



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: Eric France

Party: Democratic

District: Illinois' 2nd 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 focus on proactive legislation in terms of clarifying and reinforcing benefits, making sure governmental agencies are held accountable in their support of disabled individuals, work to increase the number of citizens who can qualify for disability, and strengthen ADA laws. I would also want to work to expand voting access and increase asset limits for those getting disability benefits.

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

I would work towards reducing RIF's by creating workforce stability, help agencies with strategic plans to increase hiring with an emphasis on digital skills and investment in tech sectors, and promote a culture where merit is emphasized with a clear path towards developing practical professional skills.

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 would advocate for the existing full federal commitment of 40%, support and endorse legislation that impacts educational programs, work to increase funding for educators and



empowering educators with additional resources for the educational benefit of those with disabilities (IEP's, etc.) and ensure we are holding agencies and school districts accountable to make sure that students with disabilities are being properly served and not being left behind, educationally speaking.

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

First, it should be stated that I am in favor of healthcare for all, as I believe healthcare is a basic right of all Americans. I would work to protect Medicaid, strengthen the ACA and advocate for healthcare protections for those with disabilities. I would work to lower prescription drug costs, fund essential services and organizations that serve those with disabilities (such as community based organizations and community health clinics/hospitals), and support the Health Equity for People with Disabilities Act. I would also work with healthcare advocates to illuminate the varying issues with healthcare protection and why supporting those with disabilities should have a prominent role in those discussions.

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 would work to improve priority screening, improve administrative support for faster approval periods, enforcing consistent, national standards for determinations and decision making and advocate for minimum pay for direct care workers. I would also advocate for increase self-direction to individuals to choose, train and dismiss their caregivers along with providing transparent information regarding race/ethnic measures. I would absolutely support HCBS, however, I would work to close the gaps in regards to waivers which can leave too many without access to needed resources.

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



I would work with civic and community based organizations to identify and locate those who are unhoused, help to establish more effective and efficient crisis response systems, help create housing-first models, provide support for those suffering with substance abuse, work with organizations to provide better support for victims of domestic violence, and assist in creating better support systems for preventative measures before homelessness occurs. I would continue the work that I did when I was involved in the establishment of the Bobby E. Wright center to create housing options for individuals who are mentally and developmentally disabled.

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

Accessible transit options, including paratransit, should be viewed as a necessity for all residents, especially for those with disabilities. I would work to prioritize funding for public transit systems while also making services like paratransit or programs that Uber and Lyft have that helps with transportation needs for those with disabilities. I would also work with urban planners to develop and implement transit options for those in underserved communities and provide additional access (such as rail or bus systems).



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 begin by improving the application process so that it is consistent and fair for all applicants. Additionally, I would work to raise the benefits levels and income/asset limits, so that recipients are not penalized, reduce in-kind support penalties, and create better work incentive programs that will better assist SSI recipients.

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 would work to simplify and streamline the application process, work to remove barriers to benefits such as unfairly strict work requirements, create a connection between SNAP and SSI benefits, and work to ensure stores in low income areas accept SNAP benefits and have healthier food options. I would also advocate for improving electronic access points such as websites and mobile apps, with clear and concise language for individuals to better relate to language used.

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 would look to closing legal loopholes in existing laws that hinder the immigration process or place an undue burden on those seeking immigration status. I would advocate for



oversight by independent bodies to conduct authorized, and sometimes surprise inspections, of detention facilities to ensure proper and humane treatment, especially of those with disabilities. I would also make sure that there is a functioning investigative body to respond to complaints made to address institutional issues. I would additionally enforce comprehensive training of personnel involved in the immigration process to make sure they are current on cultural competence, disability rights and that they are aware of ways to provide proper accommodations and care.