



## **Mayoral Candidates Disability Questionnaire 2023 – Paul Vallas**

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**

VALLAS: Yes

**If yes, where can the public find it?**

VALLAS: LINK

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

VALLAS: Since its inception in 1990, the Mayor’s Office for People with Disabilities (MOPD) – begun in the Daley Administration in which I served as the first cabinet level office in a major city dedicated to the imperatives and concerns of people with disabilities – has worked to elevate consciousness and policy for the benefit of a major, diverse and historically under supported constituency. While often trailblazer in the

development of programs, the enforcement of legal and regulatory standards, and advocacy and support for those subject to discrimination on the basis of disability, there remains a Rubicon yet to be crossed if people with disabilities attain true equality. Ours remains a system that is an accretion of admirable programs and support infrastructure that is more bolted on to pre-existing city operations. – a consideration of how we are going to go about a program or a development -- rather than baked into the processes by through which we determine priorities, policies and program. For example, while it is critically important that bidding processes for economic development and public infrastructure incorporate critical access features into design, that is not the same as incorporating access needs into what we decide to develop and build in the first place. Relatedly, the way you construct and administer budgets tells everything about your values and priorities. I would make the needs of the disability community a formal factor in setting Budget priorities, deciding what city contracts to let, what weight we give to the criteria for meeting such considerations, and how and to whom we award grants. It would be organic to the process. In order to assure that Chicago not continues to work towards the elimination of not just physical barriers, but also attitudinal barriers across the city, and to improve participation for the enrichment of all I would create and fund Committee on Disability, as exists in, for example, Santa Fe, NM, with nine members appointed by the Mayor with the approval of the City Council, whose Chair and Vice-Chair are elected by the members themselves, without interference from elected officials, in which the Chair appoints sub-committees and sub-committee chairs as needed and the Committee is additionally served by a Citizen Advocate.

### **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?**

VALLAS: The city needs to build its own separate data base for the accumulation, analysis accessibility of data on not merely demographic data but all data pertinent to people with disabilities. This includes data on programs, contract awardees, actual expenditures. I would seek the counsel and expertise of my citizen Committee on Disability and those they called upon in the disability and disability advocacy community to critique the existing data and data systems, identify its deficits, and establish a more robust set of data, subject to routine audit for completeness and accuracy and put into publicly accessible interactive, user-friendly visualized dashboards, to include breakdowns and visualization by neighborhood, program, demographic constituencies (race, ethnicity, gender, age, socio-economic, among others), so that forward-going we

expend less time on data access and quality and afford more time to citizens, advocates and legislators to discuss with the Administration the meaning of what the data show and how to amend policy and practice to address program, institutional and attitudinal deficits the data reveal. All contractors and subcontractors would be obligated to collect and provide data and the city will enforce those contract obligations.

### **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**

VALLAS: (Answer not provided)

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

VALLAS: As mayor I will, as I have done in the past, work with groups like Access Living to learn from the community what the budget city's priorities should be, and which programs need to be expanded and what new initiatives need to undertake to improve the lives of people with disabilities. Sometimes you lead by soliciting, acknowledging, respecting and responding to the lead of experts and advocates, as I was by Sue Gamm, my director of Special Education and the late Marca Bristo at Access Living

### **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.**

VALLAS: The city and its sister agencies have tremendous leverage over financial institutions, and others who benefit from the city's budget and spending. Much like I have in addressing disparities in contracting minority vendors as city budget director and CEO of the Chicago Public Schools, people with disabilities and their advocates will have an ally who will barriers both physical and financial to level the playing field and accommodate the needs of the disabled population.

## **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?**

VALLAS: By enforcing city ordinances and state mandates that are on the books while working with the disability and business communities to determine ways accessibility can be improved. With regards to city contractors and city subsidized private developers, beneficiaries would be held to high standards. I make this commitment with full and open acknowledgement of one of Chicago's less honorable practices is to take victory laps for progressive policies that it fails to score implementation costs with the result being a welter of under- and occasionally un-funded regulatory mandates. Early in my Administration I will require all city departments to report on their underfunded mandates, with detailed cost projections of what would be required to fully meet what the law requires, propose budget amendments to reallocate appropriated funding in the existing budget and request additional funding if needed. The importance of such a holistic recalibration of our regulatory enforcement system cannot be understated, because regulatory (and contractual) non-compliance often has disproportionately greater adverse impact on people with disabilities than other citizens of the city.

## **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**

VALLAS: Yes

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

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VALLAS: By making it a high priority on my federal agenda. As someone who helped negotiate the largest FEMA settlement to rebuild the New Orleans public schools after Hurricane Katrina (each new school is Lead Silver, and all schools are ADA compliant).

## **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**

VALLAS: Yes. As CPS CEO in the 90's I built 78 school buildings that were all fully ADA accessible and did renovations in 300 more that included addressing accessibility needs.

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

VALLAS: More effective and continuously updated IEP's that are religiously enforced. Overall, more effective curriculum and instructional approaches for students with disabilities and more individualized instruction and support is needed not just though more special education teachers but also student aids.

**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?**

VALLAS: By having more effective IEP's with support services. By using Restorative Justice. By prioritizing providing high school students with disabilities with the programs and the supports they need to help prepare them for the work world and independent living were possible. The inadequacies of the K-8 special education program and services is severely magnified by the total inadequacy of high schools in preparing disabled students for the adult world.

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

VALLAS: By having a plan. The transportation management has been a disaster. There is no single solution and the first step is to identify and acknowledge the full magnitude of the unmet need.

## **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**

VALLAS: 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?**

VALLAS: Numerous cities large and small have, for nearly a generation, instituted, refined and achieved success with alternative response programs. It is shameful that we have slow-rolled the implementation to scale of such a model here in Chicago. That will be an early and immediate area of attention. More generally, we need to restore the array of community based social services that the community needs. This includes at minimum opening locally owned and operated mental health centers and drug and opioid addiction centers in every police district. In addition, the resources need to be available at the police district level to provide crisis intervention and violence de-escalation services as needed. The police don't should be the First Responders only to those situations that require a police-specific response, and must never be the Only Responders.

### **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?**

VALLAS: Police need training and effective supervision – which itself requires training and continuing education – under clear protocols for dealing with this situation. But most importantly the police need the partnerships with not only the appropriate agencies but also appropriate neighborhood organizations to address the need.

## **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?**

VALLAS: By not discriminating – whether overtly or by administrative neglect as is often the case. This means not diminishing support for COVID patients and extending the medical services their respective COVID related illness requires. The city will go into the next budget with hundreds of millions of dollars in unspent COVID funds.

## **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?**

VALLAS: (Answer not provided)

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

VALLAS: The Mayor effectively controls HUD, so there is no reason for them not to be full ADA compliance for all CHA properties and that all CHA housing programs address the needs of people with disabilities.

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

VALLAS: By incentivizing private developers to offer units that are accessible. By securing the thousands of vacant residential buildings and turning them over to local community developers and non-profits, along with home improvement grants, to make those families available for low-income families, people with disabilities, victims of domestic violence, individuals returning from incarceration, etc. By removing the obstacles and incentivizing owners to convert underutilized space to garden units and via h houses. By expanding Section 8 Vouchers.

## **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?**

VALLAS: By not excluding them from the expanded services we will be providing city residents and assuring coordinated, holistic counselors to identify, coordinate and facilitate connect-up to the array of city services needed for a holistic response to their unique individual and family needs. This is the approach I took as school CEO with immigrant children and their families.

## **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**

VALLAS: 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**

VALLAS: 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?**

VALLAS: By making all CTA facilities and trains and buses 100% accessible. By funding the Red Line. By ensuring there are public safety resources in the form of CPD Officers on every platform and train station and riding the train.