



## **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:** Robin Kelly

**Party:** Democratic

**District:** Senate

### **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**

\*Not Answered\*



### 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 damage that the Trump Administration has done to the government will take a long time to repair. It's essential that we look at how we can best rebuild agencies to deliver fast results for the American people. We need to recruit good people back in government who are subject matter experts and who will uphold their oath to the Constitution and ensure equal protection under the law instead of the ideology of a monarchical president.

## **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

Fifty years ago, Congress passed IDEA/Special Education to end the exclusion of disabled children from public schools. Before IDEA, more than 1.8 million disabled children were denied education altogether. Yet despite its substantial influence, it is under attack by the Trump Administration. Students with disabilities are facing increasing threats to funding, services and federal protections. Furthermore, many of the federal civil servants who oversee the administration of the programs have been laid off.



When Congress underfunds IDEA, schools are forced to stretch resources and students lose essential support. That's why I am a proud cosponsor of the IDEA Full Funding Act (H.R. 2598), which provides mandatory funding for IDEA. Additionally, I have consistently signed letters to provide a pathway to fully fund IDEA during the House appropriations process. I am also a cosponsor of the Keep Our Promise to America's Children and Teachers (PACT) Act (H.R. 869) to fully fund Title I and IDEA on a mandatory basis.

**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**

Most Americans want to live with dignity in our own homes. Medicaid-funded home and community-based services (HCBS) have made that possible for millions of Americans. HCBS includes personal care, home-delivered meals, and case management. These programs support the entire family, enabling individuals to stay gainfully employed as tax-paying citizens, save for retirement, and care for their children.

But despite HCBS saving money by avoiding costly institutionalized care, supply is not keeping up with demand. Every year, an average of 656,000 people are on waiting lists for Medicaid home and community-based services, with an average wait time of 45 months. And this will only worsen with the passage of the GOP's Big Ugly Bill (H.R. 1).



As Senator, I would reverse the damage from H.R. 1 and focus on fully funding and expanding Medicaid and Medicare, making HCBS a mandatory federal benefit under Medicaid. I would work to guarantee its funding, in order to protect disabled individuals from being forced into institutions; increase federal matching funds for states to expand their HCBS offerings; and make the premium tax credits authorized under the ACA permanent and more generous, lowering out-of-pocket costs for middle- and lower-income families.

#### **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**

The Affordable Care Act and Medicaid Expansion helped decrease waiting lists for home and community-based services (HCBS). Yet states expanding Medicaid have cost savings and increased revenue that could be used to expand HCBS programs. That is why I support making HCBS a mandatory Medicaid service.

#### **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

Laws that criminalize homelessness are often justified under the dubious theory that they are necessary to protect the public interest. In reality, criminalization laws are generally ineffective, expensive, and often violate the civil and human rights of unhoused people. I believe that we must invest in more permanent supportive housing with on-site mental health care support. Additionally, I have long advocated for the requirement that first responders, like 911 operators, EMTs and firefighters, who engage with people with mental health challenges should be required to go through mental health first aid training, and will continue to do so in the Senate.

### 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 creating a more equitable funding system because access to reliable transit is a fundamental civil right for the disability community, not just a convenience. That is why I was proud to support the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law, which delivered historic capital investments to modernize our transit infrastructure. This law established the All Stations Accessibility Program (ASAP), which provided millions in funding to install new elevators at legacy CTA stations built before the ADA.

However, to build a truly equitable system, we must also solve the critical shortage of operating funds. Federal grants must be flexible enough to pay for the workforce and maintenance needed to run paratransit services reliably, rather than just purchasing new vehicles. In the Senate, I will fight to build on the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law's success by securing necessary funding to make our transit system fully inclusive for all communities.

**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**

Almost 8 million Americans rely on Supplemental Security Income benefits to afford basic necessities like food and shelter. All of these SSI recipients are older Americans, people



with disabilities, or children. As such, it is crucial that we preserve and improve the program.

In November 2025, I was one of 73 House Democrats who signed onto a letter regarding a proposed change that would limit eligibility for disabled and children receiving SSI benefits. The 2024 rule at issue recognized that low-income and disabled individuals often rely on family or community members for assistance by expanding the definition of what was considered a “public assistance household.” While the SSA claims that reversing this rule would promote program integrity, cutting this essential support will tear families apart by penalizing SSI recipients for staying with their loved ones.

### **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**

As Americans continue to wrestle with the rising cost of food and other goods, we must prioritize the protection of SNAP benefits for all Americans. Households that include people with disabilities are especially vulnerable to food insecurity, as disabilities often lead to reductions in earnings for the person with a disability and for other household members who are providing care.

According to recent statistics by USDA, households that included an adult with disabilities reported higher food insecurity rates than households with no adults with disabilities. That



is why I co-sponsored the Increasing Nutrition Access for Seniors Act (H.R. 5055), which aims to simplify the access to the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) for elderly and disabled individuals.

**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 have been a staunch advocate for the proper treatment of all immigrants in detention facilities. The Department of Homeland Security and its components, Customs and Border Protection and Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) are expressly prohibited from discriminating against people with disabilities. Immigrants are entitled to reasonable accommodations/modifications as needed. Yet there are numerous accounts of the inhumane treatment of detainees. Such treatment is unconscionable and must be addressed immediately.

Most recently, [I led 28 Members of Congress](#) in demanding answers from Homeland Security Secretary Kristi Noem concerning reports of poor-quality food – and in some cases, lack of food and water – provided to immigrants held in the U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement facilities. In November 2025, [I led 61 Members of the Democratic Women's Caucus and Members of Congress](#) in a letter to demand the release and



investigation of pregnant, postpartum and nursing women currently detained by Immigration and Custody Enforcement. I have attached a link to both letters below. I will continue to fight the administration's inhumane immigration tactics, ensuring that every individual, regardless of nationality, is treated with dignity and in full accordance with the law.

[12.08.25-letter-rep-kelly-demands-answers-from-sec-noem-on-food-quality.pdf](#)

[11.17.2025 DWC Letter to DHS on Pregnant Women.pdf](#)