



Mayoral Candidates Disability Questionnaire 2023 – Kam Buckner

Over the last several years, candidates running for office nationwide have learned that disability voters have an intense interest in a wide range of substantial issues. Furthermore, about one in six voters is a person with a disability according to the [American Association of People with Disabilities](#)---that’s 16.4% of the voting electorate nationwide.

In Chicago, there are over 300,000 people with disabilities, with countless friends and families who also consider themselves disability voters. The areas of the City with the highest numbers of people with disabilities are also areas that tend to be Black and brown neighborhoods with historic disinvestment or underinvestment.

Disability language: We strongly recommend that you be mindful regarding the terms you use about disability in your responses. The language that the disability community has used to describe ourselves has shifted over time. These days, we prefer either “person first” language or “identity first” language. This means we typically say “people with disabilities” or disabled people. These are also the terms used in civil rights law. The National Center on Disability and Journalism also offers a [disability language style guide at this link](#).

QUESTIONS

Disability Platform

Background: Disability voters often check to see whether candidates have a platform on disability issues, or if they frame their issues with a disabilities lens.

Does your campaign have a disabilities issues platform? Yes/No

BUCKNER: (Answer not provided)

If yes, where can people find it?

BUCKNER: I fundamentally believe that the issues facing people with disabilities need to be considered across all areas rather than in a silo. Though I have not released a standalone platform addressing people with disabilities, I have made commitments across many of my plans; key commitments include:

- Improving accessibility to the CTA through accessibility, ramps, and elevators in our train and bus stops in my [transportation plan](#).
- Investing in significant support resources for veterans in my [veterans plan](#).

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- Creating a 988 support line for individuals experiencing mental health crises, separate from lines connected to CPD, in my [mental health plan](#). I've also committed to piloting a program that would introduce mobile mental health units in the city, improving accessibility to mental health resources for everyone.
- Addressing inequities in CPS' Office of Diverse Learners in my [education plan](#). This includes fixing the issues with transportation of Special Education students to and from school.

While in Springfield I've been an avid supporter of bills that have sought to improve outcomes for people with disabilities, including (but not limited to):

- In 2019, the first bill I ever passed in the General Assembly [HB 3437](#) created the Developmental Disabilities Awareness Fund through license plate decals to fund legal aid groups to assist with guardianship fees for private citizens willing to become guardians for individuals with developmental disabilities but who are unable to pay the legal fees associated with becoming a guardian.
- I have been a champion for [CESSA](#) and have committed to establishing the 988 line in my mental health plan.
- Sponsored [HB 4437](#) to expand access to Medicaid to undocumented individuals ages 42+.
- Sponsored [SB 180](#) to establish an accessibility coordinator between state legislature and the public.
- Sponsored [SB 1975](#) to automatically renew the disability homeowner homestead exemption for qualified people with disabilities.
- Voted to support [SB 829](#) to set up the structure for a certified remote accessible vote-by-mail system statewide.
- Voted to support [HB 2775](#) to strengthen tenant rights and end source discrimination statewide.

If you had one big idea to make Chicago the most accessible city in the nation, what would that be?

BUCKNER: Change starts with understanding, and one of the root causes of Chicago's lack of accessibility is because decision makers aren't informed and culturally competent about the issues facing people with disabilities. In my administration, I would place issues that face people with disabilities at the forefront to ensure they are addressed in

all areas, whether it's public safety, education access, or environmental justice. As Mayor, I would also ensure that all city employees take mandatory annual accessibility training provided by people with disabilities.

I will also require that city projects include accessibility plans and that city departments are coordinating with each other to build a more accessible city, be it by making the CTA more accessible, building more accessible affordable housing, or reopening the city's shuttered mental health clinics.

The Disability Data Crisis

Background: Collecting data is important to understand community needs, and to secure government funds for underinvested communities. However, disability is often not included when city agencies collect demographic data. Lack of such data weakens the City's ability to measure and improve outcomes for Chicagoans with disabilities.

How will you work to ensure that city agencies collect accurate demographic data on disability?

BUCKNER: As Mayor, I would require all city forms that collect demographic data to include a section on disability status asking the [six demographic questions](#) the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services established. It's important that the decisions my administration makes are backed by the right data; ensuring we have up-to-date and accurate demographic information on people with disabilities will allow us to make better decisions to better service the community.

City Community Support Services

Background: The City of Chicago operates a wide range of social services used by people with disabilities and seniors. City services can be particularly important for disabled people who are either undocumented or homeless, but depending on the availability of the services, people may or may not have their needs met.

The Mayor's Office on People with Disabilities (MOPD) currently provides six hours of home services a week to people with disabilities. For many people with disabilities, six hours does not provide the level of support that would keep them out of nursing homes. Would you support an increase in the maximum number of hours people can receive from MOPD's Program? Yes/No

BUCKNER: Yes.

In what ways would you expand city community support programs to improve the lives of disabled Chicagoans?

BUCKNER: I'm committed to building a Chicago that works for everyone – that includes building better community programs that are informed by those who are most

impacted. First and foremost, I would listen to the community leaders who have been doing this work to understand the core needs of people with disabilities. That will allow my administration to focus our efforts on the right programs to make the most impact.

I would ensure that the eligibility requirements for programs that service people with disabilities are fair and inclusive, and I would look to state and federal resources to fund additional hours of support.

The ultimate goal always has to be increasing independence for people who require these services, so I would work to also expand not just the maximum hours, but the range of services including Electronic Home Response and home modifications.

Economic Justice

1. Banking

Background: Thousands of Chicagoans with disabilities live with both chronic economic insecurity and what we call the “disability tax”, the extra expenses that come along with living with a disability. Disability tax expenses can include paying for meds, equipment, supports, or extra fees beyond what insurance may cover. This situation is exacerbated for Black disabled Chicagoans by our historic legacy of land grabs, redlining, and other tactics used to rob Black Chicagoans of money and property---a situation that has given rise to calls citywide for reparations. Finally, for Chicago’s immigrants with disabilities, immigration status can have a deeply negative impact on their ability to earn and acquire assets/savings.

In what ways will you lead the City to develop or expand initiatives that remove barriers to accessing traditional banks and the services they offer? An example of one such barrier is the debt-to-income ratio currently used by banks to approve loans, which is deeply problematic for many low-income, disabled Chicagoans.

BUCKNER: People with disabilities experience greater challenges accessing banks and credit unions both in person and online. People with disabilities may also have mobility limitations, which can be worsened when someone doesn’t have a car or reliable public transportation. What’s more, low-income individuals are more than twice as likely to live in a banking desert where there is no physical bank branch close to them. Combine that with potential mobility limitations, and many are left with no options.

I've publicly talked about wanting to explore how a public bank can work for Chicago and address some of the lending inequities in the system. As Mayor, I would look to address this issue by exploring ways to create a system that includes a public bank that is built with all these things in mind; traditional banks who do business in Chicago could then work with a public bank to make these changes happen across the city.

2. Employment

Background: People with disabilities face multiple barriers to work, including discrimination based on disability within the hiring practices and accommodation requests on the job.

What strategies would you use to hold Chicago employers accountable for hiring and effectively managing employees with disabilities?

BUCKNER: I would make sure MOPD has easy-to-find legal resources for people with disabilities facing discrimination in the workplace.

MOPD will also investigate businesses throughout the entire employment process including: posting, application, interview, selection, hiring and processes and accommodations for employees. Additionally, I would work with City Council and the Business Affairs and Consumer Protection Agency to determine how to fine and ultimately deny business licenses for repeat offenders.

3. Cash Assistance Pilot Program

Background: The City of Chicago's cash assistance pilot program benefitted over 400 disabled Chicagoans who rely on SSI. The Social Security Administration allowed SSI recipients to benefit from the pilot without damage to their existing benefits, because the cash assistance pilot program was based on COVID recovery dollars.

Would you support making the cash assistance pilot program permanent? Yes/No

BUCKNER: Yes.

How would you urge the federal Social Security Administration to allow cash assistance flexibility on a permanent basis?

BUCKNER: I would work with our federal delegation to exempt people with disabilities from being penalized for receiving cash assistance on the basis that it is more expensive to be a disabled person in America than a person without disabilities. Because the City was granted this exemption in the first place, now there is a precedent. Furthermore, SSI income and asset limits have remained the same for decades, which only allows meager earnings and other benefits and keeps many people with disabilities from qualifying in the first place. Much of this can be addressed if Congress passes the Social Security Restoration Act.

Education

Background: Less than 40% of Chicago Public Schools are fully accessible for students, staff, and parents with disabilities. Furthermore, more than 40,000 CPS students have disabilities, and over half come from families whose first language is not English. Students with disabilities, particularly Black disabled students, are also more likely to enter the school-to-prison pipeline. The graduation rate of students with disabilities is 13% less than the general population.

As Mayor, will you commit to working closely with Chicago Public Schools leadership to develop and fund a robust ADA accessibility plan to make every school accessible? Yes/No

BUCKNER: Yes.

In what ways would you work with CPS to improve educational outcomes for students with disabilities?

BUCKNER: My mom was a Special Education teacher at CPS, and before she started with CPS she spent her first years in education at Esperanza Therapeutic Day School - a school that provides support to special education students age 5 through 21, through her I gained insight into the challenges facing disabled students in Chicago.

First and foremost, every CPS school must be fully accessible, and as Mayor I would require a plan to make every school accessible within 5 years.

I would also work feverishly to fix the broken system that has resulted in many special education students having to endure 2 hour bus rides just to get to school.

Additionally, the city has long left young people out when designing mental health resources. As Mayor, I would partner with CPS to create dedicated youth mental health services. Existing clinics are designed to support adults aged 18+, and the young people in our city have unique resource needs that need to be addressed. That includes crisis response in schools and outside, and a concrete path to resolve issues of abuse identified in both environments.

How would you work with City departments and related agencies to reduce the number of students with disabilities who become involved with the criminal justice system?

BUCKNER: Keeping any student out of the criminal legal system is a matter of giving them other, better options. This means making school a safe place that offers opportunities for students to grow and feel invested in their own education.

As part of my [Safer 77 plan](#), I commit to creating the first Youth Engagement Superintendent to partner with Chicago Public Schools to reduce the number of young people who become involved with the legal system. The Superintendent will be specifically in charge of developing plans that address the needs of students with disabilities.

What are your plans to improve the CPS bussing situation that has left too many students with disabilities without transportation to school?

BUCKNER: It is absurd that as the third largest city in the country, we are not making sure that every student has access to free, safe and timely transportation to school,

especially when we're spending nearly \$30 million a year contracting with school bus companies. As Mayor, I would end the practice of offering parents vouchers to find their kids alternate ways to get to school and I would overhaul CPS' bus program so that routes are shorter and all students, including students with disabilities, are able to take a bus to school.

As Mayor, I would make sure that CPS is fully compliant with the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, ISBE's rules and section 504 Rehabilitation Act of 1973. We know that the length of a student's ride to and from school can negatively impact them. We will establish and adhere to maximum travel times as well.

Emergency Response/Public Safety

1. Mental/Behavioral Health Emergencies and 911 vs 988

Background: Communities across Chicago have called for mobile mental health crisis units that do not involve law enforcement. The Chicago Department of Public Health has begun rolling out some pilots to test this kind of program. Access Living also passed a new statewide law, the Community Emergency Services and Supports Act (CESSA), to ensure that 911 can begin dispatching mobile crisis units that do not involve police.

Would you support the State requirement that calls for mental health support are transferred from 911 to 988? Yes/No

BUCKNER: Yes.

More generally, what is your view on the position that police involvement is not appropriate for the majority of emergency calls related to mental or behavioral health crises?

BUCKNER: In my Mental Health policy plan I commit to instituting a mental health responder model through the dedicated mental health response line (988), separate from lines that are connected to CPD. There are instances where a co-responder model is still too policed; this dedicated line will create a support unit that brings in mental health professionals to respond to mental health crises. The line and the infrastructure are already in place, but the current administration has yet to set up the system for the city of Chicago.

I think about the case of Quintonio LeGreer, a young man on Chicago's west side who called the police on himself in the midst of a mental health episode and who ultimately ended up shot dead by the responding officers; his next door neighbor who was watching TV in her home was also killed, struck by a stray bullet. He needed 988, not 911.

I fought hard for this in Springfield and am truly disappointed that Chicago is not using it.

2. Appropriate Accommodations during Arrests or Detainments

Background: People with disabilities have a higher likelihood of interaction with law enforcement. When law enforcement is neither trained nor provided with structural support for such interactions, the consequences can be costly and/or deadly. When a person with a disability is arrested, the precinct is the first opportunity to address any disability needs.

Currently there is need to improve the process and capacity for local police districts to assess and provide necessary accommodations for people with disabilities following an arrest. How will you work with the Chicago Police Department and other appropriate agencies to solve this problem?

BUCKNER: I would require CPD Districts to go through a disability assessment as part of their booking procedures and also mandate specific annual training on how to appropriately assess and interact with people with disabilities. There will be increased training in this space for CPD Academy recruits as well.

Healthcare

Background: The Covid-19 pandemic hit people with disabilities and seniors especially hard. Thousands of those who survive Covid-19 face the prospect of living with long Covid, which can create barriers to basic life activities; in other words, disability.

In what ways will you create City support and programs for people with long COVID?

BUCKNER: The advent of long Covid means more people will be living with disabilities, which calls for a recommitment to making Chicago the most accessible city in the nation through all the the strategies laid out in this questionnaire. Because long Covid is still being researched, any programs need to be flexible, adaptable, and inclusive; as we learn more about the impacts of long Covid and the needs of those impacted, we will continue to build programs to support.

Cities like New York have trained and hired Long Covid specialists to help their residents come up with a treatment plan. We will do the same.

Housing

1. Affordable, Accessible Housing in Chicago

Background: Help to get affordable, accessible housing is the top request we receive every week at Access Living, but citywide, there is a dire shortage of such available units, especially units that will accept housing vouchers. Many people with disabilities are also parents; many may be homeless. Lack of accessible housing, shelters and support services exacerbates a crisis that has been ongoing for decades.

How will you lead the Department of Housing, in coordination with the Chicago Housing Authority, to create greater access to housing vouchers and more affordable, accessible housing units, especially in new housing developments?

BUCKNER: As Mayor, I will work with City Council to pass a city ordinance that requires that all new affordable housing units in the city are built to be accessible. I will further direct CHA to gather data on how many units of affordable accessible housing are currently in demand so that we can make a plan to meet the need.

I would establish a cabinet level position with staff that is focused 100% on Affordable Housing production. This person's #1 priority would involve coordinating across departments to clear obstacles in City Hall, engaging the housing producer community, and identifying and bringing forward policy recommendations that can improve affordable housing production. My administration would establish a clear mandate to create affordable housing and to produce naturally occurring affordable housing especially. Lots of this would fall on the Department of Housing, but it is not just a housing issue. It involves zoning, planning, transportation, schools, and more. I would seek to expand housing access across Chicago by allowing ADUs in attics, basements, and accessory buildings. I would also look into changing the single family housing zoning designation that has perpetuated segregation and stopped affordable housing in many communities.

How will you work to ensure that the Affordable Rental Housing Program and the Shelter Program are accessible to people with disabilities?

BUCKNER: The Affordable Rental Housing Program should include information on accessibility on the website, and the City must source more affordable units to be in the database.

Additionally, every homeless shelter in Chicago must be made accessible, and I pledge to do so as Mayor. It is unacceptable for anyone to be turned away from a shelter simply because they have a disability.

In what ways do you envision creating more support for ending homelessness, specifically for disabled people?

BUCKNER: Unlike the current administration, I support the Bring Chicago Home initiative, which would allocate all revenue from the Real Estate Transfer Tax (~ \$150 million annually) to ending homelessness. If the City's RETT dedicated funds to affordable housing, like the State does, programs like permanent supportive housing, transitional shelters, rental assistance, new builds, and expanding the Troubled Building Initiative and Flexible Housing Pool could help us end chronic homelessness and housing

insecurity. An important piece of that work would be having dedicated services and staff to reach out to and assist disabled people experiencing homelessness.

Immigration

Background: Since September, Chicago has received asylees who were bussed or flown here as a political stunt. At least some of these asylees have been identified as having disabilities.

How will you ensure that immigrants with disabilities in Chicago – including mental health disabilities – are welcomed with the proper community supports, medical equipment and medical treatments that they require?

BUCKNER: First and foremost, it is critical that the City welcomes asylees with staff that speak their native language and with intake forms that ask about disability status, making it clear that that status will not prevent asylees from getting services. It is also important that the asylees know their rights. From there, staff should be trained to transfer asylees to the appropriate city and state services.

Transportation and Infrastructure

Background: Data shows us that both people with disabilities and women who are heads of households tend to be most concentrated on the South and West Sides, and both groups rely on community amenities and services being close by. Chicago has been a national leader in planning to make its public transportation system 100% accessible through the All Stations Accessibility Plan (ASAP). However, much work remains to make all stations accessible, and to ensure that existing accessibility features such as elevators and escalators remain in a state of good repair.

Sidewalk and curb cut snow clearance is one of the top accessibility and quality of life issues for disabled Chicagoans in the winter. Will you support the municipal Plow the Sidewalks initiative? Yes/No

BUCKNER: Yes.

As Mayor, would you commit to making our CTA rail system 100% accessible (beyond the Americans with Disabilities Act) and fight for necessary investments to improve and maintain accessibility? Yes/No

BUCKNER: Yes.

In what further ways would you work to improve accessibility of transportation for the South and West Sides, which are the neighborhoods with the highest concentrations of disabled people?

BUCKNER: Public transportation is incredibly important to me – it's what connects our 77 communities safely and affordably and brings us all together. Making public transportation more accessible, affordable, and reliable is a cornerstone of my vision for

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Chicago. We need to expand access to CTA services both by making the CTA more reliable and ending the ghost train/ghost bus problem, but we also need to expand service areas by continuing the red line expansion bringing transportation options to transit deserts, particularly on the South and West sides.

People with disabilities live in every neighborhood of Chicago, which means that all 77 neighborhoods must have reliable, accessible transportation. We will coordinate with Metra to integrate systems that already exist and make bus and train stops and stations accessible; this includes accessibility through technology and the actual infrastructure (like crosswalks) and equipment. Many of these commitments are also specifically outlined in my [Public Transportation Plan](#).