



Mayoral Candidates Disability Questionnaire 2023 – Brandon Johnson

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

JOHNSON: Our platform is in development and we welcome Access Living's guidance and leadership on its content as part of the beginning of our co-governance relationship.

If yes, where can the public find it?

JOHNSON: N/A

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

JOHNSON: #PlowTheSidewalks to make snow and ice removal a municipal service.

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?

JOHNSON: I will actively recruit leaders from the disability justice community, including disabled people, to join my administration to ensure that the city's data collection and program administration is focused on equity and justice.

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

JOHNSON: Yes

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

JOHNSON: I believe that housing is a human right. Every person with a disability should be able to receive appropriate home and community-based services, and have the support to live the lives of their choosing in integrated community settings.

Expanding city community support programs means adequately funding them. It is absolutely unconscionable that \$280 million of CARES Act funding was spent on the Chicago Police Department while just \$2,000 (!) went to the Office for People with Disabilities. To expand these vital services means taxing the rich and getting our budget priorities in order.

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.

JOHNSON: If the city can create incentives for wealthy developers to build Lincoln Yards and Millennium Park, then it can create incentives for banks to remove barriers to financial services for low-income disabled residents of the city. It is simply a matter of political will.

Banks should make their digital platforms and apps accessible, and I will work to facilitate partnership with Chicago’s civic tech organizations to address this, centering the expertise of groups like Access Living, A11ychi and those with lived experience with this issue. I also think the city should fund local community groups and public service providers to do outreach and trainings on resources already out there that are underutilized, such as ABLE accounts.

I look forward to learning more about what best practices have been utilized in other cities and how we can apply them here in Chicago.

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?

JOHNSON: I will review and strengthen the city’s procurement processes to ensure that all city contractors have an equal employment opportunity policy and workplace non-discrimination policies that include disability as a protected category. I will also work closely with the Chicago Commission on Human Relations to confirm that we are not doing business with contractors who have repeated workplace discrimination violations.

Brandon Johnson

I will also champion a strong, fully-funded Office of Labor Standards to ensure that the City of Chicago leads the way on wage, labor, hiring and workforce practices that enhance equity, address wage gaps and create a fair and healthy economy for workers, businesses and residents.

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

JOHNSON: Yes

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

JOHNSON: I will use the Office of the Mayor to urge the SSA to allow cash assistance flexibility in meetings with federal officials as well as through external campaigns and public advocacy. (For example, signing onto open letters with other cities and encouraging members of my administration to write national op-ed pieces.)

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

JOHNSON: Yes, and further, any disabled person (student, staff, otherwise) entering a school building cannot be limited to first floor accessibility. CPS needs to use ADA capital investment funds to ensure all parts of schools are fully accessible for individuals with disabilities. Any new CPS construction or renovations must include plans to guarantee accessibility. In addition, CPS must make it a priority to make improvements to buildings that currently lack access including those buildings constructed pre-ADA.

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

JOHNSON: I would work jointly with the district and the state of Illinois to make sure we are fully funding special education in CPS and meeting students' individual needs. CPS

needs to increase special education staffing so students receive the support needed, and these workers must be solely used to provide services and instruction to students with disabilities and cannot be a school principal's "go-to" to cover non-special education duties.

I would also work to improve communication between CPS ODLSS and special education staff and parents. Training for special education staff needs to be communicated clearly, with time provided to implement new policies or education programs. Parents also deserve timely and concise communication regarding their student's education, as well as updates to special education policies and practices in CPS.

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?

JOHNSON: I would increase restorative justice and reduce punitive responses to decrease the number of out-of-school and in-school suspensions for students with disabilities. I would also ensure that they have access to social workers, counselors, and nurses every day in every school. I would increase access to social-emotional learning (SEL) centered on dismantling the school-to-prison pipeline and provide better access to mental health services and diversion programs that can be provided by the city and sister agencies.

We must also emphasize the need for transition planning and services for students with disabilities, and as a part of transition planning, ensure that there is access to local community programs, city departments and linkages for transition services, and that there is interagency responsibility and accountability for the implementation of services. Finally, we must create a pathway for students to employment and opportunities in the workforce, as this will decrease their interaction with the criminal justice system.

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

JOHNSON: First, I would begin planning earlier, allowing for transportation evaluations ahead of the summer, so students with disabilities are not late additions to bus routing and we can ensure proper resource allocation for the fall. I would also re-align budgeting cycles so staffing schedules are released in a timely manner, which keeps routes fully staffed in the fall.

I would also review and revise student assignment policies so that students can be close to home, and ensure there is program coverage around the city so that once students do have transportation routes, they are not on bus routes that exceed an hour in each direction.

Finally, students with disabilities are required to double request transportation; they need to be found eligible in their IEP meetings and they need to submit a request form after they are found eligible. This causes a delay of about one month for students who need transportation. We must streamline the request process.

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

JOHNSON: 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?

JOHNSON: I am an ardent supporter of the Treatment Not Trauma campaign, and committed to working with the Chicago City Council (especially the chief sponsor Ald. Rossana Rodriguez-Sanchez), political and community groups organizing around this issue to pass the Treatment Not Trauma ordinance in my first 100 days in office. The city of Chicago needs substantial investments in public mental health infrastructure that do not cause further harm to our communities.

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?

JOHNSON: The underfunding of our social safety net means that police officers and the criminal justice system become the default sources of health care and housing for too many people. Armed police officers should not be the first line of mental health care, case management or rapid rehousing support, as this only increases the likelihood that

such encounters will end in tragedy. We must make robust investments in the social safety net, including alternatives to policing such as Treatment Not Trauma, so that armed police officers are not the first, only, or primary point of state contact available to people in crisis. As a Black man, I know all too well how often this leads to tragedy. We must do better by building real systems of care in our communities.

I will work with the Police Superintendent and the Community Commission for Public Safety and Accountability to hold police accountable and evaluate the goals and performance of the CPD, the Civilian Office of Police Accountability and the Police Board, including working to provide structural support for interactions with people who have disabilities.

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?

JOHNSON: The effects of the pandemic are still felt in senior living facilities and among individuals living with disabilities. As mayor, I will create programs around improving access to COVID-19 testing, vaccines and treatment. I will also ensure a fully funded Chicago Department of Public Health works to address gaps in services, improves access to care and better supports the individuals and communities most affected by the adverse effect of long COVID.

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?

JOHNSON: The Affordable Requirements Ordinance must be amended to become much more effective at incentivizing the construction of affordable, accessible, family-size units (as opposed to studio or 1-BR units).

I also support the Bring Chicago Home campaign to create a dedicated revenue stream for permanent supportive and affordable housing.

Lastly, the Chicago Housing Authority needs a wholesale change in order to effectively expand, administer, and maintain the city's public and affordable housing stock. Moving families off the CHA waiting list and into safe, clean and stable housing will be a top priority of my administration.

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

JOHNSON: I am fully committed to co-governance and coalition-building, and I will build an administration that is staffed with members of the housing justice and disability justice movements that have been driving this work on the ground for years in order to advance policies that expand accessibility and equity. I will foster a culture of care, and ensure that not only is access provided, but people living with disabilities are able to make their own choices about participation.

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

JOHNSON: We must make a commitment to ending homelessness by fully funding affordable housing (see Bring Chicago Home, above) and city community support services such that all people, including and especially people with disabilities, can live lives of their choosing in safe, stable and supportive housing.

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?

JOHNSON: Streamline partnership between the City of Chicago, Cook County Health, the State of Illinois Office of Emergency Management and all stakeholders (community organizations, nonprofits, etc.) to establish a mass care plan for assistance. Assist each individual and family with translation and completion of the State's benefits application, which automatically enrolls them in Medicaid, the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) and Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF). Support any and all efforts to deliver information and resources to immigrants with disabilities, so the burden is not on them to seek it out.

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

JOHNSON: 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

JOHNSON: 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?

JOHNSON: As a West Side resident living in Austin, this is something I witness firsthand every day. My administration would create wider sidewalks for anyone with a mobility aid; using audio queuing to serve not only the vision impaired, but anyone with a language-based disability like dyslexia; and, with such a high rate of reliance on public transportation on the South and West sides, continue progress on the ASAP to develop clear and accessible pathways, and increased, serviceable ramps and elevators.