," Delgado said of the town hall discussion.

But in terms of available resources, Delgado accepted responsibility for pursuing the various avenues that could help him reach his goals.

"I need to work for it. I've got all the resources and I'm starting to use them a lot more," Delgado said.

Yasmynn Alacio, also a Ben Lomond senior, enjoyed getting to moderate the discussion.

"It was interesting because most of the school is on fee waivers and live in poverty and don't open up to any counselors or teachers. So it's hard at times," Alacio said, adding that the candidates focused too much on the Latino community "because at times I see the Caucasian community living in poverty as well."

Travis Marker, an attorney in North Ogden who attended Ben Lomond High School, said he helped organize Thursday's event in hopes of raising awareness about intergenerational poverty and channeling more resources toward students seeking to break the cycle of poverty in which they've been raised.

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