



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: Bushra Amiwala

Party: Democratic

District: Illinois' 9th 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

As a candidate with a disability, and someone who suffers from struggles of mental health (bipolar disorder), this is deeply personal to me. There are several legislative remedies I will advance to protect disability rights. I'll start by reintroducing Rep. Sharice Davids' ABLE Employment Flexibility Act. This would allow more people with disabilities to use their earned income to tax-advantaged savings accounts to achieve financial independence. Our tax structure and financial institutions must ensure that everyone has means of accruing and accessing resources like bank accounts, including those with disabilities. I will also reintroduce the International Children with Disabilities Protection Act, originally drafted by Sen. Robert Menendez. This bill would establish a protection program under the State Department for children with disabilities worldwide. It would advance rights protection programs and promote policies that benefit children with disabilities as well as their families. But introducing new bills isn't enough when the already-codified disability law of our nation is currently under attack. We must protect what is already in place. I will use the Congressional power of investigation to expose how the Trump administration is violating existing law and hurting people with disabilities. In this area and others, I am running to help Congress reclaim its power. Congress, not the executive branch, has the power of the purse. The executive cannot decide to withhold funding at will because he disagrees with laws that have already been passed. My predecessors in the House seem content to let their chamber cede its constitutionally mandated powers to a president who looks more like a king every day. That will end on my watch.

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

Elon Musk's Department of Government Efficiency had very little regard for what it could legally accomplish. DOGE was essentially a propaganda wing. It was concerned with



creating flashy, made-for-camera scenes of chaos in the lobbies of our federal agency buildings. It was not concerned with saving money. Congress, not DOGE, controls the government's spending. Here's the reality: all the reckless, illegal layoffs DOGE initiated did not save American taxpayers one cent. Federal judges ruled that the reductions in force this year were illegal; the president had no such power to reorganize the entire federal government. Congress must hold him accountable. I will start by codifying the job security of our essential personnel. I will support the Protect America's Workforce Act, originally introduced by Rep. Jared Golden. The most effective way to protect the jobs of our federal workforce is to empower the unions that represent those workers. The Act would restore their ability to unionize and prohibit union-busting at the highest levels of power. Consider, for example, the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA). Most Americans don't realize that many of the services we take for granted depend on NOAA, regardless of whether we live near an ocean. Many of the local weather forecasts, hurricane and tornado warnings that populate the Weather apps on our cell phones depend on NOAA data. Without the experts at that agency, millions of Americans would have no way of preparing for severe weather. Part of the issue at hand is one of communication; Congress must be transparent in explaining how the American people's money is being spent. I will legislate with a mandate from my constituents to preserve the essential services from the federal government that keep us all safe. In doing so, I will stand in the way of any further layoffs that devastate our economy and make life worse for my constituents.

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

As an elected school board member, I have seen the enormous potential special education to uplift students in my district. I also realize the great harm caused by underfunding IDEA in our country. This program should be mandatory spending, the same way Social Security, Medicare and Medicaid are. The federal government should be compelled to fully fund its share of IDEA and avoid placing additional burdens on the states. I will ensure that special education opportunities are uniform across all 50 states. Our students' quality of education should not depend on their zip code or their state. I will also act to ensure no one who needs it is excluded from special education services. I'll reintroduce Rep. Erin Houchin's proposed amendment to IDEA that makes sure students with dyslexia and other learning disorders are included. Not only will I fully fund federal special education programs, but I will do everything possible to make those programs serve all the students that they can.

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 believe healthcare is a human right, not a privilege. I support a Medicare for All system at the federal level because no one should be uninsured in the most prosperous country on earth. In Congress, I will work to guarantee healthcare for every person in the U.S.—regardless of income, immigration status, employment, or zip code. Home and community-based services are essential pillars of our healthcare system that must invariably be covered. Medicare for All would make that happen. To me, Medicare for All is not just a political slogan; it is the morally imperative, fiscally responsible policy to create the healthcare system Americans need and deserve. That includes HCBS, mental healthcare, reproductive healthcare, and dental and vision coverage. We are the only industrialized nation not to adopt a Medicare-for-All-adjacent system. Our doctors, nurses and patients suffer for it. There is a reason that's the case: the health insurance lobby has bought our lawmakers in Congress. I will not accept any corporate or PAC funds because I will not be beholden to the insurance lobby—or any group that does not have the best interest of my constituents at heart. I will bring a clear-eyed perspective of what needs to be done so this nation's healthcare system prioritizes patient health over corporate profits.

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

Yes, I do support making HCBS a mandatory Medicaid service. HCBS is not a luxury. It's not a nice-to-have perk. It's a type of care that millions of Americans rely on to stay healthy. The Persons with Disabilities Waiver offered in Illinois should be available to patients in every state. In 1999, the Olmstead decision ruled that unjust segregation of people with disabilities violated the Americans with Disabilities Act. However, such segregation all-too-often persists 26 years later. I will restore Medicaid funding, undoing the cuts this administration has done, and implement national standards to ensure that Medicaid is never using public dollars to fund substandard care. Our patients and taxpayers deserve better. The long waitlists American patients are faced with mean that every day, scores of people in need of HCBS have to go without the care they need. Fully funded HCBS under Medicaid means more qualified doctors, nurses and caregivers who are available to render their services. Medicaid has the potential to dramatically improve the quality of life for patients of all abilities. Sometimes, the services covered under the law are best delivered in the patient's home. HCBS should be funded as consistently as any other category of services. I'll ensure that is the case in Congress by restoring Medicaid funding and codifying standards to protect HCBS patients.

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.

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Question

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

Answer

My approach to addressing homelessness is restorative, not punitive. Homelessness and mental illness are linked. We need wraparound services to ensure no one in the wealthiest country on earth has to go without a roof over their head. While we work towards that goal, ending the criminalization of homelessness is a clear first step. No one wants to be sleeping in their cars, or on street corners, or in public parks. That is no one's first choice. Endless wait lists for overcrowded homeless shelters leave many with no other option. We are in the middle of the worst affordable housing shortage this nation has ever seen, and Congress has been sluggish in addressing the issue. Our tax structure, zoning laws and infrastructure incentives all need to be reformed to increase the quantity of affordable units, including family units, to meet the demand. At the same time, I plan on funding rapid-response mental health programs to take the burden off our police officers and offer readily available, qualified mental health services to those who need it. Homelessness is not a crime, but it is a choice. It is a choice made not by the unhoused, rather by the policymakers who have taken a buzzsaw to our social safety net. I plan on choosing a different path forward.

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 do support a more equitable funding system to better fund accessible transit, including paratransit. My district's economy relies on public transit. Nearly 100,000 constituents in IL-09 rely on it for their daily commutes. This fact made the approach of Illinois' transit fiscal cliff especially disturbing. Even worse, our region's infrastructure fails people with disabilities. Inaccessibility on our streets, bus stops and train platforms makes it too difficult for many residents to get around. The Chicago Transit Authority's Red and Purple Modernization would have added four fully accessible new stations, and renovated other stations for accessibility that hadn't been updated in over a century. However, the Trump administration froze the project's federal funding. This is another instance in which I will work to reclaim the power of Congress. Funds that Congress has already appropriated cannot be frozen by the executive at will. That's unconstitutional, yet it's happening. It's time to unfreeze the project funding and ensure that all future infrastructure and transit projects like this one are planned with accessibility in mind. I will allocate funds for paratransit that ensure all travelers are served before, during and after the construction is complete. My plan includes working hand-in-hand with the Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning, which serves the city of Chicago and other regions of my district as well. I will fund studies, surveys and blueprints that include commuters with disabilities so their needs and perspectives are fully integrated into future plans. We neglect the region's transit system at our own peril. IL-09 would be thrown into economic ruin without accessible, reliable and affordable public transit.

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

The Trump administration recently considered a plan to cancel the enrollment of 830,000 people from Supplemental Security Income. Doing so would make a dire problem even worse. Right now, unconscionably long wait times to access SSI benefits mean recipients are forced to go years without the assistance they need. When they finally do obtain benefits, it is too little, too late. Even with cost of living adjustments, the payments are insufficient. I support Rep. Danny K. Davis' SSI Savings Penalty Elimination Act. The adverse effect of the asset limit punishes older recipients for responsibly saving their money. People with disabilities and those over 64 years old must possess no more than \$2,000 in assets—a policy clearly out of line with today's economy. At the very least, we must raise the limit of \$10,000 for individuals and \$20,000 for married couples, as the bill suggests. Consider it this way: does \$2,000 have the same purchasing power today that it did in the late 1990s? Of course not. It's time for Congress to get with the times and raise the asset limit SSI.

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.

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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

This issue is personal for me. I grew up on SNAP benefits, grateful that the social safety net in the United States let my family have enough to eat. Now that H.R. 1 is the law of the land, millions of Illinoisans—including thousands in my district—are forced to rely on local food pantries or otherwise go hungry. This crisis of hunger is totally unnecessary and avoidable. My top priority will be rolling back all cuts made to SNAP and reduce the red tape that stands between hungry people and access to food. It doesn't take an expert policy analyst to see the effect H.R. 1 is having on our neighbors. People are struggling to afford basic groceries, in no small part because of the tariffs this administration is placing on food imports from other countries. I will challenge the illegal and unconstitutional tariffs in Congress, and I will support legislation like Rep. Jahana Hayes' Keep SNAP and WIC Funded Act. A total of 41 million people, or 12% of the United States population, uses SNAP. Another 6.7 million rely on food assistance from WIC, which is also under attack. After restoring the benefits to all who lost access, I will eliminate any existing work requirements that keep Americans with disabilities from eligibility. Our nutrition benefits exist to feed hungry people, not saddle them with red tape.

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



America is a nation of immigrants. I believe wholeheartedly that immigrants make our country stronger. The dehumanizing treatment immigrants are receiving at the hands of ICE agents is unconscionable. Someone needs to remind this administration that the rights and protections of our Constitution are guaranteed to every person in the United States, regardless of immigration status and regardless of ability. I will use the investigatory powers of Congress to the fullest extent possible to get to the bottom of what is happening to detainees in ICE custody. I will compel ICE and senior administration officials to testify and answer to the American people for the atrocities they carried out in our own backyard. It's clear that this administration is not particularly interested in following the law—not the Americans with Disabilities Act, nor the basic constitutional right to due process. I will protect the rights of everyone pursued or detained by immigration officers by exposing the illegality of Trump's actions. When Democrats win back the House and the Senate in 2026, we will usher in a new era of accountability under the law. A reckoning is coming for everyone who committed human rights violations against Americans with disabilities during the first year of Trump's second term. They will find no further impunity for abuse.