



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: Anabel Mendoza

Party: Democratic

District: Illinois' 7th 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



The Trump Administration has willfully disregarded, and in some cases, waged a full-scale assault on, disability rights. In Congress, I would oppose any legislative or regulatory efforts aimed at weakening the ADA (such as the 30-day notice proposal) or related disability rights protections, and importantly, I would use my position and influence in Congress to center and uplift the voices of disability rights experts and individuals with disabilities at every opportunity.

Rights on paper alone are insufficient if there are no resources to ensure these laws are effectively implemented across the country. That is why, if elected to Congress, I would work through the appropriations process to increase federal funding for existing programs that support people with disabilities.

Further, the Trump Administration has set a dangerous precedent to his state and local allies that disability rights can be ignored without consequence, in clear violation of longstanding laws like the ADA. Congress has a responsibility to intervene and set an indisputable example that violating disability rights laws is not only illegal, but will come with consequences. This includes oversight hearings and investigations into officials accused of undermining federal disability rights laws, and immediate efforts to remove them from their positions if they are found to have willfully jeopardized the safety and rights of their constituencies. I would also use my position in Congress to increase reporting requirements for state and local officials receiving federal funding, ensuring full transparency to the American people about how their states and localities uphold disability rights laws.

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



"Since the start of Trump's second term, we have collectively witnessed Trump's blatant and outright abuse of reductions in force (RIFs) to carry out mass layoffs without reason or consequence, all in an effort to undermine Congress and eliminate any position meant to offer checks and balances to his violent political agenda. Of immediate priority for Congress, and an effort I would bolster if elected, would be a continued moratorium on RIFs until the RIFs process can be fully re-evaluated to ensure federal mass layoffs cannot be exploited by the current President or any future administration without genuine, legitimate reason. Further, I would use my position in Congress to push for a full-scale audit of all mass layoffs since the start of the Trump Administration, including working with the judicial branch to push for federal employees who have been arbitrarily let go to be immediately reinstated. Additionally, rehiring and rebuilding processes must include people with disabilities, including Schedule A hiring and ensuring that requests for disability accommodations are appropriately and efficiently handled in accordance with the law. Lastly, the Administration has used excuses regarding "funding" and "efficiency" as a cudgel to enact its mass layoff agenda. In Congress, I would push to ensure the adequate and sustained funding of agencies like the Department of Education to ensure executive powers cannot be abused in these ways. Lastly, this moment emphasizes the importance of long-term legislation like the PRO Act to protect and strengthen federal workers' rights to collectively bargain, unionize, and fight back when arbitrarily let go without adequate reason or merit, putting in jeopardy their own ability to earn a living wage and provide for their families. The PRO Act is legislation I would wholeheartedly work to advance if elected to Congress.

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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

All students deserve to be invested in and should never be put in a position where they are forced to suffer the consequences of decades of underfunding under past administrations of both parties. I believe in a future where all students are supported by expert educators with the training and skills to meet their unique needs and who can create an environment where students' learning, growth, and ability to thrive is put first. In Congress, I would support the IDEA Full Funding Act, work alongside allies to increase funding for the Department of Education and education programs for students with disabilities through the appropriations process, and support the creation of federal programs that increase the training and hiring of special education teachers and therapists in schools nationwide. Further, many working families are forced to bear the brunt of costs to ensure their children can access the supports and resources they need to thrive, often because public schools are underfunded and unable to provide them. In Congress, I would fight to reinstate the Child Tax Credit to at least \$3600 per year for all families, including mixed-status immigrant families, to better ensure families have access to the financial support needed to pay for these expenses. Furthermore, block grants have been a major issue advocates have raised, considering that this generalizes how critical funding can be used by states, risking that money going elsewhere instead of to the essential support services and education programs that federal funding for education was originally intended for. I



would work alongside education and disability justice experts to reject block grant proposals and strengthen plans for critical oversight of how federal education funding is implemented at the state level to ensure it is genuinely being used to support all students.

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

Health care is a human right, full stop. In Congress, I would support Medicare for All, including mental health, dental, vision, reproductive care, and gender-affirming care. Medicare for All must also protect immigrants who pay billions of dollars into our health care system and yet don't have access to health care and make up a significant percentage of health care workers facing mass deportation right now. Further, I would support and bolster all efforts to federally mandate home and community-based services (HCBS). I would also use my role in Congress to fight for an increased minimum wage for federal workers, including home and community-based health care workers, so that they can be properly compensated for their critical work and have a family-sustaining salary that allows them to pay their bills, rent, mortgage, and provide for their 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

"Yes, I support making HCBS a federally mandated Medicaid service and would support expanding Medicaid if elected to Congress.

One way to address waitlists would be to increase the home care workforce. A growing share of the home care workforce in the United States are immigrants, at roughly 32%. In Congress, I would deepen the work I've been doing on the frontlines of the immigrant rights movement to continue strongly advocating for a pathway to citizenship that ensures caregivers and home care workers in the United States do not face the looming threat and instability of detention and deportation, which is not only extremely harmful and disruptive to their own lives, but also harms the families and individuals who they support each day through their critical work. Strengthening and increasing the home care workforce would open up more opportunities to get people with disabilities off of waitlists for HCBS quicker."

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

Homelessness is a solvable issue that the federal government has deliberately chosen to neglect by investing billions of our taxpayer dollars into funding genocide and terror on our streets at the hands of ICE and CBP. That's billions that never make it to strengthen critical needs like ensuring our schools and special education programs are sufficiently funded, to strengthening paratransit in our cities, to increasing mental health support services. If elected to Congress, I would support and work to advance Medicare for All which would include mental health and substance abuse treatment and therapies intended to support people living with mental illness. Additionally, I would work through the appropriations process to reallocate critical funding away from the harms and terrors of the U.S.-backed genocide in Gaza and the billions given to the violent immigration enforcement apparatus, to restore and increase funding for the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) and by extension support for independent, integrated housing. This must be coupled with the consistent oversight to ensure that people living with mental illness are not unlawfully discriminated against when trying to access housing. Further, increasing funding to HUD would also support the creation of more affordable housing in communities nationwide to better address our country's housing and affordability crisis that is pushing many individuals and families to the brink of becoming unhoused. I believe housing is a human right, and when we live in the richest country in the world, there is



simply no excuse for why so many of our neighbors are left to live on the streets, in the bitter cold of Chicago winters, without access to the care they deserve and need.

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

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Accessible transportation options for Chicagoans with disabilities are not optional. I would support a more equitable funding system that better funds accessible transit including paratransit and strongly oppose state cuts to paratransit. I believe that in general the burden of funding transit systems should fall on those who utilize the roads and highways the least efficiently. That is why I support New York City's congestion tax which has been effective in raising revenue to fund transit, reduce traffic deaths including pedestrian deaths, reduce air pollution, and dramatically cut down on congestion in New York City. I know that a similar system could be implemented in the Chicago area with federal funding specifically along the highways that bring traffic into Chicago with similar positive results. The funds from this system would be used to better fund accessible transit, including improvements that reduce chronic lateness of pickups, long drives, and insufficient drivers. I support paratransit partnerships with ride-share companies (such as the



Rideshare Access Program and Taxi Access Program in Chicago) that improve reliability and convenience for riders.

Transit funds should also be prioritized for the building and maintenance of elevators and escalators in the CTA system. Pedestrian access is also critical. Lastly, funding should be dedicated to creating safer roadways on the South and West sides of Chicago that have some of the least safe road designs for pedestrians, installing and maintaining curb cuts, and ensuring that sidewalks are cleared of snow."

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

The SSI program is severely outdated, with many of the eligibility rules having not been updated for 50 years and deeply failing to keep up with the rising cost of living that is crushing working families in Chicago and across the country. An average \$700/month for individual recipients of SSI is well below the poverty line; no one can survive on that amount, period. To modernize the SSI program, I would follow the lead of experts and advocates in this space who have been calling consistently for the SSI benefit rate to be increased to at least 100% of the Federal Poverty Level, and adjusted annually, so as to ensure that recipients of SSI will never be left to live below the poverty line. Additionally, I would support legislation like the SSI Restoration Act which works to ensure that not only



is the individual asset limit increased and couples are able to receive the full amount of twice the individual rate but that also arbitrary punishments working to reduce SSI benefits for people with disabilities are effectively eliminated.

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

"Restricting millions of Americans' access to SNAP benefits will have immediate and horrifying effects felt across the country as people are forced to choose between paying for which essentials that they need the most at any given moment. I don't believe that our country can continue to function as normal should these cuts actually take place. With that said, I will work to build a coalition of communities across the country, starting with the unions, who will exercise their labor power and go on strike if these cuts are carried out by the federal government. I will also work with my colleagues in the House to ensure that the maximum amount of pressure is placed on chambers of government not in Democrat control so that these cuts are reversed expeditiously.

Additionally, I will work to introduce legislation that removes barriers that people with disabilities face who need to access SNAP benefits and ensure that these benefits extend to people's ability to buy ready-made meals if they are unable to cook for themselves. Furthermore, I will increase funding to municipality owned grocery stores to ensure that people with disabilities who live in food deserts are not further hampered from being able



to buy groceries due to the corporations choosing not to operate in certain neighborhoods."

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. ?

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

"Having dedicated my career to working in the immigrant rights movement, I witnessed and fought back against the atrocious conditions immigrants are faced with when snatched off our streets, ripped from their families, and detained. Many immigrants –the vast majority of whom are Black and brown– lack not only medical and mental health care, but access to legal representation to ensure their rights are upheld. In fact, the vast majority of cases could be won if immigrants were simply guaranteed access to a lawyer to represent them, and that includes immigrants with disabilities who are disproportionately harmed by our country's punitive immigration system. If elected, I would use my position and influence in Congress to push for legal representation to be a guaranteed right for all immigrants in detention, and demand that immigration agents that have violated anyone's due process, constitutional, or civil rights are immediately terminated.



I also want to make clear that if this moment has shown us anything, it is that the detention system is deeply inhumane and created to be a black hole for human and civil rights violations. That is why my primary and long-term position on this issue would be to restrict funding to ICE and CBP and invest in community-based support services that immigration experts, advocates, and leaders within the immigrant rights movement have been consistently calling for for years. Immigration detention should be extremely limited, and any detention facility - whether in the internal U.S. or at the border; whether run federally, by the state, or by a locality, should fully comply with the ADA and Section 504 and provide immigrants in detention facilities culturally-sensitive disability support services, including medical and mental health care and translators (including sign language interpreters), and more.

I oppose the Trump Administration's changes to the public charge rule, which will disproportionately harm immigrants with disabilities and their family members. "