

We asked local candidates about autism:

Are you aware of our local effort to be an Autism Friendly Community and the needs of local people with autism?

Autism McLean recently invited candidates running for local office in the April 2, 2019 election to share about their familiarity with autism and local efforts to be an autism friendly community: Bloomington & Normal Councils, Unit 5 and District 87 school boards, and Heartland Community College trustees. We did this to ask their awareness of autism and encourage future attention to issues of concern for people with autism.

This inquiry is not a candidate endorsement. Rather, our intent is to encourage awareness among candidates about the presence and needs of our local autism community. Following are the responses we received:

Local Candidate Responses to Autism Friendly Community Outreach – Spring 2019

R.C. McBride, Normal Town Council candidate, incumbent running for re-election:

Thank you for the opportunity to respond to your survey and for the positive work you're doing in the community.

My responses to your questions are below. I interpreted your limit at 100 words per question - not 100 words per area listed - in question 2, so please let me know if you would like a more detailed response.

Please consider me at your service should I ever be able to help with anything regardless of whether I'm reelected.

1. Are you familiar with our Autism Friendly Community Initiative?

I am, and will become more so. I've read your White Paper on community conditions and action opportunities, and appreciate your efforts to keep the needs of those with autism top of mind.

2. With the resources of the public office for which you are running, do you have specific ideas on how people with autism can be better integrated into our community these specific areas (inclusion and engagement, education, recreation, employment, housing and transportation, health and wellness)?

We've come far but have much more to do. I'd prefer to listen to those with experience for specific ideas and facilitate as best I can.

Our two oldest daughters have volunteered for several years as mentors for Penguin Project talent. It's been transformational for them, the takeaway being we all have much to learn from and offer to one another. Grant funding for such groups remains a priority.

Employment, recreation, support of Connect Transit, and first responder training are all ways the Town is involved. We need ongoing dialogue to be responsive as possible to issues and future opportunities.

##

Thank you again for your time.

R.C. McBride (309-824-4058)

David Shields, Normal Town Council candidate:

1). Are you familiar with our autism friendly community initiative

(<https://autismmclean.org/autismfriendly/>)?

Yes. I strongly believe in and have devoted much of my time to ensuring that organizations and communities in McLean County are accessible, supportive and inclusive to all our residents.

For example, twenty years ago, community leaders voted against adding sexual orientation into their respective non-discrimination ordinances. I also led the forming of State Farm's LGBT employee resource group. I believe these helped set the stage such that today there are 4 LGBTQ candidates running in both Council races.

The point being, I see that there are marginalized, misunderstood populations within our community. I have been and will be a voice for them.

Autism McLean is leading a vital charge, and we need to support it. Thank you!

2). What the resources of the public office for which you are running, do you have specific ideas on how people with autism can be better integrated into our community through these specific areas?

Public education is key. It's necessary to normalize the fact that people absorb and process sensory information in strikingly different ways. Creating systemic change and a culture of mindfulness is possible through persistence.

I do see this happening in our community, and we can do more to creatively facilitate effective, targeted, constant awareness. Working together to inform the community about autism will naturally help businesses and individuals better support those with autism. People on the spectrum who are willing and able to personally describe their experiences, challenges, and solutions would be the most compelling component of any education effort. Creating learning opportunities will be a priority for me. I applaud and support the work Autism McLean has already done to that end.

Due to the surprise closing of the Autism Services Group, programs are needed more than ever. We need to ensure that those with autism locally have dependable access to therapy and support services. As a Town Council member, I would happily advocate for town staff's involvement in that effort, and will research what I could personally do, as well.

Karyn Smith, Normal Town Council candidate:

I did receive your letter dated February 4 advocating for services for individuals diagnosed with autism spectrum disorder. I am familiar with this diagnosis and a number of services provided here in McLean County as my daughter, Bella, has friends with whom she interacts in the course of her school day, SOAR events, Special Olympics, and Penguin Project. Now, to answer your specific questions:

I am familiar with your Autism McLean County website, but I was unable to locate the information on the Autism Friendly Community Initiative on this site. I would appreciate it if you could send me an active link in reply to this e-mail as I may have typed in the address incorrectly. I personally endorse using the Town of Normal Early Notification Program. Our son has mental health issues and it gave me peace of mind to know that any personnel responding to an emergency call to our home would be aware of his issues and be prepared to respond appropriately.

Normal Town resources are limited in addressing services for integrating individuals with any special needs into the community. The biggest challenge is at the state level where the PUNS program is seriously underfunded. Locally, I can work to provide support to organizations that seek to provide supportive housing to special needs adults.

Kelly Pyle, Unit 5 school board candidate:

1) Are you familiar with the Autism Friendly Community Initiative?

Yes, as a former audiologist and clinical educator at Illinois State University, my professional career has been spent working with individuals with varying communicative differences and various special needs populations. I am proud to have been a volunteer for Special Olympics Healthy Hearing program for several years and many of my students have participated in the Best Buddies of Illinois State University. My personal and professional values and beliefs align with the Autism Friendly Community Initiative: to be supportive and inclusive of people with autism and their families.

2) With the resources of the public office for which you are running, do you have specific ideas on how people with autism can be better integrated into our community through these specific areas?

As a school board member, our district recently completed an addition to Colene Hoose Elementary, to ensure that classrooms and learning environments are conducive to students with autism. Both high schools have a Best Buddies program which allows for socialization and integration of students with autism and their peers. Our district-wide social and emotional learning curriculum focuses not only on wellness of self, but also teaches kindness, compassion and acceptance for others. Programs like the VTAP work program allows students with autism (and students with other disabilities) to work in our community. I also support local projects like Harmony Park, so that children of all abilities can enjoy recreational spaces in the community.

Amy Roser, Unit 5 School Board candidate:

Are you familiar with our Autism Friend Community Initiative?

I am somewhat familiar with the Autism Friendly Community Initiative. From recent media promotions of Harmony Park, our community has a heightened awareness for supporting kids with disabilities. Through visiting the Normal, IL, We Rock the Spectrum Gym, I learned of supports provided in McLean County. Finally, a parent and friend, Jennifer Sikes recently joined the Autism Board. I was excited to learn of the efforts the Autism Friendly Community Initiative in promoting inclusion in our community. I am grateful for the support this organization provides in increasing awareness, providing opportunities and supporting those impacted by Autism Spectrum Disorder.

With the resources of the public office with which you are running, do you have specific ideas on how people with autism can be better integrated into our community through these specific areas: overall inclusion and engagement, education, recreation, employment, housing and transportation and health and wellness.

At a recent Unit 5 Board meeting, we learned of the We Dine Together program at Normal Community High School. This program provides a welcoming space for students to eat lunch and who prefer to get away from the large cafeteria. The program has expanded beyond lunch to engaging in social activities including pairing up students to attend Homecoming. This is certainly an idea that could be expanded upon at other schools that promotes inclusion and acceptance in a way that is comfortable and secure.

Janet Hood – Heartland Community College, board of trustees candidate

Thank you for reaching out regarding my candidacy for the Heartland Community College Board of Trustees. As a 40+ year resident of McLean County and mother an autistic adult and am keenly aware of Autism McLean County and the Autism Friendly Community Initiative. Thank you for your ongoing awareness efforts. Janet Hood