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Gubernatorial candidates promise to work for disabled

Carney, Markell and Protack all offer solutions for program funding, insurance needs

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DOVER -- At stake were the votes of Delawareans with disabilities -- a population that numbers more than 100,000 and yet never before had been the focus of a gubernatorial candidate forum.

That changed Thursday evening, when more than 250 people -- sitting at round tables at Delaware Technical & Community College's Terry Campus -- listened to what three of the four men running for governor would do if they won the state's highest elected office in this year's election.

Lt. Gov. John Carney Jr., state Treasurer Jack Markell and airline pilot Mike Protack answered questions for more than an hour, with moderator Pete Booker, president of Delmarva Broadcasting, at the helm. Most of the questions were submitted to the candidates in advance.

Their methods and plans varied, but all three said they would expand services and work to ensure more funding for programs that help people with disabilities to live in community settings if they wish to do so. All would address continuing problems with health-care coverage and all want universal health care, at least eventually. All said they would encourage businesses to increase employment opportunities for people with disabilities.

Those are things many in the audience hoped to hear. Many were consumers of services -- with vision and hearing impairments, cerebral palsy, paralysis and other physical disabilities. Many were the direct service providers who -- despite low wages and challenging work conditions -- help their clients with basic tasks of living. Others were family members, friends, and advocates for those with disabilities.

Their votes will be important on primary day Sept. 9 and Election Day on Nov. 4.

Carney will face Markell in the Democratic primary. Protack has until July 25 to pay the \$5,300 filing fee and qualify for the Republican ballot, where retired Superior Court Judge Bill Lee is the lone candidate. Protack, who lost to Lee in the GOP primary in 2004, already is ballot-qualified as the nominee of the Independent Party of Delaware.

Lee, who was drafted at the state GOP convention in May, was not at Thursday's forum. He has declined all debate and forum invitations until after the primary.

Disability is a challenge many people never consider until it hits home -- or close to it. All three men related personal experiences that had helped them understand the challenges.

Markell spoke of an encounter he had with a young employee at MBNA's Support Services division, which -- now under Bank of America -- offers training and jobs to many with disabilities. The young man told Markell he had sat on the couch watching television for six years, until that job opportunity arose, providing income, dignity and a 401(k).

Protack spoke of his mother's decline and the challenges of finding reliable care for her needs as an Alzheimer's patient.

Carney spoke of his niece, Lorraine, who has autism and needs the supportive family and friends she has. He is concerned about programs she will need when she passes her 21st birthday and no longer is eligible for many services.

Carney said he would work to reverse the state's investment ratio in disability services -- with 70 percent of funding now going to institutional care and 30 percent to community-based services.

"The real key is eliminating bias and changing the attitudes," he said.

Markell said he would work toward full employment for all people with disabilities who want to work -- expanding the state's contracts and addressing obstacles including transportation, Medicaid eligibility problems and training.

Protack said he would offer tax incentives and get local chambers of commerce involved in promoting employment for those with disabilities.

"One resource we haven't used much are our state legislators," he said. "They're good at getting jobs for friends and family. Why can't they do that for folks with disabilities?"

All three repeated their commitments to universal health care. Markell and Protack both said they would pursue it now. Carney said his plan would take longer, recognizing current economic conditions.

The financial challenges are enormous -- and growing. Carney said the state's Medicaid commitment was \$214 million in 2000. This year it is \$521 million.

"Yet there have been no cuts to Medicaid in the last seven years," he said. "That's really important."

Markell said economic conditions for care providers are no better -- and compensation gaps must be addressed to ensure quality of care.

"My administration would view these providers as partners," he said.

Markell repeated his contention that a vote for Carney would be a vote for the status quo at a time when the state needed to go in a new direction. Carney questioned why Markell had not addressed these issues during his 10 years in the treasurer's office.

The commitment to helping people live in the community was important to Maitri Campbell, who has had her own place for about five years, after living eight years at the Mary Campbell Center in Brandywine Hundred. Campbell, who has cerebral palsy, was angry when Markell said he would continue to support facilities like the Campbell Center, which offers long-term care to those with a variety of disabilities.

"I would vote for either of the other two," she said. "Why did he even bring that up?"

Scott Lengel, a Democrat, said he didn't hear anything that put him in either Democrat's camp, but he hopes both will do more to help the workers. Lengel, who has been a quadriplegic since a car accident 22 years ago, said it is hard for the workers to live on \$10 an hour.

"If they work two hours, it's not even worth the gas to come out," said Lengel.

Janaki Subramanian, one of Lengel's aides, said she related more to Protack than to either of the elected officials. She wanted to look into Protack's "Delacare" health plan. But as a registered Democrat, she said, she is leaning toward Markell.

Carney is the choice of Wayne Carter, who survived 86 jumps as an Army paratrooper only to become paralyzed in a motorcycle accident. He now is executive director of the Colonial Chapter of Paralyzed Veterans of America.

"John Carney has wonderful ideas that separate him from the current governor," Carter said.

Addie Pack, 70 of Harrington, wanted to hear much more about how the men would address transportation problems. Pack, who is blind, said she has used the state's Paratransit service since 1979.

"I want to know how they're going to straighten that program out -- so that seven days a week, people can get to work or to church or wherever they're going," she said.

Pack doesn't really make up her mind about who to vote for this early, she said.

"Usually, in the last month before I vote I start praying," she said. "And nine times out of 10, the Lord will tell me what to do."

The forum was sponsored by the State Council for Persons with Disabilities, the Delaware Association of Rehabilitation Facilities, and other agencies and individuals. Questions and answers -- including those not raised at Thursday's forum -- soon will be posted online at www.delarf.org, organizers said.