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Knocking on doors in the tony Highland Park neighborhood on a recent afternoon, Arlington County's top prosecutor told voters that she was there to reassure them the system is working despite what they may have heard in political ads and fliers.

"Arlington is not a criminal justice backwater," Arlington County Commonwealth's Attorney Theo Stamos told one resident.

Whether voters agree may determine whether Stamos, who had already been a prosecutor in Arlington for a quarter-century when she first won election seven years ago, loses her position in Tuesday's Democratic primary to Parisa Dehghani-Tafti, an attorney who has focused on exonerations and has never prosecuted a case.

The divide is one that has become increasingly central to Democratic politics: whether the criminal justice system needs sweeping change.

Democratic financier George Soros has come down hard against Stamos, donating more than \$583,000 through a political action committee to support Dehghani-Tafti's campaign.

Stamos sees that influx of outside money as evidence that this national movement has no place in Arlington.

Violent crime in Arlington is low, and satisfaction with police is high. There were 366 people in the county jail last month, which Stamos notes is the lowest in five years. And no conviction has been overturned as erroneous on her watch. She started a drug court and supported a "Second Chance" program for young offenders. She's launching a mental-health docket and engages with a reentry program for -ex-offenders. Detention of juveniles is declining, as it is across the state.

"We can always do better," Stamos said in an interview. "But . . . my opponent is using a national discussion and is trying to infuse those issues here into Arlington — the issue of mass incarceration, the school-to-prison pipeline."

Dehghani-Tafti counters that those issues are as salient in Arlington as anywhere and that even when convictions do not result in long sentences, any involvement with the criminal justice system can be harmful. She says she would work on minimizing such contacts by no longer seeking cash bail or taking on low-level marijuana offenses while building up diversion programs and other alternatives to traditional prosecution.

"She's done nothing but work in this jurisdiction," Dehghani-Tafti said of Stamos. "That makes your vision limited, and your ability to look at the system that you spent 30 years building is going to be, even with a critical eye, really difficult."

Stamos has balked at some proposed changes. While she supports decriminalization of marijuana, she said she will continue to prosecute possession cases as long as the law is on the books. She would support upping the amount of money that makes theft a felony — currently \$500 in Virginia — but applies the law as is except for first offenders. And she believes cash bail is a useful tool.

"If you want to change laws then what you need to do is run for the General Assembly and use that pulpit," Stamos said. "The job is a trial job."

Her opponent's career at the Mid-Atlantic Innocence Project and before that in the D.C. public defender's office has been focused on appeals and parole, an experience Stamos contrasts with her own in mailings and debates.

Del. Patrick A. Hope (D-Arlington), who supports Stamos, agreed that prosecutors cannot pick and choose what crimes to enforce. "I don't view when I pass a law that it's just a recommendation, like a menu at a restaurant you can pick off of," he said.

Judges set bail, Stamos notes, and have overruled prosecutors who committed to dismissing marijuana cases.

Critics say that even within the current law, Stamos could exercise more discretion but instead overcharges to force punitive plea deals. More than a hundred lawyers signed a critical open letter noting that nearly 98 percent of felony convictions in Arlington come from pleas, higher than in neighboring jurisdictions.

"The number of charges that are brought is insane," said Patrick Anderson, a longtime defense lawyer in the area.

Stamos said people plead guilty because the cases are strong.

Dehghani-Tafti has criticized Stamos's office for prosecuting teenagers for minor offenses, including a 14-year-old who tried to open the door of a locked trailer during a county fair and was charged with breaking and entering. He was acquitted by a jury.

Stamos says her office must consider victims — including the owner of that trailer, a Florida woman who was living there during the fair. "She felt violated by the fact that someone was trying to get into her home," Stamos said.

Jeffrey Edmeades says he is supporting Dehghani-Tafti after his 13-year-old son, who has ADHD, was prosecuted for holding on to sexual images sent to him by a girl his age. The plea deal he took to avoid felony child pornography charges means the case will be dismissed after a year of supervised probation, but he cannot seek to have his record expunged.

"The entire process was excessively punitive," Edmeades said.

Dehghani-Tafti has highlighted these cases in her campaign, which includes television and Facebook ads and a dozen mailers. But she has also stumbled in turning complicated incidents into talking points.

In one mailer, when claiming Stamos had "refused to prosecute officers in cases of brutality," she cited a 2015 incident in which an officer fatally shot a mentally ill man swinging a metal bar. The officer needed stitches and had tried first to subdue the man by other means.

It was the first time since 2006 that an Arlington officer had fired a weapon in the line of duty, Stamos noted. When she pressed Dehghani-Tafti to clarify her accusation at a debate, her opponent said that her point was that all police use of force that ends in serious injury or death should be independently investigated. She did not cite cases where she thinks officers should have been charged.

"I'm not saying there is or there isn't" a police brutality problem, Dehghani-Tafti said in an interview. "What I'm saying is that we need a transparent and independent mechanism to determine that."

She has not committed to a model for dealing with police use-of-force. Union representatives say that when they met with her, she was not well-versed in Supreme Court decisions guiding police conduct.

"She is not being truthful in her mailers," said Matt Martin, former president of the Arlington Police Beneficiary Association. "That is concerning" — especially, he said, if she's "playing fast and loose" with an issue as delicate as a police shooting.

The same mailer tied the brutality issue to Stamos "taking thousands of dollars from law enforcement," although according to campaign finance reports, police unions have not put

money into her race. Neither have significant numbers of officers.

When she confronted Stamos in the same debate, Dehghani-Tafti accused the prosecutor of saying something insensitive about the mentally ill in court yet could not provide details.

While campaigning is new for Dehghani-Tafti, in court "she is a painstaking lawyer . . . really smart and strategic," said former Justice Department civil rights head Vanita Gupta. They worked together to get a Louisiana man on death row retried and released with a manslaughter conviction.

"We all saw in that case the incredible flaws in the criminal justice system," she added.

Defenders say Stamos is fair-minded and interested in rehabilitation — but not in bending over backward for people who commit crimes.

"She can be tough as nails, but she's got a great big heart. What she's not is an apologist," said Michael Herring, the chief prosecutor in Richmond, who acknowledges his own policies are more lenient on several fronts.

"We don't always come out on the same point," he said. "But I wouldn't seek out Theo's advice if I thought she was a knuckle-dragger."