

## Texans flock to Georgia runoffs' fight

Cruz, Crenshaw, Castro, O'Rourke take sides in crucial Senate races

By **Jeremy Wallace**  
AUSTIN BUREAU

There are a whole lot of Texas politicians with Georgia on their minds lately.

With two critical races for the U.S. Senate on the ballot on Jan. 5 in the Peach State, some of the biggest names in Texas politics are making a beeline for it with hopes of influencing the outcome of those races – and maybe boost their own national profiles in the

process.

"In our lifetimes, I don't think there has been a Senate race as consequential as the Georgia Senate race on Jan. 5," said U.S. Sen. Ted Cruz, who is expected to be in the state next week to campaign for Republican Sens. Kelly Loeffler and David Perdue.

If Loeffler and Perdue win those seats, the U.S. Senate remains in Republican hands and Sen. Mitch McConnell remains the majority leader. But if Demo-

crats Raphael Warnock and John Ossoff win, Democrats will control the majority and U.S. Sen. Chuck Schumer of New York would likely become the majority leader, pushing Cruz and other Republicans into the minority.

Over the weekend, Houston Congressman Dan Crenshaw was on the ground campaigning for Perdue on a statewide bus tour, warning voters there that control of the national political agenda is in their hands.

"The only people standing between you and Chuck Schumer are Sen. Perdue and Sen. Loeffler," Crenshaw said from a stage

in Cartersville in northwest Georgia on Saturday, with Perdue by his side.

Perdue was the leading vote-getter in his Nov. 3 election; Loeffler trailed Warnock in her race. No one got 50 percent of the vote and Georgia election law requires a runoff in such cases.

Crenshaw, who won re-election on Nov. 3, said there are a lot of bad policies – including raising the minimum wage and granting amnesty to people who come to the country illegally – that passed the U.S. House, where Democrats are in the majority. But he said those bills almost all died because

the Republican majority in the Senate blocked them.

If Democrats win the majority in the Senate, that check on the Democratic agenda is gone, he said.

Later, Crenshaw was at President Donald Trump's rally with Loeffler in Valdosta, Ga. And Crenshaw said he'll be back in a couple of weeks for more in-person campaign events.

Texas Democrats are heading to Georgia, too. Former U.S. Housing Secretary Julián Castro arrived in Lilburn, Ga., on Monday for a swing through the state

*Georgia continues on A5*



Photos by Robin Jerstad / Contributor

People drive past the home of John and Brenda Wilson, which features more than 100,000 lights, during Windcrest's 62nd annual Light Up event. The Wilsons decorate for the smiles they see as people enjoy their display.

## Windcrest's decorations put holiday in the right light

Brilliant displays honor military, raise fire department funds

By **Liz Hardaway**  
STAFF WRITER

The tradition started with just a string of lights and a bow for the mailbox.

Now, 62 years later, scores of Windcrest homes string thousands of lights on their homes and lawns to show off their Christmas spirit.

The theme of this year's Windcrest Light Up is "Let Freedom Ring," with residents decorating their homes in honor of the military.

Not all of the 83 homes registered for the annual decorating contest are strictly focused on the military, though. The contest has several categories, including Charlie Browniest, which is the best decorations on an entrance, door or mailbox; Clark Griswold, or over-the-top lights; creative and elegant; nostalgic; religious; and which block worked together to have the most jolly lights. Businesses, churches and schools could also enter in



People drive past the home of John and Brenda Wilson. Huge displays are the norm.

their own separate categories. Plus, homes don't have to pay an entry fee to compete.

A map of the contest entries is available at Windcrest's City Hall building, which also houses its volunteer fire sta-

tion, 8601 Midcrown Drive, from 5 to 11 p.m. every night. Donations are optional.

The fire department uses these maps as a fundraiser, having raised \$52,000 last year, according to Liz Dick, a

city spokeswoman. The city orders 20,000 maps each year and usually runs out.

Usually a panel of judges goes around to each house to determine the winners, but

*Lights continues on A5*

## Officials: State law enforcement commission needs teeth

By **St. John Barned-Smith** and **Eric Dexheimer**

STAFF WRITERS

The Texas Commission on Law Enforcement, which oversees licensing of the state's 102,000 police officers and jailers, could be in for a major overhaul.

"This is the time to get it done," John Cyrier, R-Lockhart, chairman of the Sunset Advisory Commission, said at a combination in-person and virtual hearing Monday. The commission, charged with evaluating state agencies every decade or so, last month issued a blistering report on the law enforcement oversight commission, finding it lacked meaningful ability to oversee the state's law enforcement agencies and discipline bad cops.

It also concluded the state's educational requirements for police were outdated and insufficient. To qualify for a peace officer license, Texas cops need fewer hours of basic training than licensed cosmetologists and less than half the education required of air-conditioning and refrigeration contractors.

Testifying to the Sunset Commission – composed of five representatives, five senators and two public members – Kim Vickers, the law enforcement commission's executive director, agreed, saying the state's approach to regulating law enforcement has been ineffective. "I'll be frank," he said. "That's true. We've been saying that."

The heart of the Sunset Commission's critique was that although the law enforcement commission is supposed to be responsible for licensing police, it has little authority to discipline bad cops. Instead, each of the state's 2,800 local law enforcement agencies is responsible for enforcing its own standards, which can vary across departments, resulting in "inconsistently set and enforced local standards."

Unlike in the agencies that regulate other professions such as teachers and doctors, state law gives the law enforcement commission authority to revoke a police officer's license in only lim-

*Sunset continues on A5*

## Pandemic straining resources to assist sexual assault survivors

By **Hannah Dellinger**  
STAFF WRITER

Sexual assault survivors' needs are far from being fully met in Texas because of limited resources, according to a study released this month, and the pandemic has further strained the system.

In order to fully understand the needs of the 6.3 million Texans who have experienced sexual assault, the Institute on Domestic Violence & Sexual Assault at the University of Texas at Austin surveyed 342 service providers in the state. More funding and staffing are needed in order to provide critical services like therapy, prevention efforts and legal services to growing numbers of clients, re-

spondents overwhelmingly said.

"Service providers are crying out for more staff and more therapists," said Bruce Kellison, principal investigator and director of the Bureau of Business Research at UT Austin, who led the research on the report. "The lack of resources constricts their ability to meet the needs of survivors."

### Growing demand

The study, released Nov. 16, was made in partnership with Gov. Greg Abbott's Sexual Assault Survivors' Task Force, which was created with the bipartisan passage of House Bill 1590. The study will be used to inform and improve the state's response to the needs of survivors.

The survey responses showed that many providers – which include advocacy groups, Title IX college offices, law enforcement agencies and more – felt the baseline capacities of their programs were strained by growing demand well before COVID-19. As the pandemic continues, advocates say there will likely be more survivors who need help.

"The additional burden of a victim being stuck at home, in some cases with their abusers and the fear of isolation, is an important aspect of what we know is going on," Kellison said. "So many sexual assault cases happen in a home where family violence is an issue."

Providers said they believe the pandemic is also causing an in-

crease in the lethality and the intensity of abuse, said Melanie Susswein, director of communications for the institute and one of the study's researchers. A second phase of the study will include interviews with survivors and will shed more light on the impact of COVID.

The virus has halted most in-person services, the survey found, which have become virtual. That has posed another obstacle for advocates in reaching survivors.

"If you're stuck at home living with the person abusing you, your ability to get online is very limited," Kellison said.

Outreach and prevention efforts have been significantly im-

pacted across the state due to the pandemic, 45 percent of the providers said, because in-person events have been canceled. The providers have also been negatively financially impacted by the economic downturn and staff members are more stressed, the report says.

### Unmet needs

In the Gulf Coast region, which includes Harris County, the greatest unmet needs are in therapy, accompaniment for survivors to legal and medical appointments, as well as outreach and prevention, according to the respondents.

"Prevention is an ongoing chal-

*Survivors continues on A5*

## METRO

## LIGHTS

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because of the coronavirus pandemic, this year the winners will be chosen by the public, whether they are a Windcrest resident or not. The map will have a paper ballot that can be turned into City Hall or guests can vote online via a QR code on the map. Deadline to vote both online and via the paper ballot is 5 p.m. Dec. 18.

Typically, the first night of Windcrest Light Up is a major community event, drawing hundreds of people who come to watch Santa arrive in a fire truck and flip the switch to turn on the lights of Windcrest's official Christmas tree at City Hall.

Last year, there were vendor booths, while children swarmed Santa for photos, and hot cocoa and cookies were served before participants started exploring the 98 contest entries.

This year, though, those who came stayed in their vehicles for the tree lighting – Santa did arrive in a Windcrest fire truck as usual, but he stayed on the truck and lit the tree's lights by remote – and there were no vendors or any treats. The drivers waved goodbye to Santa and then headed to the streets, cruising slowly up and down to view the lights. Bumper-to-bumper traffic dominated most of the streets.

One of the brightest homes belonged to John and Brenda Wilson, who have been putting up this year's display at their home on Waycrest Drive since



Robin Jerstad

**John and Brenda Wilson started months ago to place the lights and decorations in their yard for Windcrest's annual Light Up event.**

September.

John Wilson, who is a carpenter by day, used more than 100,000 LED lights to illuminate their home, including the hand-made, wooden sleigh and train displayed on his lawn. And the Wilsons aren't done with their display yet;

they've added a patio where they plan to install "Santa's Diner."

The couple participates in the festivities every year, sometimes starting as early as June, but decided not to compete this year as they have won the grand prize a few times and have a "wall

full of plaques."

But they don't do it for the prizes, they said. They do it for the smiles they see on the passers-by as kids and adults alike stare in awe at their brilliant light display that surely is visible from the space station.

Surprisingly, the couple's light bill doesn't go up too much, according to John Wilson. He said having LED lights helps, but he also has a bill plan that averages throughout the year.

Neighbors throughout Windcrest have put their own creative spin on decorating for the holidays.

Drivers can pass by a home with hundreds of snowmen on the 8600 block of Windway Drive, and a few houses have lights synced up to personal radio frequencies. Fans of Whataburger can see a large burger and fries along the 600 block of Balfour

Drive. There's a soldier saluting passers-by from the roof of a home on the 700 block of Moorside Drive. "Star Wars" fans can see Baby Yoda in a manger in the 600 block of Candlelego Drive.

"It's for the kids," Patty Morrison said. Her husband, David Morrison, puts out the decorations each year, dangling lights from a sprawling oak tree in their front yard in the 600 block of Fenwick Drive.

He takes off the week of Thanksgiving just to set up the lights at their home, which this year also included some green stars on the lawn twinkling in rhythm to Christmas music.

With the coronavirus affecting so many people, the lights "mean a lot more this year," said Cpl. Mercedes Underwood of the Windcrest Police Department, inspiring "hope and happiness" for the season.

## SURVIVORS

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lence," Kellison said. "It can consist of going to community groups, schools, making public affairs announcements, or billboards advertising services. [Advocacy groups in Houston] do a large amount of that, but they are telling us that they could do more."

The regions with the most overall unmet needs are Upper East and Southeast Texas, Susswein said.

The biggest unmet need across the state is sexual assault therapy and counseling options, according to the report. Nine out of 11 regions in the state reported not being able to fulfill all therapy requests. Therapists' caseloads are maxed out and there are long wait lists for new clients, the researchers found. More funding and access to therapists with specialized training in childhood trauma is a particularly high need.

Resources for outreach and prevention efforts, such as early education and awareness-raising efforts, were lacking, according to 42 percent of the partici-

**"(Sex assault victims) service providers are crying out for more staff and more therapists."**

*Bruce Kellison, principal investigator and director of the Bureau of Business Research*

pants in the study.

The need for legal services, especially in high-conflict custody cases, is not being met, 45 percent of the respondents said.

Emergency shelter and transitional housing options are limited, according to the report. There is a need for more shelter space and more services for human trafficking and non-intimate partner sexual assault survivors. Because the wait for transitional housing is long, some survivors have to stay in shelters longer than is ideal.

Survivors also need direct financial support, Kellison said, because they cannot heal if their basic needs are not being met.

Lack of transportation options is another obstacle for survivors, the report says, especially in rural areas where travel time for a forensic exam or counseling can exceed an hour.

## Innovating response

Although stretched thin, providers have found a way to help every survivor who reaches out. By referring unmet service requests to a network of other agencies that offer the same services, providers have been able to disperse the growing need in Texas, said Kellison.

"When survivors across the state seek help, they're going to get it," he said.

Of the providers surveyed, 550 said they had made a total of 840 separate referrals for clients when resources were limited, according to the study. Of those referrals, 44 percent were made for the victim to organizations that provide services specifically for sexual assault survivors, 8 percent were made to state agencies or programs, and 10 percent to local community centers. The rest were made to food banks, health clinics, religious charities, housing authorities and homeless services.

The recommendation of the report is for policy makers to create an equitable model of resource allocation areas that have the most unmet needs.

"There is a finite pool resources," Kellison said. "Policymakers have to look at data and come to an understanding of how to divide up limited resources to meet the needs of the most people in the state."

*hannah.dellinger@chron.com*  
Twitter: @hdellingermedia

## SUNSET

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ited circumstances: if the officer falls behind on mandated continuing education, if he or she receives two dishonorable discharges, or when an officer is convicted of felony or serious misdemeanor crimes.

As a result, the Sunset Commission concluded, Texas' regulation of police was "toothless."

For example, its examination of the licensing agency found that of 600 officers who had received "dishonorable" discharges, more than a quarter had been rehired.

Monday's hearing was the first step in implementing or adjusting the commission's conclusions and recommendations. Public comments will be heard during the upcoming legislative session, scheduled to begin Jan. 12.

The report recommended allowing the law enforcement commission to continue operations for another two years while setting up a blue ribbon commission to overhaul the agency and recommend changes to improve law enforcement regulation in Texas.

At Monday's hearing – which only included invited testimony – Vickers said his main concern with the Sunset Commission's staff report was over its recommendation to create a blue-ribbon committee to further study the matter, which he said might delay needed changes, as well as tasking the agency's small staff with additional responsibilities.

"I see a tremendous amount of momentum in police reform right now – needed police reform in many areas," he said. "And I hate to see anything that slows that momentum down or derails that in any way."

Vickers said that his staff had already begun working on some of the Sunset staff's recommendations, including their suggestion of a statewide standard of conduct.

"We see that down the road, that is something that is critical and will be needed and we're already preparing on that," he said.

## GEORGIA

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advocating for Warnock and Ossoff. He's also recorded ads for the candidates, and has donated to their campaigns through a political action committee he runs.

"This is too important in Georgia for people to sit on the sidelines," the former San Antonio mayor said in an interview on CNN explaining his trip.

Former El Paso Congressman Beto O'Rourke is also involved in the races, prodding his supporters to send donations to Georgia.

"Georgia needs our help," the fundraising e-mail from O'Rourke said. "Amy and I donated to both the Jon Ossoff and Raphael Warnock campaigns this week. They are our best chances at winning a Democratic majority in the U.S. Senate, which, among other things, will determine how effective a Biden administration can be."

While there are big stakes in who controls the U.S. Senate, there is also the benefit of more national media exposure for Texas politicians to be campaigning in Georgia right now, said Ford O'Connell, a

**"This is too important in Georgia for people to sit on the sidelines."**

*Julián Castro, former HUD secretary and ex-San Antonio mayor*

But O'Rourke is also being dragged into the race by others. During his speech in Valdosta on Saturday night, Trump was touting Loeffler's accomplishments when he suddenly veered into talking about O'Rourke.

"Remember Beto?" he asked the crowd as he reminisced about O'Rourke's position on guns and the time he was in the cover of Vanity Fair.

Trump finished his minute long riff by calling O'Rourke a "stone cold loser" before returning to tout Loeffler's achievements.

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veteran Republican strategist.

"(You) can't miss out in an all-hands-on-deck moment," O'Connell said.

He said Georgia is home to Fort Benning and other military installations that might respond to Crenshaw, a retired Navy SEAL who has a big following among military voters.

Crenshaw also said he is preparing to release another movie-trailer like campaign ad to help Perdue and Loeffler in their campaigns. His first ad, "Texas Reloaded" was a mix of Mission Impossible meets the Avengers, with Crenshaw acting as the leader of a group recruiting Republicans to run for office. The ad helped direct campaign donations to Republicans including Tony Gonzales, a San Antonio Republican

who won his election, and Wesley Hunt, a Houston Republican who lost his race.

Texas Gov. Greg Abbott is not in Georgia, but he too has been rallying support for the Republican candidates out there. Over the weekend, he tweeted out an ominous warning to Georgia voters.

"Georgia Republicans, if you don't vote in the upcoming election for the United States Senate, then Nancy Pelosi and Chuck Schumer will be running the United States," he tweeted.

Republican Party of Texas chairman Allen West is also heading for Georgia, his birth state. West said he'll be in western Georgia next Wednesday at a rally for the Republican candidates. He recounted how some of the defenders at the Alamo in 1836 were from Georgia.

"Georgians once deployed to Texas to fight. Now, we as Texas must deploy to Georgia for the same," West said.