

Schimel, Kaul clash on opioid epidemic, environment in second debate

Posted on Sunday, Oct 14, 2018

MILWAUKEE — Republican AG Brad Schimel on Sunday called Wisconsin a leader in the fight against the opioid epidemic while accusing Dem opponent Josh Kaul of lacking a plan to deal with the issue.

But Kaul countered the state has seen a greater increase in opioid deaths than other states, showing more needs to be done.

During their debate at the Marquette University Law School, Schimel touted several efforts he's undertaken to fight opioid abuse, including raising awareness about prescription drug abuse, establishing drug take-back programs, helping establish and expand drug treatment courts, and instituting prevention efforts he said are now being used in other states.

"We're leading the nation," Schimel said. "We've been recognized over and over for that."

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But when moderator Mike Gousha pressed about the rise in overdose deaths over the past few years, Schimel said law enforcement anticipated a rise in heroin-related problems after efforts to curb prescription drug abuse saw success.

"We knew when we took away the gateway drug more were going to switch to heroin," he said. "But you've got to take that gateway drug away or we will never stop the flow in."

Wisconsin's rise in opioid-related deaths mirrors a rise across the nation, Schimel

said.

Kaul disputed that Wisconsin is a leader in addressing the opioid crisis. In addition to the rise in overdose deaths, he noted an increase in the number of children separated from parents due to opioid abuse.

“It’s just not correct that we are leading the nation in fighting the opioid epidemic like my opponent’s campaign commercials have said,” Kaul said.

Kaul called for going after large-scale trafficking operations, expanding treatment access, holding pharmaceutical companies accountable and expanding Medicaid so more can access treatment.

Schimel, who served as Waukesha County DA before being elected AG, said he’s “been out on the front end of this for years, long before I was attorney general.”

“You still hear from my opponent talking points,” he said. “He doesn’t have a plan.”

Kaul, a former federal prosecutor, highlighted his work in dismantling large-scale drug operations in the Baltimore area.

But Schimel said records show Kaul had 25 cases assigned to him while a prosecutor, compared to the 16,000 he handled over his 29 year career as a prosecutor.

The two also disagreed over DOJ’s handling of environmental cases under Schimel.

Schimel warned every employer and worker in Wisconsin should be worried if Kaul wins this fall because Kaul would “sue first and ask questions later.”

Kaul countered the incumbent hasn’t shown any hesitation in suing to overturn the Affordable Care Act, which he said would take away protections for those with pre-existing conditions, or to deny certain workers guarantees to overtime.

The exchange came after Gousha asked Schimel, who’s seeking a second term, about his record on environmental protections. Gousha noted critics have called Schimel soft on polluters and the head of his environmental protection unit is a former lobbyist for the dairy industry, which has been involved in various actions on environmental grounds.

Schimel said the background of his environmental protection unit leader doesn't disqualify her from the job and said he's done things differently than his predecessors. He pointed to a company that he said self-reported what Schimel said was an inadvertent, unintentional containment lapse. He said some environmentalists wanted him to seek a \$40,000 forfeiture. Instead, Schimel said he worked with the company, which decided to make a \$1 million investment to upgrade its containment system to make it less likely a lapse would happen again.

Kaul countered Schimel's different approach is to not be serious about prosecuting polluters, adding fines collected from polluters have decreased significantly under his opponent compared to predecessors. Meanwhile, Kaul said Schimel has sued the federal government to challenge environmental protections.

And he noted the company Schimel held us as an example of his approach is under investigation again.

That prompted Schimel's rebuke, "This kind of sue first, ask questions later mentality should make every employer and every worker in Wisconsin frightened."

Kaul noted he only was pointing out the company was under investigation again before noting the suits Schimel has filed on things such as the Affordable Care Act.

"This is an example of how we have seen the interests of special interests far too often put in front of Wisconsinites by the attorney general," Kaul said.

Kaul and Schimel also contrasted about the best approaches to ensuring school safety.

Schimel took credit for helping come up with a \$100 million school safety plan that Gov. Scott Walker proposed earlier this year and lawmakers approved. It focuses on physical security and training in trauma-informed care and mental health issues.

"Our schools are going to be the safest in America thanks to the plan I developed with our law enforcement," Schimel said.

But Kaul said Schimel has failed to advocate for policies like universal background checks or a ban on bump stocks.

Schimel also defended his willingness to train teachers to go armed in the

classroom. He said whether school personnel are armed should be a local decision, and that if locals decide teachers should carry weapons, he wants to ensure they are well-trained.

But Kaul said teachers should not be allowed to carry weapons.

“I don’t want students in any city in Wisconsin to go to schools where teachers are armed,” Kaul said. “It introduces a danger that is not present right now. It’s not safe for our kids. The people who should have firearms near a school are police officers. We shouldn’t be arming teachers.”

Kaul and Schimel largely agreed the attorney general would have a role to play if Foxconn failed to meet its obligations or wanted to renegotiate its contract.

“This is a good example of why you need an AG who is independent and a watchdog for Wisconsinites,” Kaul said, adding that the state needs an AG who will look out for the best interests of Wisconsinites and one “we can count on to make sure that Foxconn’s held accountable just like anybody else is.”

Schimel replied, “You have one.”