

COMMUNITY QUESTIONNAIRE FOR ALABAMA LEGISLATIVE D2

Response: *Senator Merika Coleman - Chair of the Alabama Legislative Black Caucus*

1. Why are you running for this seat?

Alabama has always been my home, and throughout my 20 years of service in the Alabama House of Representatives and the Senate, I have dedicated myself to the betterment of this great state. I am running for this seat because I believe that we have more work to do, and this office allows me to bring my experience to better echo the voices and concerns of communities in District 2.

As a mother, I understand the hopes and concerns that families in our district have for the future. I want to ensure that my two children, and every child in Alabama, inherit a state that values education, provides affordable housing, and prioritizes the well-being of its residents. I have served in the Alabama House of Representatives for two decades, so I understand the inner workings of our state government. I am an adequately prepared representative who can navigate the complexities of legislative processes to bring the real change that Alabamians have been waiting for. District 2 needs someone with a proven track record and someone who has successfully passed tough legislation, such as removing racist language from our constitution and addressing critical issues like human trafficking.

I began as a community organizer working with Greater Birmingham Ministries, rooted in strong Christian principles of service, compassion, and justice. These values continue to guide me today. I believe in people power, and my work reflects a dedication to uplifting the voices of the underserved and advocating for policies that reflect the needs of our communities. My legislative record speaks to my commitment. I want to continue this work, ensuring that our community's diverse voices are heard and respected in the halls of power. I carry with me the lessons and insights gained from working with various communities, and I am ready to bring that experience to the forefront as we address the challenges facing District 2.

2. How do you plan to address disparities in educational opportunities and resources among different communities within our district?

I understand that access to quality education and equal opportunities is a pressing concern for District 2 and communities around the state. Where a child is born should not determine whether or not they deserve a quality education. I will work tirelessly to address disparities in educational opportunities by advocating for increased funding for schools in underserved areas, supporting innovative teaching methods, and promoting programs that engage parents and the community. Furthermore, I will champion

increased compensation and benefits for our teachers. There is no reason why those who spend their days educating our children, have to clock out of the classroom and clock into a second job. Our hardworking teachers should only have to focus on teaching, and not how they plan to pay their bills or feed their families. I plan to fight for programs that prioritize teacher retention, support, and development.

As it pertains to secondary education, Alabama is home to several top colleges, universities, and institutions that produce world-renowned scholars. I plan to incentivize increasing the pipeline between public school students who attend these institutions, especially first-generation and low-income students. Currently serving as Director of Judge U.W. Clemon Center for Economic and Social Justice at Miles College, an HBCU located in historic Fairfield, AL, I am also aware of the unique challenges faced by students of color. Historically Black Colleges and Universities play a vital role in providing education and opportunities to underserved communities, and my work with Miles College has given me valuable insights into the needs of students in our district.

My plan is centered on increasing funding, supporting innovative teaching methods, involving the community, addressing teacher compensation, and fostering connections with community college and higher education leaders to give our students access to life-changing opportunities and resources.

3. Given the rising cost of housing in our area, what measures will you support to ensure affordable housing options for all residents, including low-income families and individuals?

Ensuring affordable housing is a fundamental priority and we cannot ignore the rising housing costs in our state. Access to fair housing demands our attention. Alabama has historically taken pride in being an affordable place for individuals across various life stages, from college students coming to learn from our premier universities to couples looking to start their families, all the way to retirees. I plan to take proactive measures to protect our residents, especially low-income families and individuals, from the adverse impacts of rising housing expenses happening all across the country. My commitment to maintaining a low cost of living goes hand in hand with safeguarding the ability of lifelong Alabamians to call our state home without financial burden. I promise to advocate for comprehensive measures aimed at addressing affordable housing, such as incentivizing first-time home-buyer programs and supporting policies that promote responsible urban planning that will not price Alabamians out of our home.

4. With budget constraints, how will you prioritize funding for social services, such as mental health programs, addiction treatment, and support for vulnerable populations?

We must take a new approach to funding social services by understanding that when we invest in our communities, we all benefit from the investment. This begins by removing the stigma associated with social services and recognizing that individuals from all walks of life may encounter mental health challenges and issues that demand support. When I think about the need for social services, I think about veterans like my father. I want to make sure that when our veterans return home from serving our country, they return to a community trained and equipped to address their needs with compassion and understanding. I think about single and widowed mothers and envision a community that actively steps in to provide the necessary support, empowering them to rebuild their lives and care for their families. I think about all of the silent battles being fought by our everyday neighbors dealing with addiction, and I am determined to break the silence by prioritizing resources for their recovery. We all know someone in our lives who needs social services to help them lift their head above the water. We are a state that believes in helping our fellow neighbor. That is why I am committed to working with a bipartisan alliance to ensure we prioritize the funding necessary for social services that every Alabamian will benefit from. Additionally, I will champion transparency and accountability in the allocation of funds, ensuring that every dollar invested in social services contributes to the improvement of our collective quality of life.

5. What steps do you think the government should take to address police brutality against communities of color?

The tension between police and communities of color is a reality that cannot be ignored. Legislators should be committed to fostering open and honest dialogue to bridge this gap. Through community forums, town halls, and ongoing conversations, we can address the root causes of mistrust and work toward collaborative solutions that prioritize both public safety and the protection of individual rights. My extensive experience in human trafficking reform has allowed me to work closely with law enforcement officers. I acknowledge the dedication and sacrifices of many officers who work tirelessly to protect our communities. It is essential to collaborate with law enforcement agencies to implement training programs that emphasize de-escalation techniques, cultural sensitivity, and community policing. That is why I have recently introduced a bill that focuses on enhancing transparency, accountability, and community engagement. By establishing clear guidelines for accountability, we can work towards rebuilding trust between law enforcement and communities of color.

6. Do you support an individual's right to reproductive rights?

I am more than just a supporter of an individual's right to reproductive rights. I am an advocate to ensure we protect an individual's right to reproductive rights. As a mother of two children, I have a firsthand understanding of the need for reproductive rights, which includes access to prenatal healthcare and the ability to make informed decisions about one's own body, especially in cases of complications that pose risks to the mother. We have to move beyond focusing solely on abortions and broaden the conversation into one that recognizes reproductive rights as a deeply personal and comprehensive healthcare matter.

I firmly believe that these decisions should be left to medical professionals and not be subject to political agendas. It is time to listen to the millions of women in our state who are voicing that reproductive rights and decisions are a personal choice. Reflecting on my legislative track record, one of my proudest moments was successfully passing human trafficking legislation and a resolution mandating human trafficking training for hospital personnel, law enforcement, and truckers. This experience has shaped my understanding of the importance of giving individuals agency over their bodies, especially those who have been victims of unspeakable sexual assault and abuse. I challenge anyone who is trying to roll back reproductive rights to sit in the same rooms that I have with these victims, look them in the eye, and hear their stories. In the context of reproductive rights, I am dedicated to ensuring that we do not prosecute and criminalize victims but rather stand as advocates to safeguard their rights and choices.

7. Will you make it a priority to get the John Lewis Voting Rights Act passage?

It has always been a lifelong priority of mine to champion the beliefs and values that underlie the John Lewis Voting Rights Acts. As Chair of the Alabama Legislative Black Caucus and a lifelong Alabamian who grew up with a deeply ingrained understanding of the history of our state, I am committed to ensuring that we protect the democratic freedom of voting. We are in unprecedented times that require our focus to remain on ensuring that everyone has equal access to the ballot box. Alabama has a rich and proud history that celebrates the sacrifices made by individuals like the late Congressman John Lewis and so we have a unique role to play in advancing voting rights. I plan to join my colleagues in Congress and strengthen their fight to preserve the fundamental right to vote for all Americans.