Greater Cleveland Congregations is a new coalition of religious congregations and community organizations working together to make this region a more just and prosperous place.

By JAMES W. WADE III

Staff Reporter

Greater Cleveland Congregations (GCC) has been busy making a difference in the greater Clev eland
area. Recently, they held a forum to give people a chance to hear from each candidate for Cuyahoga County Prosecutor.

Congregants from about 40 churches and synagogues attended the GCC event, said Ari Lipman, lead organizer. The forum had standing room along the walls and in the halls as the

750 seat Temple was all filled.

GCC asked the candidates to commit to four reforms in the prosecutor's office. They include ensuring young people have adequate representation, so they aren't persuaded to waive their right to an attorney and enter a guilty plea.

The other reforms include working to end the abuse of overcharging a defendant with multiple crimes to persuade them to plead guilty to an offense; reducing racial disparities that lead to African-Americans being more far more likely to be charged and convicted of a crime than those of other races; and increasing use of diversion programs and rehabilitation rather than sending adults and juveniles to prison.

Four people convicted of drug-related and other crimes told of their personal experiences with the county justice system, each one focusing on one of the areas GCC is targeting for reform.

One, a former alcoholic, told the candidates about his felony conviction, when he said he begged the judge for treatment in lieu of prison to no avail.

Another told a story about spending time in prison and seeing the disparity between the number of incarcerated Blacks and minorities versus Whites.

The GCC outlined four topics they wanted candidates to address: preventing juveniles from waiving their right to an attorney, overcharging defendants with crimes, racial disparities in the justice system and adult and juvenile diversion programs.

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At the forum, GCC also urged attendees to vote for and encourage friends and neighbors to support Issue 15, the Cuyahoga County Health and Human Services levy. This is a renewal of

one of the county's two levies for social services. It will not add to a homeowner's property taxes. The annual cost to an owner of a $100,000 house would continue to be $147.

The levy raises $140 million, which brings in an additional $64 million in federal funds, to support MetroHealth Medical Center, children's services, and assistance to needy families and seniors.

In December, GCC hosted over 850 people from the 40 religious congregations and community organizations that constitute Greater Cleveland Congregations gathered at Olivet Institutional Baptist Church to celebrate CTU President David Quolke, CMSD CEO Eric Gordon, and Cleveland Mayor Frank Jackson, for reaching an agreement that will restore cuts to early childhood education, high school transportation, summer school, athletics and other vital programs.

Last June, GCC held its inaugural Founding Assembly on Monday, June 6, at the Masonic Temple located at 3615 Euclid Avenue. Over two thousand people of all faiths came together to be a part of history.

The co-chairs for the event were the Rev. Jawanza Colvin, Olivet Institutional Baptist Church, Rev. Tracey Lind, Trinity Episcopal Cathedral and Rabbi Joshua Caruso, Anshe Chesed Fairmount Temple
. Music was provided by the Olivet Institutional Mass Choir who filled the stage, dressed in all black.

Some of the churches involved are;

Antioch Baptist Church, Bethany Baptist Church, Elizabeth Baptist Church, First Baptist Church, Olivet Baptist Church, Shiloh Baptist Church, the historic St. John AME, St. James AME, St. Paul AME, The Temple Tifereth Israel, Park Synagogue, Fairmount Presbyterian.