



Mayoral Candidates Disability Questionnaire 2023 – Lori Lightfoot

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

LIGHTFOOT: Yes

If yes, where can the public find it?

LIGHTFOOT: [“The Mayor’s Record” pages](#) on our website highlight many issues important to Chicago’s disability community. For instance, our “Economic Justice” page highlights our work to eliminate exemptions that allowed young workers and workers with disabilities to be paid a subminimum wage and our work to open a new career center for Chicagoans with disabilities to access job training services and employment opportunities.

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

LIGHTFOOT: As a person with a hearing disability myself, and the daughter of a person who was deaf, I am proud to have already taken significant steps toward making Chicago the most accessible city in the nation. In my administration, the Commissioner of the Mayor's Office for People with Disabilities is a cabinet-level department, and disability is a vital focus of our equity work. I'm proud to have appointed Rachel Arfa, a member of the disability community, as Commissioner and consider her one of my most important advisors. She has done an excellent job of aggressively advocating for the disability community and centering its needs and interests in all of our work.

In my 2020 budget, I insisted upon the elimination by 2024 of the subminimum wage which was previously permitted under the Department of Labor 14(c) waiver that shamefully allowed employers to pay people with disabilities poverty wages in so-called "sheltered workshops." We have already made great progress on this. Chicago was one of the largest cities to take an early lead on this, and many other cities and states have followed since then. Through the Ability One program, the federal government then passed a rule eliminating the program in October of this year. I felt strongly that we should lead the way in supporting disability employment and that people with disabilities should be paid equal wages—and we have also shown the power of leading by example in this regard.

As part of our \$3.7 billion Chicago Works plan to improve infrastructure and create jobs for Chicagoans, we're installing 6,000 ADA-compliant curb cuts. We also created a Digital Equity Council to combat the digital divide and increase internet access across the city. A key element of this initiative is ensuring digital content is accessible.

In 2021, I supported funding the new MOPD Career Center, a \$1.2 million investment designed to help people with disabilities with career readiness and job searches. The center has already seen significant results—I'm excited to report that several Chicagoans with disabilities have received full-time employment as a direct result. We also ensured there are now Access Officers in every single City department and agency who serve as point persons on all disability access issues, including

public-facing services in both physical and communication access. I believe strongly that disability is not about just one department or one person, but is and must be a citywide commitment.

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

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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?

LIGHTFOOT: We have been and continue to be committed to advocating for federal and state data collection to include demographic data on disability (for instance, the CDC did not include demographic data on disability in their COVID tracking data). Our administration has been proactive about including disability questions into program applications such as the Chicago Resilient Communities cash assistance pilot.

This enabled us to track if our program was reaching people with disabilities in our outreach and ensure they had strong representation in the final participant pool. 16.8% of participants identified as having a disability.

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

LIGHTFOOT: Yes, we would be happy to support increased hours for personal assistance services. Our program serves many Chicagoans, including those who may not qualify for the state Department of Rehabilitation Services Home Services program. We have already expanded our community programs through our investment in the MOPD Career Center in recognition that employment is a vital economic mobility tool.

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

LIGHTFOOT: As detailed in the previous section of this questionnaire, in 2021, I supported funding the new MOPD Career Center designed to help people with disabilities with career readiness and job searches. The Center has already seen significant results and is a crucial investment in our City's efforts to address unemployment—several Chicagoans with disabilities have received full-time employment as a direct result. We also ensured there are now Access Officers in every single City department and agency who serve as point persons on all disability access

issues, including public-facing services in both physical and communication access. I believe strongly that disability is not about just one department or one person, but is and must be a citywide commitment.

I am also committed to advancing a comprehensive set of solutions to combat homelessness and housing instability—that’s why we increased budget investments in affordable housing by nearly 120% and homelessness services by over 450%. Our recently passed 2023 budget includes more than half a billion dollars for homelessness services and affordable housing. This includes a significant increase in funding for homelessness services, including 1200 units of rapid rehousing, low barrier shelter, and additional positions for our homelessness services team, in addition to the more than \$200 million in investments we have already put in place for services to persons experiencing or at risk of homelessness.

When taking office, I heard from Chicago’s disability community that city mental health resources were insufficient. We increased the CDPH’s mental health budget more than sevenfold, from \$12 million in 2019 to \$89 million in 2022, raising the number of Chicagoans served annually from 2,500 prior to the start of my administration to being on target to serve more than over 60,000 Chicagoans this year, and we now serve children who did not previously have this access to care. We have funded mental health resources in more than 50 of Chicago’s 77 community areas already, and plan to be in all 77 community areas by the year’s end.

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.

LIGHTFOOT: I have repeatedly used my platform as Mayor of Chicago to call out banks for discriminatory lending and crediting practices. In speeches at the African American Mayors Association and United States Conference of Mayors, I addressed this very issue and pressed banks to review practices that prevent people of color and people with

disabilities from being recipients of credit and loans. Too often, bank branching is not accessible across all our neighborhoods, forcing residents to go to businesses like Currency Exchanges to fulfill their financial needs.

We take seriously the role that the City can play to shift practices of banks seeking to be municipal depositories as one focus for action. We will work with our state and federal partners to advocate for expanded access to capital for lower-income Chicagoans (particularly those who have a disability) and regulations aimed at combating predatory banking and lending practices. I support proposals for expanded services at United States Postal Service locations that include check cashing, money transfer or postal banking.

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?

LIGHTFOOT: The BACP Office of Labor Standards works closely with the Chicago Commission on Human Relations, which enforces the Chicago Human Rights Ordinance that prohibits discrimination in employment, public accommodations, and credit transactions due to disability. Our new MOPD Career Center helps people with disabilities connect to career readiness services and assists with job searches.

In 2019, the City embarked on a path to eliminate the subminimum wage for people with disabilities that were previously built into the Municipal Code of Chicago. To that end, in late 2019, the Chicago Minimum Wage and Paid Sick Leave Ordinance was amended to raise the minimum wage and remove several exemptions to improve the pay for disabled workers. The minimum wage rate depends on the size of the employer, and, as of July 1, 2022, the wage for employers with 21 or more Covered Employees is \$15.40 an hour and for those with 4 to 20 employees, the wage is set at \$14.50.

For those employers in possession of a special license issued under Section 5 of the state's Minimum Wage Law, issued by the Director of the Illinois Department of Labor, they will be required to pay Covered Employees at least the Chicago Minimum Wage by July 1, 2024. Given that this could impact a large population of workers employed, the administration gathered a list of those employers who possess such a license, often referred to as sheltered workshops, and created a communication plan to raise awareness about the imminent increases to the wages of those workers. This will enable those employers to financially plan for and maintain the workforce and staffing levels of those Covered Employees. The Mayor's Office for People with Disabilities and BACP's Office of Labor Standards have collaborated on the outreach plans to ensure that both

the impacted workers and the employer community effectively reach and inform the target populations.

The OLS strictly enforces 6-105-080 Retaliation of the MCC that prohibits retaliation, "it shall be unlawful for any Employer to discriminate in any manner or take any adverse action against any Covered Employee in retaliation for exercising any right under this chapter, including, but not limited to, disclosing, reporting, or testifying about any violation of this chapter or regulations promulgated thereunder." Violations are enforced at \$500 to \$1,000 per violation and each day that a violation continues it shall be a separate and distinct offense to which a separate fine shall apply.

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

LIGHTFOOT: Our Chicago Resilient Communities Pilot represents a \$31.5 million commitment to combat poverty and transform the lives of 5,000 Chicagoans and their families. Following the pilot program's completion, we will lead an evaluation process with an academic partner to determine the impacts of the program. We're excited to analyze these findings and identify a course forward. In the meantime, we've been working closely to provide case management support to recipients, including providing program participants with financial literacy tools. Centering the experience of residents with disabilities was a top priority for our current Chicago Resilient Communities Pilot. We completed user-testing with people with disabilities to ensure ease of access to the application, and provided a range of assistance options for residents to receive support in application and enrollment from physical locations and at home. 16.8% of participants identified as having a disability.

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

LIGHTFOOT: I personally had conversations with and lobbied the United States Department of Health and Human Services and the White House to secure a waiver for our cash assistance program to ensure participants did not have to choose between their lifeline safety net benefit and participation in this pilot. The Chicago Resilient Communities Pilot became the first government-led monthly cash pilot in the country that secured a waiver for SSI participants. Other municipalities reached out to us to learn our strategies to achieve this in their programs. In the future, we will continue to

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work through our regional office and federal delegation to ensure that participation in any City-led cash assistance program does not jeopardize one's SSI/SSDI.

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

LIGHTFOOT: Yes.

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

LIGHTFOOT: I am working to ensure that CPS prioritizes students with disabilities who have been disproportionately harmed by the pandemic in its budget and strategic plan. One of the district's goals is to reimagine its support to its diverse learners. I will ensure that the district takes concrete steps to follow through on this promise by setting ambitious yet achievable goals for improving educational outcomes, broken down by race/ethnicity/disability. While CPS may face challenging budgets in the years ahead, I will do all that I can to ensure services to our diverse learners are protected.

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?

LIGHTFOOT: CPS, like all of the sister agencies, is a part of my cabinet. In the past year, we have prioritized reimagining career services for students at risk of dropping out of school. Many of these students are students with disabilities. We are working with City Colleges to provide them with viable pathways upon graduation or another end to their CPS experience. We have been building partnerships with employers and trade unions to ensure students have pathways to productive careers and other support, and can stay out of 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?

LIGHTFOOT: The current bussing situation is extremely challenging. CPS has explored many solutions, but many of the barriers are due to a national school bus driver shortage that has affected school districts across the United States and Illinois. My team is committed to working with the General Assembly in Springfield to allow for the

district to use more types of drivers to help transport students. I have also directed them to prioritize students with disabilities over able-bodied magnet students, who were previously at the same level of priority. We have also worked to increase pay for these drivers to help the district and its partners recruit more drivers. In the meantime, CPS is offering students who qualify for transportation services a \$500 per month stipend to help families transport their student to school for the remainder of the academic year.

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

LIGHTFOOT: 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?

LIGHTFOOT: Our CARE (Crisis Assistance Response and Engagement) pilot program ensures individuals experiencing a mental health crisis are assisted by teams of behavioral health professionals in pilot regions across the city. We are optimistic about the preliminary results from this program and have since expanded it to include additional pilot regions. We are evaluating pilot program results to inform our continued response to mental health emergencies. We must ensure that we put health at the center of our mental health crisis response.

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?

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LIGHTFOOT: I believe the needs of people with disabilities must be prioritized at each and every police district. We have been and continue to be committed to ensuring that every facility is ADA compliant and that each district's officers are trained in the various accommodations that people with disabilities may require. Working groups with MOPD and the Mayor's Office of Public Safety and other stakeholders have already begun in order to discuss the needs of people with disabilities in the public safety ecosystem.

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?

LIGHTFOOT: When public health guidance began to be eased as COVID-19 transmission declined, the City of Chicago continued to encourage masks and offer hybrid programs to ensure that Chicagoans who remain COVID-cautious or experience long COVID-19 have safe ways to continue to access city services. City of Chicago employees who acquire long COVID may qualify for reasonable accommodations so that they can continue working with this new disability. MOPD is able to serve people who acquire disabilities as a result 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?

LIGHTFOOT: My administration has been and continues to be committed to ensuring continued investments in affordable housing, much of it in new buildings achieving high levels of accessibility.

Additionally, our team has prioritized housing affordability by addressing rapid development and gentrification to prevent the displacement of long-time residents by revising the Affordable Requirements Ordinance. The 2021 ordinance creates much-needed affordable housing across the city, addresses the legacy of racial segregation, and:

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- Requires all on-site affordable units to be Type A accessible in new market-rate multifamily housing.
- Has resulted in four 2021 ARO projects under construction already, providing a total of 137 affordable units on-site that are all Type A accessible. A total of 15 other projects under the 2021 ARO are in the pipeline and will provide a total of 959 affordable units on-site.
- Specifies that developers shall give preference in leasing or selling units to people with disabilities as specified in the rules.

Our work on the Connected Communities ordinance supports accessibility in ETOD developments by:

- Creating a citywide incentive for ground-floor accessible units in moderate-density zones. Buildings in these zones are almost never large enough to have elevators and so rarely have accessible units, but now developers can get a bonus if they provide ground-floor accessibility.
- Improving safety of the public realm for people with mobility devices, as well as those traveling by foot or on bikes, by extending Pedestrian Street design guidelines to all commercial streets within ½ mile of a CTA or Metra rail station. This places additional restrictions on dangerous design elements like curb cuts and requires buildings to face the sidewalk.

Our ADU ordinance helps support residents aging in place and affordability for people with disabilities through at-grade coach houses.

Finally, in order to better inform the community of available affordable accessible dwelling units, the Department of Housing (DOH) and Mayor's Office for People with Disabilities (MOPD) drafted an action plan. This plan has immediate actions and mid- and long-term actions to inform the community of properties with accessible units and specific accessibility features.

Immediate actions:

- Implemented a referral process whereby DOH informs our delegate agency partners when new properties begin marketing the rental apartments so that delegate agencies can inform their membership/service communities of these accessible unit opportunities.

Interim Strategy:

- MOPD to confirm accessible units in existing properties. This data will inform and be the data used to implement the long-term strategy.

Long-Term Strategy:

- Interactive map and database that will be published on the City's website to identify properties for rent with accessible units.

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

LIGHTFOOT: The Mayor's Office for People with Disabilities is committed to ensuring that all physical locations, including shelters, are accessible to people with disabilities and will continue to work toward achieving this goal. We continue to expand communication access services.

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

LIGHTFOOT: My administration has prioritized ensuring Chicagoans have access to safe and affordable housing. We are committed to advancing a comprehensive set of solutions to combat homelessness and housing instability—that's why we increased budget investments in affordable housing by nearly 120% and homelessness services by over 450%. Our recently passed 2023 budget includes over half a billion dollars for homelessness services and affordable housing. This includes a significant increase in funding for homelessness services, including 1,200 units of rapid rehousing, low barrier shelter, and additional positions for our homelessness services team, in addition to the more than \$200 million in investments we have already put in place for services to persons experiencing or at risk of homelessness. We are being intentional to ensure that these investments and homelessness services and the construction/rehabilitation of affordable housing are accessible to and benefit disabled Chicagoans who face homelessness or housing insecurity.

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?

LIGHTFOOT: We have been and continue to be committed to ensuring all families, including undocumented immigrants and refugees, can realize their Chicago dreams. For many medically fragile people who come to the United States for medical care,

deportation to their own country (with a lesser health care system) could be a death sentence. We have taken numerous steps to protect immigrants with disabilities in our city—most importantly, I kept my core campaign promise from 2019 and removed all carve-outs from Chicago’s Welcoming City Ordinance and ended police collaboration with ICE. I also signed an executive order to ensure that benefits, opportunities, and services provided by the City are accessible to all residents, regardless of birth country or citizenship status. Additionally, we committed \$5 million in our 2023 budget to ensure we have resources available to support migrants arriving in Chicago.

On the topic on mental health, we increased the CDPH’s mental health budget more than sevenfold from \$12 million in 2019 to \$89 million in 2022, raising the number of Chicagoans we serve annually from 2,500 prior to the start of my administration to being on target to serve more than over 60,000 Chicagoans this year, and we now serve children who did not previously have this access to care. We have funded mental health resources in more than 50 of Chicago’s 77 community areas already, and plan to be in all 77 community areas by the year’s end. We take a "no wrong door" approach to service, meaning the full range of mental health services are available without regard to insurance, ability to pay, or citizenship status. We work to provide accommodations to ensure Chicagoans with disabilities can access these 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

LIGHTFOOT: We are currently exploring potential pathways to identify whether such a program is feasible, given fiscal and personnel allocations it could require.

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

LIGHTFOOT: Yes. While more than 100 CTA rail stations are accessible, roughly 30% of our stations (many of which are over 75 years old) remain non-accessible. Our administration is actively partnering with our state and federal partners to advocate for funding for our ASAP (All Stations Accessibility Program) strategic plan to make the

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remaining non-accessible rail stations fully accessible within the next two decades. Last year, I was proud to break ground on the Lawrence to Bryn Mawr Modernization Project which includes rebuilding the Lawrence, Argyle, Berwyn, and Bryn Mawr stations to be fully accessible with wider platforms and elevators.

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?

LIGHTFOOT: My administration is focused on extending the CTA Red Line from the existing terminal at 95th/Dan Ryan to 130th Street. This extension would include four fully-accessible stations which would make it substantially easier for people with disabilities to travel within the Far South Side and between the Far South Side and other regions of the city. We plan to support transit-oriented developments around new stations, which would offer affordable, accessible housing options near accessible public transit.

The City of Chicago also has wheelchair accessible vehicle taxis, regulated by BACP, to provide an additional accessible transportation option. We work to support our WAV taxi rides, including honoring the top 10 drivers with a medallion in recognition of their exemplary service. We continue to work on solutions to support increased WAV vehicles on the road and taxis. The TAP program subsidizes those taxis for riders with disabilities.