



## **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:** Justin Ford

**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**



I would work to fully restore and fund OCR and OSERS, protect ADA, Section 504, and IDEA enforcement, and put guardrails in place so these offices cannot be dismantled again. I support stronger civil rights oversight, faster complaint resolution, and a universal design approach that ensures accessibility is built in, not treated as optional.

### **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**

These layoffs damaged our ability to recruit and retain talent. I would restore staffing, rebuild agency capacity, and create protections that prevent politically motivated RIFs, so the federal government becomes a place where top professionals want to build careers.

### **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 has to keep its promise. I would work to raise the federal share of IDEA funding to 40 percent, lock in predictable funding, and ensure districts have the resources to deliver the services students are legally entitled to receive.



## **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**

As a public health professional, I know Medicaid and HCBS are lifelines. I will oppose cuts, work to secure stable federal funding for community-based services, and ensure Illinoisans with disabilities can access affordable care and remain in their homes and communities.

### **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 mandatory. To cut waitlists, we need stable federal funding, better pay and training for caregivers, and strict quality oversight. Community living promotes dignity and independence, and we should treat it as a right, not a limited program.

### 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

As a public health professional, I know criminalizing homelessness makes everything worse. I will push for housing-first policies, stronger mental health funding, and federal protections that keep people with mental illness out of jail and connected to care.

### 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 support a more equitable funding system that increases federal support for operations, expands dedicated paratransit funding, and ties federal dollars to accessibility outcomes. Reliable transit is a civil right for disabled riders, and the funding structure should reflect that.

### **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 would raise SSI asset limits, increase monthly benefits, and streamline the application process so people are not waiting years for support. SSI should lift people out of poverty, not trap them in 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 oppose H.R.1's cuts and protect SNAP from harmful eligibility restrictions. I support expanding SNAP so benefits are more generous and available to more people. No one should go hungry in the richest country in human history, and we have a moral responsibility to care for our neighbors

### **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**

I would require full ADA and Section 504 compliance in all detention facilities, expand independent monitoring, and hold agencies accountable for any neglect or abuse. Immigrants with disabilities deserve the same dignity and care as anyone else. Our values call us to treat every person as worthy and protect the vulnerable without exception.