



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: Jesse L. Jackson, Jr.

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 will work to ensure that current disability rights laws and regulations are protected and not dismantled by strengthening enforcement of current laws and regulations. One of the ways I would do that is by encouraging the use of the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission's power to use consent decrees to compel employers to fix discrimination.

I will also work to boost economic security by expanding funding for affordable and accessible housing and in-home support services. We need to raise wages for caregivers to improve retention and maintain quality care. Asset limits need to be reformed so members of the disability community can increase their financial freedom through savings without losing essential benefits. We also need to increase investments in transportation and infrastructure that improve access for everyone. Disability-focused design, like sidewalk curb cuts, fosters broader societal gains such as benefiting parents with strollers, travelers with rolling luggage, and cyclists. These examples are just a few illustrating that equitable design for the most vulnerable often benefits everyone.

We need to empower advocacy for disability rights by increasing funding for protection and advocacy systems that provide legal support and outreach. We also need to promote both federal and state level reforms to ensure that voting rights for the disabled, especially those under guardianship, are protected.

We also need to improve access to jobs by creating federal and state apprenticeship programs, and modernizing systems, to support and empower disabled workers without disincentivizing work.

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

Congress needs to maintain merit based civil service systems and enact permanent reforms to the RIF process to prevent political abuses of the federal workforce. Legislative prohibitions on RIFs need to be enacted. Adequate, stable and timely appropriations are paramount, so that departments and agencies have the personnel and resources to carry out mandated programs. RIF notices issued during the current administration need to be rescinded, and back pay provided. These actions will help restore experience, stability and



confidence in the federal workforce. Congress must restore its traditional oversight role. By monitoring any agency or department restructuring, Congress ensures the executive branch is complying with civil service laws and protections and challenges the executive branch's illegal actions regarding the federal workforce. Congress also needs to reduce the overuse of external contractors which create a shadow class of permanent employees, often at higher costs.

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

In the U.S. we have 50 different states and six territories which include around 13,000 different public-school districts that support almost 131,000 schools. Those school districts rely on different sources of funding, but the major sources of funding are property taxes, state funds and to a much lesser extent, federal funding. Using property taxes as a



major source of funding creates huge disparities based on where you live. Education funding should be robust, and follow student need, not local wealth.

I firmly believe that education for all is a human right. So much so that in 2001, I wrote *A More Union: Advancing New American Rights*. The book introduced the concept that basic human rights such as education need to be enshrined in the U.S. Constitution.

From the 107th to the 112th Congress, I introduced nine Constitutional amendments like the right to vote, the right to equal high-quality education and healthcare, the right to decent, safe and affordable housing, that would benefit everyone.

H.J. Res. 29, guaranteed the right to an equal, high-quality education in the U.S. Constitution. This amendment would allow Congress to enforce and implement the amendment through appropriate legislation.

Appropriate legislation should look at shifting the reliance on local property taxes to much more state and federal funding. Public school funding needs to implement weighted formulas that emphasize high-need schools that disproportionately educate low income, special needs, and English as a second language students. Funding formulas should also consider a minimum per-pupil spending level for all districts, as well as substantially increase funding levels for the federal Title I program and better target those funds for high-need areas.

Mandating a permanent and incremental glidepath for federal funding to at least cover the 40% share of state special education costs should be considered, instead of school districts relying on the capricious and arbitrary annual discretionary appropriations process. The elimination of the Department of Education, especially the Office of Special Education and Rehabilitative Services, needs to be reversed to ensure accountability and consistent enforcement of IDEA across all states.

That is vital to ensure equity and legal recourse for all families. IDEA funding formulas need to be reexamined to ensure that the diversity and severity of student needs are met without relying on formulas that use a census-based or one-size-fits all approach.

To make critical investments in IDEA students, teachers and public schools, I would



support legislation that raises revenue. That would include measures ending the carried interest tax loophole, increasing the capital gains and corporate tax rates, increasing the top tax rate on high earners, as well as establishing a windfall profits tax on the financial, energy and tech sectors.

In the U.S. we tax work, not wealth, allowing the wealthiest to take a ridiculously low salary and be compensated with stock options and other financial instruments. If those stocks are not sold, the wealthy can borrow huge sums using their stock options as collateral to fund their lavish lifestyle and avoid paying their fair share of taxes. Tax rates should be based on one's ability to pay them, not the ones who can afford accountants and tax lawyers who know how to manipulate the tax code.

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 right, not a privilege. So much so that during my previous service in Congress, I introduced H.J. Res. 30, a Constitutional amendment that would enshrine the right to equal, high-quality healthcare for everyone.

However, until that Constitutional amendment is enacted, I will strongly oppose any



reduction in federal funding to Medicaid. I support the expansion of Medicaid under the Affordable Care Act in all states that have not yet expanded the program. I also support a single-payer, public option, national healthcare system like Medicare for All. I will oppose any efforts to privatize or block grant the program, or efforts to include work requirements for recipients.

Home and Community-Based Services (HCBS) must be enhanced by making HCBS waivers less restrictive to keep people out of institutions, offering more choice in residential/supportive living. I don't favor regulations for the sake of regulations, yet HCBSs should be routinely assessed to ensure equal, high-quality standards, adequate staffing and provider accountability.

I am the only candidate in Illinois' Second Congressional District race that has a plan to support family caregivers and ensure those who need the help can get the care and respect they deserve at home.

To support adequate funding for Medicaid, I would support legislation that raises revenue such as ending the carried interest tax loophole, and legislation that increases the capital gains tax rate, the corporate tax rate, and the top tax rate on high earners as well as establishing a windfall profits tax on the financial, energy and tech sectors.

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

Healthcare is a right, not a privilege. I will work to make it a right that is enshrined in the Constitution. Until that happens, significant federal investments need to be made by establishing HCBS nationwide, creating an equal, high-quality standard. Substantial funding needs to be provided to reduce the number of people on waitlists, like the way the ACA decreased the number of uninsured through Medicaid expansion. To level the playing field and to ensure HCBS aren't subject to the vagaries of political majorities, HCBS should be mandatory, not optional.

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

Jails and prisons have effectively become the largest mental health institutions in the country, housing significantly more people with serious mental illness than state psychiatric hospitals. This is appalling. As I stated previously, I have proposed adding the right to a decent, safe, sanitary and affordable housing to the Constitution. Until this happens, there are some steps policy makers can take to protect unhoused people living



with mental illness that I support.

We need to provide immediate, unconditional permanent housing with wrap around support services like physical and mental health and substance use disorder treatment. We must emphasize voluntary engagement with community mental health services instead of forced institutionalization, which has proven to be ineffective and possibly harmful. Municipalities need to consider decriminalizing homelessness, and law enforcement needs to be accompanied by social services or mental health professionals when responding to 911 calls dealing with people experiencing a mental health crisis. I will also work to address the root causes of homelessness like poverty, the lack of livable wage employment, and the lack of affordable housing.

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. Freedom of movement for everyone is necessary to maintain a person's dignity. All transit systems need to be ADA compliant and robust funding should be provided to paratransit for those unable to use fixed routes. Fares should be eliminated for people with



disabilities, low-income riders, and seniors. We need to look beyond regressive taxes, like sales and gas taxes, to fund transit systems. In addition, we need to ensure that federal funds supplement, not supplant, state and local funding.

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

To benefit and uplift people with disabilities, we need to increase the maximum SSI benefits to at least meet, or exceed, the poverty level to truly lift people out of poverty. I will work to raise the absurdly low asset limits, so people with disabilities can save for emergencies without losing benefits. The marriage penalty for disabled couples and in-kind support rules need to be repealed. Employers should be incentivized, possibly through tax credits, to hire and provide physical accommodations for members of the disabled community. We also need to ensure that earning more doesn't lead to a sudden decrease of crucial benefits. We need to make sure that disability benefits keep pace with the cost of living and streamline the application process to encourage participation.

I am the only candidate in the Second Congressional District race who has a detailed plan to transform the District by connecting it to the global economy. That will ensure we can make big plans and pay for them. It is the most viable path to enduring economic justice.



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

Access to food is a human right. We need to create a single, user-friendly way for people to apply for all social, safety-net programs like SNAP, Medicaid, and unemployment benefits. SSI recipients should be seamlessly enrolled into SNAP. I will work to support states seeking the flexibility to use longer SNAP certification periods, especially for people with disabilities. I am running for Congress again to become a policymaker who works to expand and make permanent the Restaurant Meals Program, allowing SNAP benefits to buy hot, prepared meals for those with mobility or cooking challenges. We also need to ease restrictions on eligible food purchases and eliminate all work requirements.

We have to think bigger to support those on SNAP and to address the unique needs of people with disabilities. Connecting the Second Congressional District to the global economy will bring more funds, opportunities and jobs with higher wages to the District and provide more resources to expand these programs and explore new ones.

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 will work to enact legislation or regulations that eliminate mandatory detention and prioritizes community-based alternatives that offer support like medical care and legal aid for disabled individuals. We need to implement specific, safe release guidelines to ensure individuals with disabilities are released to an environment with the necessary resources that can provide the appropriate level of care. All immigration enforcement officers need regular training on disability law, cultural competency, and non-discrimination practices.