



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: Junaid Ahmed

Party: Democratic

District: Illinois' 8th 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



I will fight to fully enforce and protect the ADA, Section 504, IDEA, and all federal disability rights laws. That means opposing efforts to weaken enforcement, restoring capacity at agencies like OCR and OSERS, and using congressional oversight to hold the Trump administration accountable. Disability rights are civil rights, and they must be defended with the full force of federal law.

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

One of my top priorities is rebuilding the federal agencies that protect civil and disability rights by restoring staffing, funding, and authority. I support reversing harmful RIFs, investing in skilled public servants, and ensuring these agencies have the independence and resources needed to enforce the law. A functioning federal government is essential to protecting vulnerable communities.

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

I strongly support fully funding IDEA at the promised federal share. I will advocate for sustained increases in federal funding so schools can hire more special education teachers, therapists, and support staff while reducing the burden on local communities. Every student deserves a truly free, quality public education that meets their needs.

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

I will fight to reverse Donald Trump's cuts to Medicare and Medicaid and fight to protect and expand home and community-based services. Medicaid HCBS allows people with disabilities to live independently and with dignity, and those services must be strengthened, not diminished. Health care is a human right and I believe in universal



healthcare.

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 benefit and increasing federal investment to eliminate long waitlists. We must also raise wages for care workers, improve oversight, and center the voices of disabled people to ensure services are high quality. Community-based care is both more humane and more cost-effective than institutionalization and should always be our goal.

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

Criminalizing homelessness is harmful and ineffective, especially for people with mental illness. I support a housing-first approach that expands permanent supportive housing, mental health services, and crisis care instead of punishment. We must treat mental illness as a public health issue, not a crime.

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

Yes. I support an equitable transit funding system that treats accessible transit and paratransit as essential services, not afterthoughts. That means stable, dedicated operating funding for CTA, Metra, Pace, and ADA paratransit, with accessibility built into every investment. Mobility is key to independence and economic participation. The NITA



Act was a major step in the right direction and we must continue to build on that progress.

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

SSI must be modernized to reflect the real cost of living. I support raising benefit levels, dramatically increasing outdated asset limits, and streamlining the application process so people aren't forced into years-long delays and poverty. Disability benefits should support independence, not punish it.

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 will fight to reverse SNAP cuts and oppose new bureaucratic barriers. SNAP must be modernized to account for disability-related needs, including allowing the purchase of prepared and hot meals when necessary. Food access programs should prioritize dignity, flexibility, and accessibility.

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. ²

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

I will push for stronger oversight and accountability for federal agencies to ensure immigrants with disabilities receive proper care and accommodations. This includes enforcing disability rights in detention, increasing transparency, and ending practices that place disabled immigrants in harm's way. Human rights do not stop at citizenship status.

