

Markey, Kennedy take campaigns into Boston jail

By Matt Murphy

State House News Service

One inmate in the Suffolk County House of Correction wanted to know how U.S. Sen. Edward Markey would help former prisoners find reliable transportation to keep appointments with their parole officers.

Another questioned the senator about his position on reparations for slavery.

And yet another asked U.S. Rep. Joseph Kennedy what he would do if elected to lower the rate of recidivism.

The two Democrats running for U.S. Senate stood before a room of masked inmates in the Suffolk County House of Correction on Tuesday to answer their questions about everything from systemic racism in the criminal justice system to climate change and the Supreme Court's recent ruling on immigration.

Invited by Suffolk County Sheriff Steve Tompkins, each candidate had over an hour to respond and share their thoughts on how to reform a system that both agreed puts too many people behind bars, and doesn't do enough to help people before or after they're incarcerated. The discussion was moderated by Tompkins, who has endorsed Kennedy in the race.

"We are an over-incarcerated society. We have too many people behind bars who shouldn't be there," Markey said.

The first-term senator, who is seeking six more years after a long career in Washington, said he and U.S. Rep. Ayanna Pressley had sponsored legislation to make public transit free for people to get to work and appointments, and said he signed

on to a Sen. Cory Booker resolution to create a commission to investigate reparations.

And Kennedy blamed Republicans for the stalemate over immigration reform, suggesting that during his early years in Congress there were enough votes for comprehensive reform that would have protected the so-called Dreamers brought to the United States as minors by their parents without documentation.

Republican leaders, Kennedy said, refused to put the bill on the floor for a vote.

"If Mitch McConnell won't do it, then you have to go out there and make sure Mitch McConnell's not calling the shots," Kennedy said, returning to the case for his candidacy that he's better suited to campaigning for Democrats around the country to flip control of the Senate.

On the issues, however, there wasn't a lot of daylight between Markey and Kennedy, who both talked about the importance of reaching people with mental health and substance use disorders before they break the law and end up in jail.

Markey discussed with one inmate his support for ending qualified immunity for police officers, and frequently mentioned Booker, a Black senator from New Jersey, as someone he has worked with to sponsor legislation like the Next Step Act, to overhaul sentencing, police tactics and training, and reentry programming.

The two Democrats also agreed with one inmate who said housing is an issue for people returning to the community from prison who often have no choice but to return to the violent neighborhoods and lifestyles that got them in trouble in the first place.

Markey said that to solve the problems of social justice in the court and prison systems the government has to provide

more funding for housing that's affordable and mental health services.

"A vision without funding is a hallucination," Markey said.

Kennedy also said the federal government needs to look at the minimum wage and tipped wage laws nationwide to make it easier for people to provide for their families and hold on to the housing they have.

"Let's make sure fewer people come into jails and prisons in the first place," Kennedy told the inmates about his approach to recidivism and rehabilitation.

Kennedy has criticized Markey during the campaign for his vote for the 1994 crime bill signed by President Bill Clinton that has been blamed for the disproportionate incarceration of people of color through mandatory sentencing for drug crimes and other offenses.

Markey, in turn, has questioned Kennedy's decision to work for conservative Republican District Attorney Michael O'Keefe on Cape Cod after Harvard University law school.

Kennedy and Markey both said the system of mandatory minimum sentencing guidelines must be revisited.

"It's been real successful at putting people in jail. It has not been successful at all in mitigating the impact of drugs on our streets. And that needs to change," Kennedy said.

Voters decide the Democratic contest between Kennedy and Markey on Sept. 1, and Tompkins called it "asininely stupid" that people with felony convictions cannot vote. The prohibition was approved by voters in 2000, by a two to one margin, as part of a constitutional amendment.

But even though some inmates might not be able to vote for either candidates, Markey and Kennedy said their voices are valuable.

“We have to think of you as part of a larger family,” Markey said. “You won’t be here forever. But you’ll be part of our community forever.”