



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: Daniel Biss

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

The dismantling of the OCR and OSERS is an erosion of our civil rights. By gutting these agencies, the administration is making disability laws impossible to enforce. I will introduce legislation to mandate minimum staffing levels, ensuring no president can fire the investigators who protect our students and workers. We must treat these offices as non-negotiable lifelines, not political pawns. Furthermore, I will fight to expand the private right of action, empowering families to hold institutions accountable when the government fails them. Disability rights are human rights and I won't let them be erased through bureaucratic sabotage.

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

The reductions in force were a targeted attack on disability rights. By 2028, my vision is a total restoration of our enforcement infrastructure. I will fight for Protect America's Workforce Act to reinstate purged civil servants and restore institutional knowledge. We must establish statutory staffing floors for the OCR and OSERS, ensuring no administration can gut the law by firing the people who enforce it. Disability rights are non-negotiable lifelines and should never be cut by any administration, Republican or Democrat. We must go beyond just building back what Trump has slashed by creating a "RIF-proof" government that finally treats civil rights as a mandatory obligation.



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

The federal government’s failure to meet its 40% funding promise is a betrayal of our students’ civil rights. By providing only 10%, we force local districts into impossible choices, stretching educators thin and neglecting our most vulnerable learners. I will fight to pass the IDEA Full Funding Act, making special education spending mandatory, not discretionary. We must bridge this gap to provide competitive wages for therapists and hire more school psychologists. It’s time to stop balancing the budget on the backs of students with disabilities. Full funding is the law and it must be treated as such.

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 make health care a guaranteed right, not a privilege tied to income or unemployment. The first step will be to immediately reverse the damaging policies enacted under the Republican budget so working people can access care, and hospitals can avoid closure. I will defend and strengthen Medicaid and Medicare while fighting for Medicare for All. Medicare should be expanded to include vision and dental coverage. To make care truly accessible, I'll take on big pharma, big insurance, and private equity by pushing for lower prescription drug prices, ending surprise medical bills, and stopping corporate takeover of hospitals and nursing homes that cut services and harm patients.

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 support making HCBS a mandatory Medicaid service so people with disabilities aren't stuck on endless waitlists. To reduce waitlists while protecting service and quality of care, I'll fight to fully fund and expand Medicaid and invest in direct care workforce with better pay. I will also prioritize home and community-based care so people with disabilities can live independently and with dignity. I am proud of my time in Springfield where I fought for HCBS, and helped stop Gov. Rauner's attacks on the Community Care Program. While those attacks were directed at seniors, we know that he would have come after HCBS for people with disabilities next.

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 unhoused 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

I will treat access to housing and health care as human rights. I oppose policies that criminalize poverty and mental illness—including substance use—which push people further from care and stability. These issues should never be “treated” by the criminal justice system. I will push for more investment in treatment and outreach so people can heal with dignity and safety. This is something that I have done as mayor of Evanston with our Crisis Alternative Response Evanston (C.A.R.E.) program, an initiative aimed at changing how our community polices by sending specialist C.A.R.E team members to



respond to lower risk service calls. This not only leads to better outcomes for those in crisis, but also allows our police department to focus on addressing criminal activities and implementing proactive community safety measures.

I'll fight to expand access to mental health care through Medicaid and Medicare for All, invest in community-based health services, fund supportive housing that includes quality care, and dramatically increase federal investment in building and preserving affordable housing through the Housing Trust Fund and Low-Income Housing Tax Credits.

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

In Congress, I will fight for transit and paratransit funding with an understanding that these services are also civil rights. Even as many of my fellow suburban mayors were opposed to the recent transit reform bill that was signed into law, I spoke out in strong support of this legislation. I'll support the Stronger Communities Through Better Transit Act to help provide better federal support for CTA, Pace, and Metra operating expenses. I'll also work to reclassify paratransit as mandatory federal spending to ensure the federal government helps cover the costs. With the state drastically underfunding ADA paratransit, we need federal assistance to provide high



quality service. Our transit needs go far beyond capital, and we should have a federal government that puts some skin in the game to ensure reliable, door-to-door service.

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

I support increasing the SSI monthly amount and asset limits, shortening the application and timelines, and removing punitive rules that penalize savings, marriage, and part-time work so these benefits provide real value to people's lives.

I will work with community-based organizations, such as Access Living and the Social Security Administration (SSA), and other community members to create an SSI enrollment assistance program that makes it faster and easier for people with disabilities to understand and access the benefits they qualify for. Right now, the SSI system is buried in red tape and government rabbit holes that are nearly impossible to understand, especially for people with disabilities and even if families or caregivers are there to help.



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

We must fight for food justice for all in our communities, and that means not only providing food, but providing accessible systems to get to it. Step one is to immediately reverse the harmful policies enacted under the Republican budget, which includes protecting and modernizing SNAP to reflect the realities that people with disabilities face. I also support the Hot Foods Act to make prepared meals more accessible to those on SNAP. I believe we need to provide additional funding for food pantries and distribution points to ensure accessibility. Finally, I support cutting the red tape that kicks many disabled people off of SNAP to make these programs easier to get on and stay on. We must ensure our food assistance programs meet people where they are and actually make their lives better.

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

First, I'll fight for an immigration system grounded in decency, the rule of law, and common sense. The violent and terrorizing immigration enforcement actions under the Trump administration are unconstitutional and making our communities unsafe. Congress must immediately begin aggressive oversight and transparency investigations to understand exactly where and how the Trump Administration is carrying out this terror. Members of Congress and advocates must have immediate and unfettered access to detention facilities for oversight purposes. That includes enforcing disability accommodations and ensuring access to appropriate medical care. Individual rights, including disability rights and due process, apply regardless of immigration status.

I have been proud of the work I have done as mayor and our community being the tip of the spear at combatting the federal government's attacks on our residents. From strengthening our Welcoming City ordinance to protect the sharing our resident's data with the federal government to passing an ICE-free zone resolution to bar ICE from using our city's property for federal immigration enforcement operations, to being in the streets protesting the in Broadview, Chicago, or Evanston, I will not stop fighting to protect our neighbors from the Trump Administration's heinous attacks.