**Questionnaire for City candidates:**

The Jews United for Justice Campaign Fund is a grassroots community organization that is working towards a Maryland where everyone has what they need to live and thrive, where all our residents live in dignity and have a voice in democracy, and where our government focuses on the well-being of all residents and in particular the needs of those who are most vulnerable.

We believe that racism against residents of color, whether explicit in the form of hate speech and violence or implicit in oppressive structures, policies, and barriers, is a key element threading through every issue our City and our state faces. As Jews, our tradition and history teaches us not to stand idly by as this injustice persists, but to be actively engaged in changing the dynamics of power in Baltimore City and the Maryland General Assembly.

We work in coalition with trusted partners to advance key issue campaigns informed by our commitment to ending all forms of oppression and making real improvements in people’s lives. We work with elected officials to craft policy, and with our grassroots community to hold those elected officials accountable to their commitments. We also make endorsements of candidates aligned with this vision who are ready to win elected office and take bold leadership.

Please return the completed questionnaire by Friday, February 7th to the JUFJ Campaign Fund Baltimore Director, Molly Amster at molly@jufjcampaignfund.org . If you have questions regarding our process, please contact Molly.

Date: **February 10, 2020**

Candidate Name: **Thiru Vignarajah**

Phone: **410-456-7552**

Email: **thiruforbaltimore@gmail.com**

Your Priorities

1. What are your top three priorities and specific proposals for how to achieve those priorities?

**As Mayor, I will prioritize raising expectations for our education system, drastically reducing crime, and making Baltimore a more affordable city.**

**Education is the path forward. We need to raise expectations not only for our children and schools, but for how we invest in and support them. We will fully fund Kirwan, and we are the only campaign that has specifically outlined how we will pay for Kirwan’s demands. We will, among other things, become the first city in America to legalize and tax marijuana without federal or state approval, earmarking that money exclusively for educational priorities. I have pledged to provide universal pre-K for three and four year olds, debt free college for every public high school graduate at a trade school, community college or university in Maryland, to grow the endowments of HBCUs, and to make every elementary school a community school. My mom and dad taught three generations of kids in Baltimore City schools. They used to say to me the best day to plant a tree was 20 years ago; the next best day is today. Our children deserve immediate action.**

**In November, we announced a comprehensive crime plan that set forth 20 concrete strategies that Baltimore City has not undertaken that we have pledged to pursue to drive down violent crime. Former Councilwoman Rikki Spector wrote about our crime plan in the Baltimore Sun: "It is smart, concrete, detailed and realistic. It is tough and progressive, rejecting policies of mass incarceration and cash bail and rooted in principles of rehabilitation and restorative justice. It is the plan of a person who, as a federal and city prosecutor and deputy attorney general of Maryland, actually fought crime.... The plan is innovative and fearless, willing to do what others have refused." Veteran columnist Frank DeFelippo said that we had “put forth, no doubt, the most comprehensive crime-fighting plan of anyone, including the police department and the Justice Department." Finally, former Baltimore County Police Chief Jim Johnson—whom we would expect to play a leadership role in City Hall on crime—said this: “His plan for public safety will drastically reduce violent crime. I strongly believe that Thiru’s vision for this community will make us all safer.”**

**Here are three key features of that plan. First, I have pledged to commit $10 million to a diversion program for qualifying juvenile offenders and low-level offenses. These individuals, as a condition of probation, will enroll in skills training, workforce development, and a job placement program. This is modeled off a court-based initiative that boasts a 6% recidivism rate. This diversion program will give at-risk individuals a real alternative at a critical crossroads moment in their lives.**

**Second, we will lower the barriers for returning citizens integrating back into Baltimore. I have pledged to forgive outstanding debt owed to the government by returning citizens if they maintain stable employment and avoid criminal conduct for two years. We will also launch the “Faith in Justice” reentry initiative which pledges to disperse $5 million in federal grant money to nonprofits and faith organizations supporting returning citizens reentry.**

**Third, we will bring additional resources to bear and deploy them strategically to drive down crime. This means more federal prosecutions of carjackings, commercial robberies, and firearms violations and more violent crime prosecutions by the Maryland Attorney General’s office. It means recruiting 600 more police officers through a college cadet program, focusing on burglaries where forensic evidence is often potent, and going after certain murders in a newly-constituted cold case unit. And it means maintaining an anonymized database of violent repeat juvenile offenders to make sure their cases are being handled appropriately.**

**There is no better measure of a city’s health than whether people are coming or going, and right now people are leaving Baltimore City in droves. We need to make Baltimore a more affordable and appealing place to live. Part of this will include improving education and reducing crime. But this will also require us to reduce property taxes. I have pledged to cut Baltimore City’s property taxes in half in ten years using a plan described by former WYPR President, Tony Brandon, as “visionary and actionable.” We will reduce the current property tax by $0.11 per $100 of assessed value each year for ten years—until it equalizes with the county rate. To address the reduction in revenue, we will expect agencies to collectively cut $40 million in wasteful spending, knowing there is likely hundreds of millions in waste that forensic audits would expose. Moreover, to further compensate for the risk of reduced revenue, we will raise taxes on abandoned property to prompt owners to develop the land or to sell it to someone who will. Finally, we will seize and sell uninhabited property with unpaid taxes or excessive code violations. A ten-year preset scheduled of property tax reductions will prime the market for investment, impose a level of fiscal discipline that Baltimore City has sorely lacked, and encourage families and businesses to stick around knowing that City leaders are committed to making sense of what is currently an irrational and unsustainable tax rate.**

2. How do your priorities and proposals address structural inequities, especially those that impact people of color, immigrants, and other communities fighting their marginalization?

**Baltimore does not need more proclamations and platitudes, we need concrete solutions to the discrimination and systemic inequities faced by our community. I have proposed policies that will address structural inequality in a measurable way. This will include legalizing and taxing marijuana, providing tax incentives for small businesses controlled by marginalized communities, and expanding our transit grid to address mobility inequities.**

**When it comes to marijuana, the war on drugs has been a colossal failure. For decades, communities of color have disproportionately shouldered the costs of Baltimore’s enforcement policies. Now that America is realizing its mistake, the communities who were most devastated by the failed policies of the 1980s ought to be the first to benefit from this emerging market. Permits will be preferentially issued to enterprises owned, operated, and controlled by historically-disadvantaged, local business owners of color and to those who commit to hire employees with non-violent criminal records who are seeking legitimate employment opportunities.**

**As Mayor, I will provide tax incentives to encourage growth of small businesses controlled and operated by minorities, women, members of LGBTQ and immigrant communities. Prioritizing a diverse business space is a key commitment of our campaign and these populations are integral to the economic development of Baltimore.**

**Finally, we need to expand our transit grid to reach all corners of Baltimore. I will immediately start a free East-West bus system and will do everything in my power to restart the Red Line 2.0. We will also expand the free bus lines to the major arteries criss crossing the city.**

Our JUFJ Campaign Fund Priorities in Baltimore City

Our priorities in the current election is Baltimore City reflect the issue agenda that JUFJ and its coalition partners have been working to move forward in the areas of renters’ rights, fair elections (locally financed public elections), police accountability, and water justice.

● Renters’ Rights : Everyone in Baltimore should have a safe and stable place to live, including the huge percentage who live in rented homes. Baltimore City enacted a rental licensing law in 2018 that requires landlords to obtain rental licenses to legally rent their properties. However, many landlords continue to rent unlicensed properties and use Baltimore’s Rent Court to evict tenants without first having to present valid licenses. This practice devastates current tenants who lose their homes and keeps housing unsafe for future tenants. What would you do to strengthen and uphold the current rental licensing law? How else would you plan to reduce the number of evictions in Baltimore City?

**Under the 2018 Rental Licensing Law, all landlords are required to obtain rental licenses. I would support an amendment to the law that a tenant cannot be evicted without the landlord providing a valid license for the property. Further reducing the number of evictions requires a multifaceted approach. We need to ensure wages are rising through economic development to adjust for inflation in rental prices. According to the National Low Income Housing Coalition, the minimum hourly wage required for a one bedroom apartment in Baltimore City is $20.65, more than double the current minimum wage.**

**I also support collaborating with the the Maryland Department of Housing Services which operates the Homelessness Prevention Program (HPP), local non-profits, and private sector stakeholders to expand eviction prevention policies safeguarding renters in need of short term assistance. The outcome would model itself after programs like HomeStart in Boston that use flexible monetary funds, legal and financial advice, and local knowledge to help renters at risk of eviction remain in their homes. In addition to the services provided to renters, the collaborative would work with landlords on eviction prevention partnerships because eviction poses significant costs that they would largely rather avoid as well. In these instances low-interest loans to the renter could satisfy both the landlord and renter, and avoid costly, harmful evictions.**

● Public Funding for Local Elections: Public financing democratizes elections, allowing candidates without deep-pocketed backers to run credible races against candidates with wealthy donors. Do you support publicly funding Baltimore City elections? If such a program were in place, would you commit to participating in the program and only accepting small, local donations?

**No one’s bank account should prevent them from public service. I support passing and fully funding the proposed Fair Election Fund. I have also proposed working with the Council to enact a criminal ban on campaign contributions by registered lobbyists or any company soliciting donations from its vendors for more than an aggregate amount of $6,000. I have also called for 50% tax on personal contributions exceeding $250,000 to one’s own campaign, the proceeds of which would go towards the Fair Elections Fund, along with a corresponding increase of the matching funds to the level of the self-funding candidate.**

● Police Accountability: The Baltimore Police Department has a long history of corruption and violence, especially toward Black residents, which led to the killing of Freddie Gray z”l (may his memory be for a blessing) and to the consent decree with the Department of Justice. Despite the consent decree, police abuse and misconduct is kept secret from members of the public they are supposed to serve. How would you work to prevent future police violence, ensure greater transparency and reform of the police department, and enforce strong implementation of the consent decree requirements?

**The relationship between our community and our police is broken. Repairing the damage will take years, but step one is fully recommitting to community policing and actively working to build real partnerships with the people of our city. We have placed community policing at the center of our 20 point crime plan by pledging to form the Office of the Public Advocate to ensure policing satisfies community expectations and constitutional requirements, the post will be filled by a respected community activist and civil rights leader; to create a College Cadet program to recruit a more diverse, local and professional police force; to open ComStat to press and the public to promote police accountability and transparency; and to redeploy school resource officers from their posts inside schools to perform much-needed foot patrols in the neighborhoods around the schools, instead of fueling the school-to-prison pipeline.**

● Water Justice: Water is a basic human right, yet it is unaffordable for huge swaths of Baltimoreans. The City Council recently passed the Water Accountability and Equity Act to address this issue and to reform our inaccurate and unaccountable water billing system. How would you ensure strong implementation of the Water Accountability and Equity Act? What are you looking for in a new Director of the Department of Public Works?

**For years, water bills have been unpredictable, unreliable, and far too high. Current City leadership has failed to fix the problem. We can do it better. I have pledged to make Baltimore an example for the Nation of what it means to conceive of water as a basic human right. This requires us to end water inequities, to make water more affordable, and to improve services. For something as vital as water, anything less is unacceptable.**

**I will ensure comprehensive, efficient implementation of the Water Accountability Act by conducting a forensic audit of the Department of Public Works to identify the systems and processes causing the unpredictable water bills. I will also remove barriers to accessing water bill discounts by automatically enrolling qualifying residents using their State tax returns.**

**The Director of the Department of Public Works must view the dissemination of services through the lense of inequities in Baltimore. I will prioritize a proven record of improving operations in distribution of, affordability of, and access to services. It is not only the Director of the Department of Public Works who impacts the operation of DPW, but also the tier of middle management officials responsible for executing the distribution of services. The Director must be able to identify the existing managers that can adapt to significantly higher expectations for our public services and implement new policies to meet those expectations, and those who cannot. In addition to a strong sense of equity and managerial capabilities, I will prioritize fiscal responsibility, executive experience, and expertise in providing public services.**