

## UTAH HOUSE DISTRICT 24 CANDIDATE

# I help Utah's most vulnerable as a public defender. If elected, I can address homelessness at its roots.

My name is Grant Amjad Miller, and I am a public defender. I became a public defender to help people in vulnerable situations. I am running for the state House for that very same reason.

All of my clients are very poor, and they often lack the resources many of us take for granted, such as healthcare and housing. Legislative policy that directly impacts my clients, especially on housing issues, often comes from a law enforcement perspective, with limited input from the other impact workers on the ground — like public defenders. These policy decisions often require that our police force address our homelessness crisis, but the institution of law enforcement is not designed to address the issue at its roots. In the end, incarceration is not a solution to homelessness.

Our homelessness crisis cannot be resolved with a single answer, but there are approaches we can immediately implement that will help the unsheltered. This involves compassionate initiatives to meet people where they are and build a sense of purpose and community.

For example, an underserving program in Salt Lake City is "Kayak Court" — a program in which the city's municipal court travels in kayaks along the Jordan River to engage with unsheltered folks camping along the banks. A team of social workers ask each individual if they want resources — and they typically do. The problem is that many of the folks don't qualify for help because they have active arrest warrants for not showing up to court, usually for camping and trespass citations. When I have participated in the program, the social workers have me paddle over to address the court case. If there is something I can help with, I call over the municipal



A homeless camp is shown next to the Jordan River across from Cottonwood Park in Salt Lake City on Aug. 29.

judge, who is in a canoe with their clerk. We hold court right there — on the water.

This program is a perfect example of how to meet people where they are while also reducing costs to taxpayers. There is less money spent on arrests, booking and jail to address the warrants. It is more humane to my clients because it avoids the needless anxiety, embarrassment and fear that comes with an arrest. We have been too harsh with our unsheltered community to

the point that we have lost their trust. This program is an example of how we can build bridges to funnel resources to the people who need them.

The other key is to proliferate low-barrier transitional substance abuse and mental health care-based housing options. It has been my practice to set up a transitional program for my clients when they leave incarceration. This means leaving the jail to attend an inpatient residential rehab. From there, my clients can

enter sober living or obtain housing vouchers. It's an approach that works. Recidivism has decreased dramatically for my clients that use these lifelines.

That said, this approach has major obstacles. Right now, the waitlist for a substance abuse rehab bed is anywhere from four to 10 weeks. A bed for residential mental healthcare is dramatically worse — it takes up to 18 months. If you have ever seen an unsheltered person having a mental health episode in a public

place, it is usually because they have no other meaningful place to go. Our shelters have some tools to grapple with mental health, but they are largely limited with the kind of healthcare they can provide. The few mental health treatment centers we have are all significantly overburdened. The default solution then becomes incarceration — which isn't a solution at all. Not only is it expensive and ineffective to put people needing treatment in jail, it's unethical — particularly if there is no long term infrastructure to provide ongoing support for these folks.

We need to do more than simply provide housing. We need to bring resources to the people who need them. We need to build a sense of community and belonging for those who are suffering from poverty.

I am running for the state House to work on these solutions. I am aiming to collaborate with my colleagues at the municipal and state levels to streamline resources and bring our local governments and community actors together to help people. Our most vulnerable communities need grace, purpose and hope. In so doing, we will make our communities safer and bring some closure to one of the most challenging issues confronting Utah.

**Grant Amjad Miller is running for Utah House District 24.**

## UTAH HOUSE DISTRICT 23 CANDIDATE

# If elected, I'll ensure Utah's public money goes to Utah's public schools, not siphoned off to private institutions

When I was in elementary school, I struggled to read at grade level. I started to fall behind other students, and it wasn't until sixth grade that my teacher, Mrs. Reavy, intervened. She helped improve my reading skills, which then helped improve my stutter, my performance in other subjects and my relationships with my classmates. Her swift intervention provided me with the confidence and ability to overcome educational adversity.

Because of her example, I volunteered every Wednesday at Bonneville Elementary School to help third graders improve their reading skills. However, volunteering is a band-aid solution to cover up a wound in our state. As a candidate for the Utah State House of Representatives, I am here to say: We must build a foundation for the next generation and invest in public education.

Utah's per-pupil spending is among the lowest in the nation. Our public money should be going to our public schools, not siphoned off to private institutions. We must prioritize our public education system, ensuring it is adequately funded and equipped to meet the needs of every student. In recent years, our Legislature has proven ineffective in expanding educational opportunities.

In 2022, the Legislature passed HB193, which allocated \$12.2 million to full day kindergarten but did not provide the additional \$33.8 million necessary to bring full-day kindergarten to the whole state.

In 2023, the Legislature passed HB215, which created a voucher initiative titled the "Utah Fits All Scholarship Program" and took \$42.5 million from public schools.

In 2024, the state legislature passed HB415 reducing school fees and eliminating \$17 million from public schools.

Educational opportunities should not come at the expense of diluting our public school system.

For seven years, my wife and I



Desert Sky Elementary principal Aaron Stevenson visits with students on the playground of the new elementary school in Eagle Mountain on Aug. 21.

have lived down the street from a public elementary school. Before our children were old enough to attend, I could see teachers trying their best to teach — and often "strangle" — the many children entrusted to their care. Now my two oldest sons attend that school, and I hang their assignments on the fridge as I hear about how their teachers teach them as well as they can with so many students in the classroom. Utah has the largest class sizes in the nation, with an average of 22.4 students to one teacher, and studies show that larger class sizes negatively impact learning. We know we need more teachers, and that our current teachers need tools, financing and



**JEFF HOWELL**

state investment to succeed at their roles.

Increasing our spending on education provides teachers with the resources to prevent other children from falling behind, just as I did. Currently, only 66% of K-3 students in Utah meet the

benchmarks necessary to achieve reading proficiency at their appropriate grade level. The Salt Lake School District has outlined a program to address this and other issues in their county-wide school district, titled the "Strategic Plan for Student Achievement" (SPSA). The SPSA includes a goal to have 80% of K-3 students reading at grade level by 2029, which needs state support to be achieved.

The benefits of reading at grade level extend beyond academic performance. As my grandmother, a public school teacher, used to say: "Readers are leaders." Children who read proficiently are more likely to graduate high school, pursue higher education and have successful careers.

Investing in early literacy is not just about helping kids read better; it's about setting them up for a lifetime of success.

But my passion extends beyond per-pupil spending and reading at grade level. I have advocated for various pieces of legislation aimed at supporting children, from improving childcare options to the Safe Child Project. As parents, my wife and I want what is best for our kids. Our three (almost four!) boys love to learn, and I want to leave a legacy of advocating for children like them. I want all children in our district — and state — to be set up for success, which our public schools can easily achieve if we make the necessary adjustments.

When we invest in public education, we are investing in the next generation of leaders. Let's advance Utah's future and ensure every child has the opportunity to succeed by supporting our public education system.

While we have many problems to tackle, I know that together, we can create economic opportunities, environmental sustainability and support our communities if we imagine a future where our young leaders first receive the support they deserve to build back a stronger House District 23.

Thank you, Mrs. Reavy, for being my first supporter and for the foundation so I may continue to champion public education as a candidate for House District 23. This election cycle, our kids need your support as I seek to protect the next generation of leaders and readers.

**Jeff Howell is a husband, father, volunteer, mountain biker, tech leader, community advocate, coalition builder and candidate for the Utah State House of Representatives in House District 23. He is passionate about public education, the environment, our unsheltered community, our LGBTQ+ community, reproductive freedoms and making a difference in Utah.**