



## **Access Living Federal Candidates Questionnaire – Disability Policy Issues**

Disability voters are an important voting block. In Chicago, there are over 300,000 people with disabilities, with countless friends and families who also consider themselves disability voters. Furthermore, about one in six voters, or 16.4% of the voting electorate nationwide is a person with a disability, [according to the American Association of People with Disabilities](#).

Candidates nationwide have learned that people with disabilities have a historical interest in policymaking that impacts our lives. The following **10 questions** aim to address major policy areas of concern of disabled voters in the Chicagoland area.

**Candidate Name:** Kat Abughazaleh

**Party:** Democratic

**District:** Illinois' 9<sup>th</sup> District

### **Disability and Civil Rights:**

#### **Context for Question**

Over the last fifty years, people with disabilities and our allies have worked tirelessly to create and enforce a critical set of disability rights laws, such as the Americans with Disabilities Act, Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, and much more. In the past several months, both administrative and legal action have made it clear that federal disability rights and enforcement are at tremendous risk. This is evidenced by the recent dismantling of federal entities tasked with enforcing disability laws, notably the Office for Civil Rights (OCR) and Office of Special Education and Rehabilitative Services (OSERS) within the Department of Education.



### Question

***What would you do to ensure that current federal disability rights laws and regulations are protected, not dismantled?***

### Answer

Federal legislation is integral to defending the rights and safety of people with disabilities. In Congress, I will work to legally mandate the reinstatement of personnel dismissed by the Trump administration in the Office for Civil Rights and similar federal entities. I will support federal legislation to amend the Fair Labor Standards Act and follow Illinois' lead in eliminating the subminimum wage for people with disabilities.

Any attempts to roll back the ADA and other landmark legislation must be resoundingly opposed and I will do so both on the campaign trail and in Congress. As a person with a disability myself (I have Type 2 Narcolepsy), I understand the necessity of keeping these pieces of legislation intact and continuing to expand on this progress.

Accessibility and representation aren't nearly enough when so many people with disabilities cannot afford to see a doctor or fill their prescriptions. When I was in college, I had friends who would purchase fish antibiotics from pet stores rather than pay high out-of-pocket costs for medication designed for humans. This is a reality that no one should ever have to be forced into, especially in the richest country in the history of the world. In Congress, I will fight for Medicare for All and a stronger social safety net, both so that people's medical needs can be met and that poor medical outcomes can be better anticipated and prevented. I will also support legislation that restores Medicare's and Medicaid's ability to negotiate drug prices and would go a step further by introducing legislation to fund a pilot program for the federal government to make and distribute prescription drugs at cost.



### Question

***Between now and 2028, what is your vision for rebuilding the federal administrative infrastructure that has been gutted in this year's reductions in force (RIFs)?***

### Answer

We need a Marshall Plan for the federal government. Everything that Trump has cut — from the State Department to USAID to the Department of Education to the EPA — must be fully restored and, in many cases, expanded upon. Outcomes in civil rights, education, diplomacy, climate crisis prevention, and so much more have worsened and will continue to worsen as a result of Trump and DOGE's cuts. If elected, I am going to introduce and co-sponsor legislation that ends Trump's, or any other president's ability to unilaterally gut the federal government and its programs. I will additionally be working on legislation designed to not only achieve previous staffing levels (which were already inadequate), but exceed them. I want us to pursue a similar set of programs to FDR's Works Project Administration (WPA) and Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC), solving not only our unemployment issues, but our infrastructural deficits as well.

### **Education:**

#### **Context for Question**

The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) is the federal law that governs special education in the United States. This is the law that ensures that ALL students have the right to a “free and appropriate public education.” When the IDEA was passed, the federal government committed to covering 40% of state special education costs. As it currently stands, IDEA is only covering 10% of costs. This shortfall leaves local communities on the hook to make ends meet. Teachers and therapists stretched thin, and worse outcomes for students.



### Question

***What steps would you take to ensure IDEA/Special Education is properly funded going forward?***

### Answer

Properly funding special education is a priority for me as a citizen and as a person with a disability, and will continue to be when I serve in Congress. The federal government must radically reallocate its spending, cutting unnecessary costs and bringing in additional revenue with a modest 2% wealth tax on estates of \$50 million or more. With a 10% cut to the Pentagon's budget and hundreds of billions of dollars in increased tax revenue from the ultra-rich and tax-dodging corporations, the federal government will be able to meet its commitment to cover 40% of state special education costs and hopefully more.

### **Health Care:**

#### Context for Question

When we surveyed disabled Chicagoans about their federal policy concerns, access to healthcare was the number one issue for an overwhelming number of respondents.

Medicaid is integral to the independence of people with disabilities because of home and community-based services (HCBS). H.R. 1 will implement drastic cuts to Medicare and Medicaid, leaving many disabled folks without access to health coverage. HCBS is particularly at risk of cuts should their federal funding be lost, because HCBS is not mandatory. Without Medicaid HCBS, many people with disabilities will be forced to leave their communities and live in institutions.

### Question

***What will you do to protect Illinoisans' access to health care, especially people with disabilities?***



## Answer

The current state of healthcare (or lack thereof) in the United States is appalling. Wait times are too long, outcomes are too poor, and most of all, costs are too high. And that's if care is even accessible to begin with. Having lived without health insurance for over a year, I support Medicare for All. Access to life-saving treatment should never be dependent on someone's employment status or whether an immediate relative has a job that offers health insurance.

On my first day in Congress, I will cosponsor the Medicare for All Act and champion the core tenets of the legislation. I will additionally work to protect and expand home and community-based services. I also support expanding Medicare coverage to include long-term in-home healthcare. Illinoisans deserve to access convenient, efficient, and caring services, and that means expanding equal access to those we so often leave behind. We haven't had meaningful reform at the federal level in over thirty years since the Americans with Disabilities (ADA) Act of 1990 — that must change. Individuals with disabilities, especially hidden disabilities, are no less human, and I am deeply disappointed in our elected leaders' collective failure to treat them as such.

Furthermore, individuals with disabilities deserve to be treated as patients, not moneymakers by shady providers with little oversight. For individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities, this problem becomes magnified a thousandfold. The issues facing the group home care industry are well known, and in far too many cases, have resulted in neglect and abuse; many survivors are unable to legally testify to those events, and law enforcement has a notorious bias against listening to their experiences. We have a responsibility to legislate real, meaningful protections for all Americans, and I will make it my mission to ensure that no one, regardless of ability, gets left behind.

If elected, I will introduce the first federal law on group home safety reform, which will not only raise standards nationally, but create real penalties for providers that fail to practice their duty of care. I will work alongside other progressive members of Congress to eliminate medical debt for all Americans, and establish strict limits on costs charged for essential care. My office will always be open to advocates, not lobbyists, and I will never take a penny from Big Pharma, or any other corporate entity.



### **Context for Question**

In Illinois, thousands of people with disabilities remain institutionalized in state-operated developmental centers or nursing facilities, even though most could live safely and independently with proper support. Illinois operates several HCBS waiver, such as the *Persons with Disabilities Waiver*, to help individuals receive care at home rather than in institutions. Expanding access to these programs is vital because community living promotes autonomy, dignity, and inclusion. It is also more cost-effective than institutional care and aligns with the *Olmstead v. L.C.* decision, which affirms the right to live in the most integrated setting possible.

### **Question**

***What is your plan to reduce the number of people with disabilities on waitlists for home and community-based services (HCBS) while ensuring services are high quality? Do you support making HCBS a mandatory Medicaid service?***

### **Answer**

I support making HCBS a mandatory Medicaid and Medicare service and believe that we can do so without reducing quality of care. The federal government should make healthcare work a more appealing career path by reducing or significantly eliminating educational costs associated with becoming a doctor, nurse, or other healthcare worker, improving pay for healthcare workers, and expanding Public Service Loan Forgiveness.

The funnelling of individuals with disabilities into facilities, often without the correct treatment plans or capacities, is nothing more than a callous and casual attempt



by our society to “sequester the problem.” Let me be unambiguously clear: individuals with disabilities deserve to live with people who love and care for them, supported by home- and community-based services, until that option is no longer medically viable. Anything else is an abandonment of our commitment to preserve the life, liberty, and happiness of all Americans.

That funneling has created twin issues: first, it has encouraged the transformation of facilities into what are known as “Medicaid mills,” where residents are treated with the bare minimum standard of care, and neglect and abuse is prevalent. Second, the ease with which residents are funneled into these facilities often makes it hard for HCBS providers to play on an equal field, reducing demand. I firmly believe that institutionalization is a last resort, and should never be our primary method of care.

### **Context for Question**

We have seen a rash of laws across Illinois and the country that criminalize homelessness. Homelessness is an issue that disproportionately impacts people with disabilities. People with serious mental illness are more likely to end up homeless and not having a house leads to all kinds of health problems. Some ordinances even go as far as penalizing people sleeping in their own cars.

### **Question**

***What will you do to protect people living with mental illness who are also unhoused?***

### **Answer**

The day after Trump signed his abhorrent “Ending Crime and Disorder on America’s Streets” Executive Order, I pushed back on the right-wing narrative that Trump’s order was anything other than an attempt to discriminate against impoverished people and people in need of mental health treatment.

It’s incredibly important that Democratic elected officials and people with large platforms continue to reiterate that issues like homelessness and crime stem from people’s material needs not being met, not from personal failures. One of the ways we can solve homelessness is to build more housing and to pass a federal jobs guarantee. One of the



ways we can address addiction is to invest in effective mental healthcare and pass Medicare for All. One of the ways we can ensure that life is more affordable is by passing a cost-of-living tax adjustment.

The conservative myth that bad personal circumstances are always the result of bad personal decisions needs to be defeated. We can demonstrate that these myths are false by meeting people's material needs on the federal level, as Chicago and Cook County have worked to do through guaranteed income pilot programs and as my campaign has done at a smaller scale through our mutual aid programs

### **Transportation:**

#### **Context for Question**

Systemic underfunding of transit systems, particularly on the operations side, has left the Chicagoland transit system in funding peril. Many disabled people cannot drive and rely on both mainline transit and paratransit systems to be independent and participate in society. Because the availability of paratransit is tied to the availability of mainline transit, fixed route funding cuts directly impact ADA paratransit service as well. Unfortunately, despite the high need for paratransit, it remains insufficiently funded and frequently overlooked, rather than considered a vital part of the transit system overall.

#### **Question**

***Would you support a more equitable funding system that better funds accessible transit, including paratransit specifically? And, if so, what do you think that system should look like?***

#### **Answer**

I am 100% in support of building a more equitable funding structure for our public transit system. Paratransit, so often overlooked, is a critical bridge across the gap between patrons with disabilities and getting around. We cannot have a transit



system that excludes people with disabilities, and we must incorporate features that make it more accessible for individuals with hidden disabilities. That system should, in my opinion, look very much like the WMATA's in Washington, D.C. Paratransit services should be on-demand, small units, and should be entirely independent from mainline transit, to allow riders with disabilities to access central transit hubs at their convenience. I also support federal legislation to subsidize decreased fares for riders with disabilities, following CTA's lead.

### **Economic Justice:**

#### **Context for Question**

Supplemental Security Income, also known as SSI, serves as a critical safety net to provide some level of income for many people with disabilities. However, the process to obtain benefits can stretch over two years. Recipients of SSI only receive an average of \$700 / month, and outdated asset limits of \$2,000 per person and \$3,000 per couple trap people with disabilities in a vicious cycle of poverty.

#### **Question**

***What concrete steps would you take to modernize and reform the SSI program so that it benefits and uplifts people with disabilities?***

#### **Answer**

If elected, I want to overhaul SSI completely and will support legislation to do so. The incredibly low asset limits make it impossible for people with disabilities to gain financial security, and too often trap them below the poverty line. I will work to raise those limits significantly, and I will work to raise the monthly assistance amount to be in line with inflation, and the increased cost of living. On my first day in Congress, I would co-sponsor the SSI Savings Penalty Elimination Act.

#### **Context for Question**

SNAP is a critical lifeline for millions of Americans and is especially important for people with disabilities. However, H.R. 1 will force millions of Americans off critical SNAP benefits, as well as create excessive bureaucratic red tape for people with disabilities. Regardless,



the SNAP program in many ways does not account for the unique needs of people with disabilities, particularly with the program's restriction on purchasing ready-made / hot meals.

### Question

***What concrete steps would you take to protect SNAP benefits AND modernize food access programs to be more accessible to the disability community?***

### Answer

I am disgusted at this administration's efforts to cut Americans off from lifesaving food assistance, simply for the purpose of being cruel. This will disproportionately harm the disability community, and I won't stand for it, both during my campaign and in Congress. We need a complete overhaul of the SNAP system, yes, but that overhaul must make the assistance received both greater and easier to access, not smaller and harder. I will be introducing and co-sponsoring legislation aimed at reversing the cruelty in H.R. 1, and making disability rights and accessibility cornerstones of our assistance programs. I will ensure that I am able to work with other state and local agencies to ensure that these programs are not only funded but are being administered in a way that makes them accessible for all.

## **Immigration:**

### Context for Question

While federal disability rights laws apply to people with disabilities regardless of citizenship status, there are significant unaddressed enforcement gaps in protecting immigrants with disabilities. According to an [April 2024 Congressional Research Service report](#) on medical care in immigrant detention facilities, significant gaps remain in ensuring adequate treatment and accommodations for detained individuals with disabilities. <sup>2</sup>

### Question

***How would you work to hold federal agencies accountable for protecting the rights and dignity of immigrants with disabilities in detention and during the immigration process?***



### Answer

This administration's callous disregard for human rights is appalling, nowhere more so than the immigration travesty it has wrought. American law enforcement is kidnapping and imprisoning individuals purely on the basis of race, in squalid, inhumane camps. These conditions are harmful to everyone detained but especially people with disabilities and chronic health issues. I have regularly protested at the Broadview ICE facility, where many people abducted in the Ninth District and across Illinois have been taken. I witnessed with my own eyes as an immigrant family was turned away at the door by a federal agent when they tried to bring much-needed medication to their loved one who was being held inside. People inside the facility were denied water, beds, and food. Some detainees even went into cardiac arrest.

And this is happening all over the country. Trump has deported children with cancer and untold numbers of other people experiencing life-altering illness and struggles. The full force of the federal government is currently being used to deprive human beings of legal and medical assistance. They use disproportionate amounts of force on immigrants and protestors alike. This is the nightmare scenario, and it is so much worse for those with disabilities. I will hold the Trump administration accountable, not only through my oversight authority as a member of Congress, but as a human of conscience. One of my primary fights will be legislating these inhumane operations out of existence, and referring to these thugs, including Pam Bondi, Kristi Noem, Stephen Miller, and Tom Homan for criminal prosecution during the next administration. I am the only candidate for Congress who has called for Kristi Noem to be tried at the Hague. I refuse to be silent about the crime of the century