



**EMPOWER  
MISSOURI**



# 2026 CANDIDATE *Question Guide*

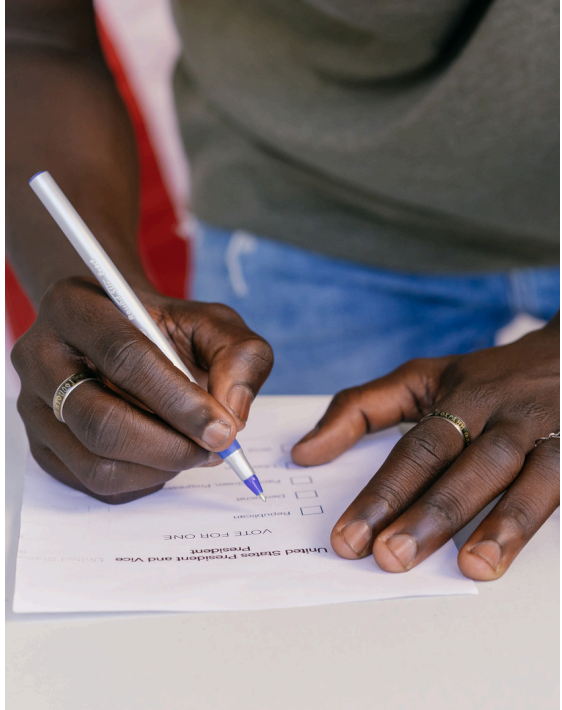
**02** Introduction

**03** Election Season Guidelines

**07** Affordable Housing Questions

**09** Community Justice Questions

**11** Food Security Questions



*Table of*  
**CONTENTS**

# How to Use THESE QUESTIONS



Nonprofit advocacy is more important now than it has ever been. Nonprofit organizations are doing the work everyday to help ease the suffering of our communities, and they know better than anyone how important it is for our elected officials to consider the needs of our most vulnerable neighbors. While nonprofit organizations cannot endorse candidates, or donate to or assist in any political campaign, they can ask questions of candidates and advocate for issues important to their clients.

Empower Missouri has worked with our coalition partners across the state to craft these questions to ask candidates in their communities. We are sharing them as a starting place for your own advocacy campaigns. You can take them with you to candidate forums or public meetings, solicit and publish questionnaires, or use them as a starting place for your own candidate forum. What follows is some direction for nonprofit election season advocacy that fits within the

guidelines for nonprofit organizations. Organizations and staff representing organizations should take care to stay within your expertise and experience during campaign season. You can add or prioritize issues you've worked on in the past, but should not publicly add new or tangentially related issues. This is to avoid the appearance that you might be aligning yourself with a candidate strategically, or helping to boost talking points for a specific campaign.

**A reminder: 501c-3 organizations cannot implicitly or explicitly endorse a candidate or political party.**

# Election Season GUIDELINES



## Candidate FORUMS

Your organization can host candidate forums or invite candidates to participate in panels related to the issues you work on. These invitations must be uniform, with exactly the same language, at the same time, and in the same manner. You must invite all candidates to participate, including 3rd party candidates. In a crowded field, you can limit invitations based on a specific criteria but you must make that criteria reasonable and published. For example, you can say all candidates polling with at least 3% of the likely vote are invited. You must give them all adequate time to respond to your invitation and cannot intentionally schedule an event while you know one party may be unable to attend. If you send reminders, you must send them to all candidates at the same time.

What happens after the invitation is extended is not your responsibility. If one candidate accepts and another never responds, you do not need to cancel the event. You should begin the event with a statement that makes it clear these candidates were invited and they were unable to attend or never responded. If you choose to advertise the event you should not advertise in advance that one or more candidates will not be in attendance. You may choose to clarify in writing attached to this event that all candidates were invited. You should also

be sure those advertisements do not offer a tacit endorsement, such as one candidate's photo or name larger or more clear than another's.

During the event you should enforce time limits equally and do your best to ensure one candidate is not monopolizing time on the microphone. If you use a moderator, you should ensure candidates don't get tougher or easier questions. You should also open the event reminding the audience that you are a nonprofit organization and this event is for education only, not to endorse any specific candidate.



Another tactic might be for your organization to send written questionnaires. Similarly to forums, all questions should be sent at the same time, in the same format, with the same timeline, and with the same directions for all candidates. You can provide some restrictions like a character limit, and it must be the same for all candidates. You should publish each response in full without call out boxes or highlighting or ranking any specific responses.

You can choose to send or share complete answers for specific questions from all candidates. If you choose this strategy, every time you should provide a way to access the full questions and answers for all candidates.



# Candidate EVENTS

Candidates will likely not know your full legal responsibility or limits as a nonprofit organization. Candidates may invite you to campaign events or community meetings, they may invite you to speak or even donate. You can and should explain what you are allowed to do or not do, and be ready to hold those boundaries. Rarely, candidates may use photos from your legislative visits or other places in their campaign. If that happens it is best practice to ask the candidate to remove it. If appropriate, you can also make a public statement somewhere (often on your social media accounts) clarifying that your organization cannot endorse candidates and did not consent to being included in campaign materials in this way.



# INCUMBENTS

You are able to engage with elected officials like you normally do, even if they have filed for or announced a candidacy. In Missouri, every House Representative is up for re-election every two years and Senators serve four year terms. When the issue you are needing to connect with is relevant to issues you've been advocating on before and timely to the legislative session, you can continue to engage in that advocacy campaign. This means interacting with an elected official in any capacity they currently serve in is allowed, especially during the legislative session or in case you are working on a campaign over the veto session. It is usually a good idea to wait until after any election before preparing your advocacy strategy for the next legislative session, even if you feel the incumbent is likely to win their campaign for re-election. It is not a good idea to invite any incumbent running for office to speak or receive any awards during the campaign season, even if that elected official is running unopposed. This could give an appearance of favoring a political party.

Nonprofit staff and board members are able to engage in any type of political activity they wish while not working. They should avoid wearing any logos or insignia from their organization, and should not share with anyone the organization they work for. The employee or board member may take extra steps to be sure they take PTO during days they may also engage in political activity. It is further a good idea if that person is speaking from a microphone or otherwise leading anything in a candidate forum or public meeting, they should clarify that they are there as themselves and not representing any organization or company (without naming it specifically).

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Find more information on voting in Missouri on the Secretary of State's website:

[sos.mo.gov/elections/goVoteMissouri/register](https://sos.mo.gov/elections/goVoteMissouri/register)

*Scan to check your registration, or register to vote:*



[sos.mo.gov/elections/goVoteMissouri/howtovote#absentee](https://sos.mo.gov/elections/goVoteMissouri/howtovote#absentee)

*Scan to learn more about absentee voting in Missouri:*



# Affordable Housing QUESTIONS



How would you define affordable housing?

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Do you believe there is a housing affordability crisis in your area? If so, briefly share which constituencies you believe are most impacted and how this issue impacts their lives.

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What are your solutions for:

- The leading causes of homelessness
  - Tenant evictions
  - Unaffordable rent and housing costs
- .....

Would you be willing to visit a homeless shelter in your area?

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Do you take contributions from corporate real estate interests or landlord associations?

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What steps are you willing to take to limit corporate ownership of housing in Missouri?

Would you support a measure that limits the amount of rentals and LLCs a single landlord can own?

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What steps will you take to protect renters from fraudulent and discriminatory rental practices?

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Do you believe everyone should have the right to a free or court appointed attorney before being forcibly removed from their home?

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Did you know that low-income housing tax credits (LIHTC) properties are not permanently affordable? What extent would you go to eradicate the displacement of tenants from expiring LIHTC units?

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Would you be willing to support zoning reforms that allow for more mixed-use housing opportunities in your community?

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The Missouri Housing Trust Fund works to make safe housing more accessible and affordable to Missourians. The real estate recording fee that funds the Missouri Housing Trust Fund has not increased since 1994. **Will you sponsor a bill to increase funding to the Missouri Housing Trust Fund?**

# Community Justice QUESTIONS



## COMMUNITY SAFETY

What does a safe community look like to you? What policies would you support to create safe communities?

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What community programs and services do you support to reduce crime rates in Missouri?

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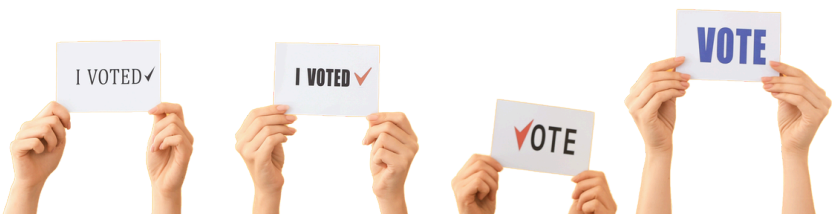
How will you work to ensure that jail residents receive adequate mental and physical healthcare?

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Do you believe in restorative justice?

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Will you support the implementation and expansion of Clean Slate (automated record sealing)?



# PRISON CONDITIONS

In the past five years, over 500 people have died in Missouri prisons. How will you increase transparency and accountability for in-custody deaths?

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Will you champion or support a prison oversight bill?

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What do you believe are the most important factors that contribute to safe and humane prison conditions?

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Will you commit to visiting a prison in your area?

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What improvements, if any, would you support regarding access to mental health care and substance use treatment in prisons?



# Food Security QUESTIONS



## SAFETY NET

With federal cuts to SNAP (formerly food stamps) and rising food costs, how will you ensure families can still access nutritious food?

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Passage of H.R. 1 on the federal level shifted a significant portion of SNAP administrative and potentially benefit costs from the federal government to states. Will you prioritize funding SNAP in the Missouri budget?

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Research has found that every \$1 spent through SNAP generates approximately \$1.50 in economic activity. Do you know how much money from SNAP benefits are spent in your district every month?

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Healthy SNAP (places limitations on what food can be purchased with SNAP) is being launched in Missouri. At the same time, Missouri just eliminated funding the Double Up Food Bucks Program (a program that incentivizes the purchases of fruits and vegetables). **Do you think that is wise? What are your ideas to promote healthy eating?**

Access to school meals is associated with improved academic performance, better attendance, improved health outcomes, and increased overall lifetime earnings. **Do you support expanding access to free school meals for Missouri students? If so, what policies or programs would you support to achieve this goal?**

## FOOD SYSTEM

How can Missouri get more local food into local mouths? What policies or investments would you support to expand farm-to-institution purchasing and strengthen local food supply chains?

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Many Missouri communities experience both food insecurity and limited access to food. At the same time, many farmers and food entrepreneurs face barriers to growing their businesses because they lack access to licensed commercial kitchens, food processing facilities, and other critical infrastructure. Investments in shared-use commercial kitchens, food business incubators, and mobile processing are proven to strengthen local food supply chains, increase access to affordable fresh foods, and create new market opportunities that help farmers and food entrepreneurs increase revenue and grow their businesses. **Would you support a state-funded grant program to help communities develop this infrastructure? If so, how will you facilitate it?**

Missouri is known as an agricultural state, which often refers to commodity crop production, not specialty crop production. Since specialty crops are the healthy foods Missourians need access to, would you work towards increasing producer access to land, capital, credit, and markets? If so, how, if not, why?

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Missouri currently gives preference to Missouri-grown and Missouri-produced products when competing bids are comparable in price and quality. Would you support strengthening this policy to increase purchases from Missouri farmers and food producers, strengthen local food supply chains, and keep more food dollars in Missouri communities? If so, how would you strengthen it, if not, why?

## **FOOD ACCESS**

What are the most significant barriers to accessing healthy, affordable food in your community, and what policies, programs, or investments would you support to address those barriers?

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What role should state government play in helping families make healthy food choices, reduce food waste, and improve long-term health outcomes through nutrition education? What policies, programs, or investments would you support to achieve these goals?

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How does improving access to healthy, affordable food fit within your legislative priorities, and what actions would you take to support food security in your district and across Missouri?

Some stakeholders are concerned that new SNAP purchasing restrictions could create additional challenges for grocery stores in rural and underserved communities, potentially increasing the risk of or the expansion of food deserts. What policies would you support to promote healthy eating without reducing food access?

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Missouri's Food Pantry Donation Tax Credit encourages donations of food and money to food pantries. Do you support expanding this tax credit? If so, how would you work to move the policy forward?

## GENERAL FOOD SECURITY

If elected, will you commit to visiting:

- A food pantry in your district
- The food bank that services your county
- A locally owned grocery store
- A community garden
- A specialty crop/family-owned farm.





Empower Missouri, a statewide not-for-profit organization, was founded in 1901 to solve the underlying issues driving poverty in our state. Through advocacy, research, and education, Empower Missouri works collaboratively with community members, nonprofit organizations, and state and federal policymakers to build an understanding of systemic poverty and its role in Missouri. Our goal is to ensure all Missourians have access to affordable housing, adequate and nutritious food, and equal justice in their communities.

[EMPOWERMISOURI.ORG](https://empowermissouri.org)