

Madison County State's Attorney race: Tom Gibbons running against Ron Williams

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EDWARDSVILLE - The position of **Madison County State's Attorney** is one of many contested positions on the Nov. 8 ballot.

Whoever wins the election will be the chief law enforcement official of **Madison County**. Incumbent **Tom Gibbons (D)** is running against retired public defender and 32-year Army veteran **Ronald Williams (R)**. Both Gibbons and Williams are passionate about justice for children and recovery for drug addicts. Both men want to crack down on drug dealers and violent crime, yet they have different methods of doing it.

Gibbons was appointed to the position of Madison County State's Attorney in Dec. 8 to complete the term of **Bill Mudge**, who became a judge. Gibbons was elected by the people of Madison County in Nov. 2012. After his election, Gibbons said he went to work to make the office of the state's attorney run more smoothly and more efficient.

"I implemented a management team in the office to run more efficiently," Gibbons said. "We were operating out of five courthouses in seven buildings. It was somewhat inefficient in that way."

After consolidating office practices, Gibbons created the **Children's Justice Division**, which is a cooperative working group of attorneys operating in all courts in which children's lives are impacted. These cases include child support, juvenile delinquency, abuse, neglect and cases in which children were victims of crimes.

"It's bad enough for kids to have to be in the criminal justice system at all," Gibbons said. "It is important for everyone to be on the same page."

The subject of justice for children was a specialty of Williams during his time as a public defender in Madison County. During that time, he said he managed 6,000 juvenile cases within a 12-year time frame. Williams knows the plight of children in the criminal justice system firsthand.

"I never dealt with a kid who was truly bad," Williams said. "Today, I kind of miss working with the kids. It was the parents that made me want to quit. It was so rare to find a decent parent, it was fairly discouraging."

Williams served 32 years in the **United States Army**, including his time at **West Point**, where he graduated in 1965. Williams served two years in Vietnam, serving as a commander of a unit building infrastructure in the jungle and later serving as an air cavalry pilot and executive officer.

In his public life, Williams four years managing an engineering company, before deciding he was "out of date" with modern engineering practices. He decided to then go to law school, and graduated in 1969.

After completing law school, Williams served as a public defender in Madison County. Besides the juvenile cases, he also was the defender for 2,600 felony cases. Only one of which went to trial. Either a plea bargain was entered or the case was dismissed, Williams said.

Plea bargains, however, are something Williams said he would work to abolish in the cases of violent crimes, if he is elected to the position of state's attorney, he said.

"The vast majority of all felony cases in Madison County end up on probation or a lesser charge," Williams said. "The deal always should be, if you go on trial for burglary, you shouldn't be able to take a plea bargain for retail theft. That does nothing to deter crime."

Violent crime is an issue to both Williams and Gibbons. Williams said Madison County has not enjoyed the current national trend of violent crimes being on the decrease. He said Madison County is experiencing a large amount of violent crimes, and blames lesser charges and plea bargains for that problem.

To address violent crimes during his time in office, Gibbons has created a violent crimes unit with a team of top trial attorneys handling the most serious cases of violent crimes. He said the prosecution of these crimes is coordinated to cope with the large number of trials in his office.

One item during his tenure, which Gibbons said was "really unexpected" was the rise of opiate painkiller overdoses and heroin in Madison County.

"It came out of left field and occupied my time," he said. "We're working with treatment providers, law enforcement and families affected by the addictions."

Gibbons said his main focuses to alleviate the heroin epidemic are impacting treatment and prevention. During his time as Madison County State's Attorney, Gibbons has spoken to more than 25,000 students in high schools and middle schools across the county to warn them about the realistic dangers of the drug. He is joined by **Madison County Coroner Steve Nonn**, among others.

Williams said he would combat the heroin epidemic by using some of the county's surplus to develop an in-patient treatment center to deal with addicts.

"If **Kurt Prenzler** is the new **Madison County Board Chairman**, which I believe he will be, and I happen to be elected as well, the two of us could lead the county into creating a long-term treatment center," he said. "Seventy-two hours of detox really doesn't work. Only four to six months of chemical-based treatment will really work."

The cost of his proposed treatment center would be as much as \$2.5 million a year, Williams said.

"I think it will be money well spent," he said. "It may not be able to serve everyone, but it could serve a lot of people."

Williams said he is not inclined to blame users or addicts for their problems, but would work to get the dealers off the streets. He said lesser charges and sentencing for these dealers is part of what allows them to return to the streets.

"If you believe a person committed a serious felony, you should prosecute him," Williams said.

If elected, Williams promises to cut the jail population by working through a backlog of cases and sending the convicted to prison. He said incidents such as the recent murder in the **Madison County Jail** by an inmate show the need to take people from the jail, which he described as a "holding warehouse," to prison where they can be rehabilitated and receive better food and services.

If reelected, Gibbons said he would like to work on prosecuting cases of the "rising problem" of financial exploitation of senior citizens.

"At this point, law enforcement is in need of additional resources and energy given to that," he said. "It's going to be a challenging task, because like other crimes, it takes place out of sight and is not easy to discover. The people being exploited are often isolated."

A few programs have been discontinued in Madison County Gibbons would work on reviving if reelected. The **Metro East Automobile Theft Task Force** is one of them. That task force, which specializes in stolen automobiles, was disbanded more than a year ago. It was a group of officers from different departments around the Metro East collaborating.

Another former task force Gibbons wants to see returned is a public integrity investigation force. Gibbons said such a task force would target public officials abusing their powers and positions. He said the Illinois State Police formerly operated such a task force, but no longer does on a regular basis.

"Any time there is an allegation or concern a public official at any level is committing crimes in their office or duties, we need a fully-trained investigatory agency or group to find out if those are true or if they can be charged," Gibbons said. "If someone is a public servant, they should be held at a higher standard. It's difficult to investigate public corruption, because the resources are no longer there."