



Mayoral Disability Questionnaire 2023 – Chuy Garcia

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

GARCIA: Not yet, but we intend to soon. I have been a lifelong ally for people living with disabilities at every level of government and am committed to making Chicago the most accessible city it can be.

If yes, where can the public find it?

GARCIA: N/A

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

GARCIA: One central idea to make Chicago the most accessible city in the nation is to ensure our public spaces such as public transit, housing, government buildings, parks, hospitals, and schools are completely accessible for people with disabilities, including physical, audio and

visual capacities. We must ensure our city is in compliance with the American with Disabilities Act and advancing on ways to be inclusive and welcoming for people with disabilities.

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?

GARCIA: As Mayor, I will instruct agency heads and/or respective Inspector Generals to conduct a thorough review of demographic data collection within their agency's purview. Further I would seek to create an interagency task force to identify and provide recommendations on citywide or agency-specific policies that can expand equity and access for people living with disabilities.

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

GARCIA: I would consider it, and would seek to gather critical data from state, county, and other partner agencies to make the most appropriate recommendation for a city-specific policy. For instance, it's helpful to know how many individuals are currently in need and actually served by MOPD. In addition, is it useful to know the scalable capacity of the MOPD to expand service hours as well as any unanticipated challenges to expanding service hours?

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

GARCIA: First and foremost, as I have done my whole career, my administration's approach to addressing the needs of community groups, including people living with disabilities, would be to work alongside advocacy organizations and community leaders involved in the work. In the case of developing comprehensive plans and proposals to expand community support programs to improve the lives of disabled Chicagoans, I would convene and

establish a working group(s) to bring together agency leaders and advocacy organizations like Access Living to the table. In addition, I would conduct an audit of city services and programs to better understand the current gaps in access.

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.

GARCIA: Access to banking and credit has been a core focus of my work in the United States House of Representatives as a member of the House Financial Services Committee and will continue to be as Mayor of Chicago.

In Congress – I sponsored several bills to address systemic inequities that have harmed Black and Brown communities for decades. They include but are not limited to:

- HR 2324 Protections in Consumer Lending Act to require the collection of demographic data on applications for credit and credit transactions as well as enforcement by the Consumer Financial Protection Bureau on potential discriminatory practices revealed by said data.
- HR 5180 Protecting Consumers from Market Manipulation Act; HR 4813 Keep Big Tech Out of Finance Act; and HR 5912 Closing the ILC Loophole Act – all bills that would limit shadow banking practices that enable non-bank entities to skirt existing federal regulations pertaining to financial institutions designed to protect consumers
- HR 5974 the Veterans and Consumers Fair Credit Act which would extend the same lending rate cap in effect for military service members, veterans, and their families of 36% to all consumers – effectively curbing predatory pay-day lending schemes that prey on Black and Brown communities at consistently higher rates.

I also voted for and/or co-sponsored a number of provisions to make it easier for marginalized communities with traditionally high barriers to credit and banking services to

obtain credit, remove adverse credit notes on their records, and to avail themselves of resources to promote financial literacy and wealth building.

As Mayor – I would work to collaborate with local financial institutions as well as advocacy, grassroots-based community organizations to bring to bear resources such as financial literacy workshops to marginalized populations as well as encouraging regional financial institutions to ensure they are servicing populations with little to no access to credit.

I plan to use my experience and relationships at the federal level to apply influence on our federal delegation and the White House to continue advocating for the type of legislation I authored or supported.

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?

GARCIA: Identifying, exposing, and prosecuting employers who run afoul of federal, state, and local laws-prohibiting discrimination based on disabilities is critical.

I would explore avenues with appropriate agencies to set up tip-lines or widely accessible means by which employees of public or private entities can report potential discriminatory hiring practices they were the subject of or witness to.

I would also work to ensure corporate education was a component of my platform to address inequities faced by people with disabilities. In that vein, I would work with advocacy orgs locally and nationally, like Access Living to provide seminars or workshops for potential employers and/ or employees to help businesses of all sizes understand best practices, their rights as employees to reasonable accommodations, and requirements that employing entities have in terms of fair hiring practices and accommodations related to people with disabilities.

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

GARCIA: Before committing – I again would want to operate and make decisions based on data. If it was possible to extend or make the program permanent via alternative, sustainable funding sources I would strongly consider it – but I would address the cash assistance program holistically to ensure that all populations that previously benefited from the program would have equal opportunity to participate if the program was in fact

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extended or made permanent, beyond the availability of Covid recovery funds. COVID relief / recovery funds will end in 2024 and it is critical our city identifies new funding sources to meet needs.

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

GARCIA: I would leverage my existing relationships in Congress, the House Financial Services Committee and Senate Banking Committee, and the White House/Administration to state the case and provide testimony about the importance of and benefit of flexibility in the cash assistance program on a permanent basis. Moreover, it's important to consider the aftermath of COVID on people, there are countless individuals struggling with long-haul COVID effects and ineligible for disability assistance programs. Our city must lead the nation by accurately categorizing the effects of COVID for individuals no longer able to provide for themselves or their families.

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

GARCIA: Yes, I do commit to working with CPS leadership to develop and fund a robust ADA accessibility plan. It's unacceptable that our students, teachers, and public school personnel have to work in a public space that does not meet the needs of people with disabilities.

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

GARCIA: In addition to conducting an audit of building access, it's important to also explore how CPS' administrative and curricular policies and practices present barriers for students, teachers, and personnel. Our public schools must be in compliance of IDEA and ADA while reviewing any exclusionary practices that may intentionally or unintentionally create disparate and unequal treatment. CPS must educate students with disabilities in the least restrictive environment, as required by law, and also provide teachers and personnel with the support, professional development, and tools to meet this expectation. Moreover, I plan to work with CPS and education stakeholders to create a "Grow Your Own," pipeline to recruit and retain educators and paraprofessionals that are trained to effectively work with and support students with disabilities.

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?

GARCIA: In order to reduce the number of students that are pushed into the school-to-prison pipeline, we must start by reviewing our CPS policies and practices as it relates to academic tracking and discipline. Oftentimes, students are inaccurately categorized or labeled with a behavioral diagnosis without the accurate evaluation from a professional. In turn, this sets students on a life-long path of barriers and missed opportunities due to a misclassification. To prevent this, it's imperative schools have interdisciplinary committees and staff overseeing a student's classification. If qualified experts are not available on-site that can provide a thorough evaluation then families and students should have access or referrals to a trained professional. Moreover, once an evaluation is completed and in the case it is found additional support is needed, I would recommend school leadership work with health and development professionals to support a student's trajectory. Given the shortages of health and education professionals, I would also encourage CPS to work hand-in-hand with the Chicago Department of Public Health for more aligned processes and identification as well as cognitive, physical, and mental health support. In addition, the City

of Chicago can create partnerships across CPS, workforce agencies, and youth violence prevention groups to engage students early on.

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

GARCIA: As the highest-ranking member from Illinois on the Transportation and Infrastructure Committee, I've been a champion for equitable transit oriented development - including the launch of the Congressional Future of Transportation Caucus. I understand how critical it is to have equitable access to basic services like education, housing, healthcare, and jobs. That's why as Mayor I plan to improve the bussing situation by increasing the targeted recruitment and retention of bus drivers to ensure we address the workforce shortages. In addition, it is important to evaluate and adjust the bus routes to reduce the travel times for students - it is unacceptable that students with disabilities wait for over an hour before drop off. Overall, it will be key to work with bus drivers, workforce sectors, transit partners, school leadership, and parents to improve this situation.

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

GARCIA: Yes. I am a strong proponent for a robust mobile mental health crisis apparatus to serve as an important supplement to the Chicago Police Department. I believe it is critical to ensure our sworn officers are focused on the work they are trained to do, and that they should have the support from professional mental health crisis experts to respond to other situations that don't necessitate sworn officers. I understand the current program has not operated as expected, and plan to work with respective partners to improve its implementation.

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?

GARCIA: Chicagoans deserve to feel safe – but in many instances – the presence or response from armed, sworn officers is not necessarily necessitated and can instead be better addressed by professionals trained in mental or behavioral health crises. Given the significant force shortage we face in the CPD, and the added burden that that shortage places on existing force members, it is all the more critical that we explore beefing up our alternative response apparatus for mental health and behavioral health crisis calls so we can

better utilize our limited sworn officers for emergencies where they are best trained and equipped to respond.

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?

GARCIA: I have already called for new leadership within CPD. In addition to that call, I would convene an interagency working group, alongside relevant Inspectors General, to identify process and protocol gaps that contribute to people with disabilities not receiving the necessary accommodations they need and deserve in situations involving law enforcement. I would task those entities with providing recommendations to rectify or close those gaps and ensure my administration conducts a self-analysis on these matters on a regular basis. In addition, I plan to work with state, county, and city health departments and mental-health experts to ensure we have aligned resources, training, standards, and protocols.

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?

GARCIA: It's important to consider the aftermath of COVID on people, there are countless individuals struggling with long-haul COVID effects and ineligible for disability assistance programs. Our city must lead the nation by accurately categorizing the effects of COVID for individuals no longer able to provide for themselves or their families. We need to explore economic, health, and socio-emotional assistance for people with long-term COVID effects.

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?

GARCIA: This is a multi-part approach:

1. First it's a matter of identifying or mustering additional public or private/philanthropic support to expand the existing set of resources at the city's disposal to expand the number of recipients of vouchers or affordable housing units;
2. Second the City, alongside advocates and partners must ensure that these resources are made known to the widest array of eligible individuals as possible. This means going into hard to reach communities and allocating the necessary resources to ensure undocumented immigrants or individuals whose primary language is something other than english are also receiving outreach and educational campaigns to solicit applications.
3. Finally – I would charge the Department of Housing, Chicago Housing Authority, and other appropriate City Council committees to review possible ordinances/regulations to promote or require the construction or inclusion of affordable housing units in future construction or rehabilitation projects across the city.

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

GARCIA: People with disabilities already suffer from additional burdens we refer to as the disability tax. It is incumbent on public officials to ensure programs intended to support those with the greatest need do so – and that means ensuring programs like the Affordable Rental Housing Program and Shelter Program do just that.

As Mayor, I would instruct appropriate authorities to prioritize the accessibility of their existing programs for people with disabilities, including outreach efforts that partner with trusted community advocates like Access Living.

I would also task appropriate Inspectors General to conduct reviews of existing housing programs and their ability to equitably serve people with disabilities.

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

GARCIA: Homelessness remains a major issue for all people who suffer from housing insecurity. Though I would take special consideration to consider addressing homelessness for disabled people, I think that approach must be bold and holistic. In the same vein as a previous response, I think we should be working towards making Chicago a fully accessible city including for new construction and rehabilitation projects so that all new affordable housing opportunities are accessible. Everyone suffering from homelessness or housing insecurity are inherently in a tough life-situation and we should be working to address homelessness for all people, including those with disabilities.

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?

GARCIA: As an immigrant, I understand first-hand the additional barriers language and citizenship status has on accessing services and programs as well as treatment from others. As a City Councilmember, State Senator, Commissioner, and Congressman I have been a champion for immigrant rights and protections, and that certainly includes immigrants with disabilities. It is of utmost importance that all immigrants regardless of country of origin be treated with dignity and respect, including the right to access proper treatment, facilities, equipment, and resources. To improve our current processing of immigrants and their full integration in Chicago, it is important that we work with state, county, and local health agencies to provide access to quality health screenings and any needed treatments and services. During the intake process, it's also vital to provide referrals to trusted organizations, healthcare partners, and support networks that can help immigrants with disabilities thrive - -including housing accommodations. Overall, it is important we live up to our values and promises as a Welcoming City and activate our federal, state, and local partners to make this a reality.

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

GARCIA: 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

GARCIA: Yes. As Illinois' senior-most Democratic member of the U.S. House Committee on Transportation & Infrastructure, implementation of the CTA's All Stations Accessibility Program (ASAP) is top of mind. I was a co-author, alongside Senator Tammy Duckworth (D-IL) and Rep. Marie Newman (IL-03) of the ASAP Act and committed to working with the CTA, RTA, Pace and other regional transit entities to ensure that Chicago maintains a world-class, accessible transit system – including a CTA system that is 100% accessible.

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?

GARCIA: Inclusivity in the planning and outreach process is of utmost importance in improving accessibility in populations with the highest concentration of disabled people. I would seek to ensure any task force or interagency working groups focused on improving accessibility be cognizant and intentional about inclusivity of groups with the highest concentration of disabled people and those with the greatest barriers to accessibility - in this case, appropriate representation of people with disabilities from the South and West Sides.