



Mayoral Candidates Disability Questionnaire 2023 – Sophia King

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

KING: Yes

If yes, where can the public find it?

KING: www.sophiaforchicago.com (our updated platform page will be launched soon)

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

KING: As Mayor my goal would be to make Chicago one of the most accessible cities in the country. We have a long way to go to make the top 10 accessible cities list but we can start with ensuring that all of our voting sites are ADA accessible, public transportation improvements, and re-tooling our ambulance and fire services to

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accommodate individuals in wheelchairs. I believe accessibility should be a natural part of how we think about city services and push to include advocates at the table as we allocate investments that make Chicago work for everyone.

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?

KING: As Mayor, I will work with advocates and the Mayor's Office of People With Disabilities through regular think tank sessions to restructure our data collection process to more accurately capture information about our disabled residents in order to prioritize their needs and secure more investments.

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

KING: Yes

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

KING: Expanding the number of service hours available to people with disabilities is critical to making Chicago work for everyone. This lifeline allows residents to complete tasks such as food shopping, cooking, cleaning, dressing and help with errands is essential for individuals who may not have any other support. My administration would partner with the non-profit and faith based organizations to expand our overall network of services and offerings and strengthen that support network for Chicago's disabled community. My administration would be open to collaborating with advocates to continue developing innovative programs for children, seniors and everyone in between who need accessibility across our city.

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.

KING: Unbanked workers are often essential workers, especially young workers and immigrants. Many continue to rely on alternative financial services including check cashers or pawn shops that charge substantial processing fees many cannot afford. As Mayor, I will advocate for the increased use of alternative measures of credit worthiness to increase access to capital and housing for low-income Chicagoans.

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?

KING: As the lead sponsor for the Fight for \$15 led the effort that included increasing wages for the people with disabilities. We need a 360 approach as Chicago prepares our workforce for the jobs future to ensure that people with disabilities and all people of diverse backgrounds have a fair chance at a good paying job. The city must be a leader in utilizing diversity and inclusion policies that are inclusive of people with disabilities and require our private employers to do the same. Building this workforce starts with the expansion of apprentice programs within our schools to be inclusive of students with disabilities, ensuring a smooth transition into the workforce after graduation. I believe we can streamline the connection to employers and agencies representing people with disabilities to increase access to opportunities for people seeking jobs both with the city and private employers to help increase representation and accountability with our private employers.

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

KING: Yes. I served as co-sponsor for this bill and certainly a champion of this program. We had federal dollars in this budget to make this program a reality. As Mayor, I would work to prioritize this program for inclusion in the annual budget.

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

KING: For the programming that we seek to extend in the annual budget, my administration will work with advocates and experts to lobby for those continued resources and join leaders statewide to secure resources.

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

KING: Yes. As Mayor I would work with CPS to ensure that we closed the educational outcomes gaps for students with disabilities. As a former educator, I understand the importance of customizing the approach to teaching to meet the student's needs.

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

KING: Investing in public education is the most important thing we can do to secure the future of Chicago. We must use our tax dollars to create a public education system that helps every child reach their full potential regardless of the zip code in which they live or any additional need they may have. Developing joint partnerships that are focused on supporting disengaged youth and dismantling education issues from cradle to career, including tech education K-12, student internships and job training, and coordination with technical colleges is critical to Chicago's success. Key steps a King administration would take work with CPS include:

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- Allocate investments for CPS to build curricular and co-curricular programming dedicated to STEM.
- Create more opportunities for youth to be engaged outside of schools.
- Launch dedicated STEM schools to elevate trade and technical education to offer students who may not choose college a chance to obtain high paying skilled jobs.
- Increase and expand apprenticeships in the High Schools for trades, tech and STEM jobs beyond the summer to include the complete school year creating a pathway to union membership and living wage jobs.
- Foster a spirit of partnership between the City and CPS, build coalitions with parents, teachers and support staff, and advocacy groups to convene a CPS/Mayor's Office Task Force to ensure that the City does all it can to support our schools.
- Prioritize and increase access to teacher professional development opportunities to include specialized training to 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?

KING: Working with the disengaged students at CPS would be a huge priority for me as Mayor. As we speak with parents and teachers across the city we are learning that students as young as 8 years old are being exposed more frequently to criminal activity. The more year-round engagement we can create for youth the less likely they are to disengage from school.

As Mayor, I will work with CPS and sister agencies to strengthen and fund opportunities for our youngest students to reach their full potential in both curricular and co-curricular activities. This effort must include a transportation component to support working families. As students age, we need to evolve the programming to include opportunities for high skill development and training that lays the foundation for success beyond the classroom.

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

KING: Many of our students continue to experience very extended commutes to school and more than 170 students with IEPs spend more than 90 minutes on the bus. As my Mayor my goal is to grow the number of successful neighborhood schools in every community. We need to ensure that our schools are solvent and able to support

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expanding our school bus system including accessible buses. We need to aggressively incentivize hiring more bus-drivers to address our shortage.

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

KING: 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?

KING: In addition to pushing more 911 calls to the 988 or 311 system and expanding the number of mental health professionals who respond to 911 calls either with an officer or instead of one, Law Enforcement Assisted Diversion (LEAD) programs work directly with law enforcement, trusting them to make pre-arrest diversion decisions.

Over 50% of 911 calls are for non-violent offenses. My Safety and Justice plan calls for investments in alternative responses to non-violent and mental health related calls. I have led the effort to co-pilot these types of programs and as Mayor would work to accelerate full implementation city-wide.

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?

KING: As we build infrastructure for alternative responses to non-violent or mental health calls to 911 we must build a stronger integrated network of agencies and services for individuals that need wrap-around services while in custody and upon release. My

administration will work with CPD and advocates for people with disabilities to ensure those individuals have access to supportive services to help them move forward.

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?

KING: People whose long COVID qualifies as a disability are entitled to the same protections from discrimination as any other person with a disability under the ADA and the CDC continues to work to better understand the effects of long COVID. We must continue to educate residents and employers about the impact of long COVID and the ongoing challenges with recovery and support our residents through programming, advocacy and accessibility.

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?

KING: With housing costs rising faster than incomes, I understand that in order to improve housing affordability, we need better alignment of zoning, taxes, and subsidies. By leveraging multiple solutions to create a wider array of housing types across Chicago including units with accessible modifications, we can ensure a healthier distribution of affordable homes of all shapes and sizes.

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

KING: Chicago can optimize opportunity zones to create more affordable housing. I will work with community stakeholders and business leaders to create a vision for residential and mixed use housing that includes ADA compliant units.

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

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KING: My administration would be immediately focused on delivering the thousands of affordable housing units needed in the city. With more than 30,000 people waiting for housing assistance from the CHA we cannot afford to wait. Increasing the number of ADA accessible available units to help unhoused individuals stabilize and move forward is an important part of that vision.

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?

KING: It is reprehensible that human beings are used as political pawns for political points. I believe that we need to re-open and fund more mental health centers that are prepared to serve people with disabilities, and language barriers regardless of their status.

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

KING: We should certainly explore the feasibility of this initiative. In the interim we should continue to have residents and landlords remove snow on the sidewalks adjacent to their property. The city should then remove snow from city-owned lots and buildings as well as those of sidewalks who haven't complied. This approach would be less cost prohibitive and help achieve total sidewalk clearance and make sidewalks more accessible for disabled Chicagoans in the winter.

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

KING: Yes

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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?

KING: As the Alderwoman for the 4th Ward I have been on the front lines fighting against inequities in transportation on the South Side. We fought against the reduction of bus service lines in Bronzeville and restored Sunday services that had a huge impact on the elderly and disabled community.

We know that overall, connectivity within the city that links neighborhood to neighborhood, and each neighborhood to downtown, enables equity and economic vitality. Affordable and accessible public transportation connects to our jobs, our schools, entertainment, pharmacies, grocery stores, with our families. We have had a disparity of connectivity where much of the West South Side has been left out of this basic core community element. The pandemic impact on public transportation has been dire but as we address affordability and create more housing we can create new business corridors and density to increase accessibility and public transportation.