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: Sanjyot Dunung

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

Protecting disability rights is personal to me, and I will fight aggressively to ensure federal disability laws are protected, not dismantled. As someone who cared for my aging and disabled parents, including my mother, who had a rare and aggressive form of MD (Inclusion Body Myositis), I've seen firsthand how essential strong federal protections and services are for families. No one should lose care because agencies are dismantled or rights are weakened.

We know that financial, health, and services programs are critical for ensuring that Americans with disabilities can live safely with dignity.

Medicaid is a lifeline for millions, especially children, low-income families, older adults, and people with disabilities. I will fight to block any cuts, block grant proposals, or paperwork-driven disenrollment that strip people of the care they are legally entitled to.

I also believe everyone deserves dignity in aging and disability. That's why I support modernizing SSI and co-sponsoring the SSI Savings Penalty Elimination Act to end outdated asset limits that push people with disabilities deeper into poverty.

Strong disability rights require strong enforcement. I will oppose any effort to weaken or defund the federal agencies responsible for civil rights, special education, transportation, workplace safety, and healthcare protections. These systems must act proactively, not after harm occurs or someone dies.

In Congress, I will defend and strengthen the laws and agencies that uphold disability rights, protect and expand Medicaid and SSI, and ensure every person with a disability can live and age with dignity and independence.

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

Between now and 2028, my vision is to reimagine how government can better serve, protect, and uplift all Americans. Rebuilding the federal infrastructure requires that we have a firm understanding of the needs of all Americans for the next two decades –and ensure that we build a professional, merit-based, and independent civil service to protect individuals, workers, families, and civil rights. I will oppose funding cuts designed to shrink the federal workforce, further federal pay freezes and benefit cuts, and any efforts to change the federal service jobs from merit-based civil service to at-will, politically based employment. Federal employees should be valued for their expertise and protected from what we have recently seen—partisan manipulation.

Many disabled Americans have special needs and requirements, and we must ensure that the government can serve these Americans fairly, with ease and dignity.

My mother served on the board of Age Options in Cook County. Accordingly, I have spoken to them extensively to see how we can better meet the needs of our disabled and aging neighbors throughout our district.

I will support the full restoration of collective-bargaining rights for federal workers, including co-sponsoring the Public Service Freedom to Negotiate Act and legislation to reverse executive orders that stripped those rights and to restore union contracts. Reinstating these rights is essential to maintaining a professional, independent civil service with fair pay, equitable benefits, and safe working conditions.

To truly rebuild administrative capacity, I will prioritize federal workforce development funding that supports high-quality jobs and “high road” employers, and I will push Congress to return to a functional appropriations process that plans, invests strategically, and provides stability, rather than governing by constant crisis and continuing resolutions.

Education:

Context for Question

The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) is the federal law the 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 believe every child deserves a world-class education, regardless of disability, income, or zip code, and that includes fully upholding the federal commitment to fund IDEA. When the federal government underfunds special education, it pushes the burden onto local communities, leaves teachers and therapists stretched thin, and harms students. I will fight aggressively to reverse this trend. My experience in education, combined with a first-hand understanding of the needs of disabled Americans, will help me collaborate with experts to reimagine how a new Education Department can better serve individuals with special needs at all ages and stages of learning.

First, I will support increasing federal appropriations to move toward the original 40% funding commitment, ensuring schools have the resources they need rather than shifting cost onto families and districts. My platform already prioritizes expanding access to early-intervention and children’s health programs and ensuring that vulnerable populations continue to receive uninterrupted care and support.

Second, we must combat administrative barriers and red tape. States and school districts should face churn-style paperwork burdens that disrupt services for students with disabilities. Federal funding must be paired with clear, stable rules and consistent support.

Finally, I will strongly oppose any effort to weaken or defund the federal agencies responsible for enforcing civil rights and education protections. Strong, independent enforcement is essential to making IDEA meaningful in practice, not just on paper.

In Congress, I will work to ensure IDEA is properly funded and vigorously enforced so every child with a disability has access to the education and support they are guaranteed under the law.

Additionally, my platform prioritizes updating income and poverty-based thresholds to better
reflect the costs of raising a family in 2025. Families with disabled children and family members face additional long-term costs, and it's essential that we improve our programs to help alleviate some of the stresses.

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

Protecting access to healthcare, especially for people with disabilities, is one of my top priorities. As someone who cared for my disabled mother, I understand how essential Medicaid and home and community-based services (HCBS) are to independence, dignity, and safety. Cuts from H.R. 1 would be devastating for Illinois families.

I am prioritizing updating income and poverty-based thresholds to ensure that individuals do not have to be destitute to access benefits. Additionally, I am advocating for improving Medicare to ensure more Americans have expanded access to in-home support so they can live and age with dignity in their own homes.

I will fight to block any cuts to Medicaid and Medicare and oppose block-grant proposals that turn guaranteed care into a political bargaining chip. Medicaid must remain a stable, legally protected benefit—not one that forces people with disabilities into institutions because states can no longer afford HCBS.

My platform also calls for:

1.) Expanding access to HCBS so people with disabilities can live in their communities, not institutions.

2.) Ensuring fair reimbursement so providers don't abandon Medicaid, which would further reduce access to essential care.

3.) Strengthening early-intervention and children's health programs, which are critical for long-term outcomes.

4.) Eliminating administrative barriers and burying families in paperwork that causes eligible
people to lose coverage. States should not be forced into burdensome verification processes that strip people of the care they depend on.

ACCESS LIVING

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 strongly support expanding access to HCBS because every person with a disability deserves the chance to live as independently and safely as possible. With personal experience, I know how life-changing the right to support can be, and how damaging it is when families are forced into institutional settings they don't need.

To reduce HCBS waitlists in Illinois, I will work to significantly increase federal investment in
Medicaid, so states have the resources to expand their waiver programs and meet demand. I will also push for fair reimbursement rates so providers can hire and retain enough qualified staff to deliver consistent, high-quality support at home. When reimbursement is too low, services disappear, leaving families with no real choices.

I also advocate updating the income and poverty thresholds so that people can live and age with dignity in their homes and with the support that they need. We also need common-sense, responsible reforms to reduce the administrative burden on people and their families.

I will fight to ensure people with disabilities can access services that help them stay in their

communities, personal care, in-home support, transportation, and employment assistance,
without being forced out of their home simply because government funding is inadequate. Community living is not only more dignified and cost-effective, but it also aligns with the core principles of disability rights and the promise of the Olmstead decision.

I support making HCBS a mandatory Medicaid benefit because essential support should not depend on where someone lives or whether a state has funding available. A person's ability to live in the most integrated setting possible should be a guaranteed right backed by stable federal funding.

In Congress, I will push for long-term federal commitment that dramatically expands HCBS capacity, reduces waitlists, strengthens the workforce that provides these services, and ensures that every person with a disability can live in the community with autonomy, dignity, and respect.

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 cruel, ineffective, and disproportionately harms people with disabilities, especially those living with serious mental illness. I believe every person deserves dignity, stability, and access to care, not punishment for the circumstances they're in.

My approach centers on expanding access to healthcare, including mental healthcare, which I view as an essential part of healthcare, not a luxury. I will fight to strengthen Medicaid and ensure it continues to cover the behavioral health services people need to stay safe, stable, and connected to their communities.

To protect unhoused people with mental illness, we must:

1.) Increase federal funding for supportive housing, including wraparound services that address both housing needs and mental health treatment.

2.) Expand community-based care programs so people receive treatment outside of prisons, institutions, and emergency rooms.

3.) Provide stronger protections against discriminatory or punitive ordinances that criminalize behaviors associated with homelessness or mental illness.

4.) Ensure fair reimbursement levels for providers, so communities can expand outreach, crisis response, and long-term treatment capacity.

I believe homelessness reflects fundamental policy failures, not personal ones. In Congress, I will push for a coordinated federal strategy that treats mental illness with compassion, expands access to care, and ensures no one is punished simply for being unhoused.

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 strongly support a more equitable funding system that fully recognizes accessible transit, including paratransit, as an essential public service rather than an afterthought. Reliable transportation is a lifeline for many people with disabilities, and cuts to fixed-route transit that automatically reduce ADA paratransit access are unacceptable. Everyone deserves the freedom to participate in their community, work, go to school, and live independently.

From my work advocating for stronger public-sector protections, I've been clear that federal transit programs must safeguard critical services and the workers who provide them, including by ensuring Section 13(c) labor protections apply to all federal programs and "innovative finance initiatives." That same philosophy applies here: federal funding must be stable, equitable, and structured to protect the accessibility services people rely on.

A better funding system should include:

1.) Dedicated federal operating support for both mainline transit and ADA paratransit—not just capital investments—so service levels remain stable and accessible.

2.) Stronger federal investment in accessible infrastructure, including vehicles, stops, stations, and digital access tools.

3.) Funding formulas that explicitly account for disability access, so paratransit is not financially dependent on the health of fixed-route systems.

4.) Fair reimbursement and workforce protections to attract and retain the drivers, dispatchers, and support staff needed to deliver safe, reliable paratransit service.

I oppose efforts to privatize or weaken transit services, because doing so undermines pay, safety, and accountability—ultimately harming riders with the greatest need.

In Congress, I will push for a funding model that treats accessible transit as core infrastructure: stable, protected, and fully funded so people with disabilities can move freely, with independence and dignity.

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

Modernizing SSI is long overdue. The current asset limits, set in 1984, punish people with disabilities for saving even modest amounts and push them into destitution. I fully support and will co-sponsor the SSI Savings Penalty Elimination Act, raising asset limits. This is an essential first step to restoring dignity and stability.

Furthermore, my platform calls for updating the income and poverty thresholds to better reflect the realities and costs of living in 2025. Americans living with disabilities incur additional costs that must be factored into any calculation.

We must:

1.) Reduce paperwork and wait times by expanding staffing and resources at the Social Security Administration so people don't wait unnecessarily for life-sustaining benefits.

2.) Increase SSI monthly benefit levels so recipients can meet basic needs without falling into homelessness or medical crises.

3.) Ending punitive rules that strip people of benefits for receiving small gifts or support from family.

4.) Protecting Medicaid eligibility, since SSI is tightly linked to healthcare access for people with disabilities.

5.) Strengthening outreach and simplifying the application process, so people aren't shut out
by overly complex systems or inaccessible systems.

Updating these limits to at least $10,000 for individuals and $20,000 for couples and then indexing them to inflation is long overdue. By increasing these thresholds, we can

✓ Ensure that disabled Americans have financial security.
✓ Reduce the constant fear of losing benefits.
✓ Reflect today's economic realities for our communities.
✓ Encourage responsible saving rather than penalizing it.

Protecting dignity, stability, and independence for vulnerable Americans is a core priority for me and one of the reasons I am running. I will strongly advocate for modernizing SSI and ensuring it serves the people it was designed to protect.

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

SNAP is a lifeline for millions of Americans, especially people with disabilities, and I will fight aggressively to block any cuts in H.R. 1 that would strip people of the food assistance they rely on. No one should lose access to food because of punitive rules or bureaucratic barriers.

To protect and modernize SNAP, I will support:

1.) Fully protecting SNAP from cuts, block grants, or burdensome eligibility barriers that disproportionately harm people with disabilities.

2.) Streamlining paperwork requirements so people are not pushed off benefits by red tape or repeated re-verification demands.

3.) Expanding the program to allow the purchase of ready-made or hot meals, recognizing that many people with disabilities cannot safely cook or prepare food.

4.) Increasing benefit adequacy so recipients can afford nutritious food throughout the month.

5.) Strengthening Medicaid, SSI, and other interconnected programs, because stability in healthcare and income is essential for consistent access to food.

SNAP must reflect the needs of the disability community. In Congress, I will push to modernize food access programs so that no one is forced into hunger or unsafe living conditions simply because the current system has failed to adapt to people’s lived realities.

Immigration:

ACCESS
LIVING

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.

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

Protecting the rights and dignity of immigrants with disabilities is a moral and legal obligation. I believe all Americans—and all people in our care—should have the legal and structural protections to live their best lives, including access to medical care, safety, and humane treatment. As someone who cared for my disabled mother and father, I know how dangerous it is when institutions fail to meet basic health needs, and that responsibility is even greater when the federal government has custody over someone.

I will work to hold federal agencies accountable by:

1.) Strengthening oversight and enforcement of civil rights protections, including requiring DHS and ICE to comply with federal disability laws governing medical care, accommodations, and accessible communication. I strongly oppose efforts to weaken or defund the agencies responsible for protecting civil rights, safety, and basic standards of care.

2.) Requiring transparent reporting and independent inspections of detention facilities to ensure people with disabilities receive appropriate medical treatment, prescribed medications, mobility supports, and reasonable accommodations.

3.) Expanding community-based alternatives to detention, particularly for individuals with disabilities or medical needs, who should not be held in facilities unable to provide adequate care.

4.) Pushing for legal, fair, humane, and efficient immigration processes so people are not kept in prolonged detention where conditions can exacerbate disabilities. My immigration platform supports a transparent, fair system that treats people with dignity and keeps families safe. We need to process visas, green cards, and citizenship faster so that no one is waiting years to receive their papers.

5.) Ensuring workers in detention and processing facilities have the training, resources, and
protections needed to deliver safe, lawful, and humane care, consistent with my commitment to strong labor protections across all federally funded programs.

In Congress, I will demand accountability, insist on humane and lawful treatment, and ensure that immigrants with disabilities are protected—not forgotten—at every stage of the immigration process.