



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: Sam Polan

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



The protection and enforcement of these rights should remain a top priority. To begin, this includes restoring and protecting the Office for Civil Rights and OSERS through direct appropriations that are not easily altered by administrative action. Furthermore, I support statutory protections to help prevent executive restructuring from diminishing disability rights enforcement. In addition, I would support expanded DOJ enforcement and would ensure that citizens retain the right to pursue legal action, so that access to justice does not depend solely on agency capacity. Finally, I would oppose any legislative or regulatory effort to weaken ADA, Section 504, or IDEA protections, regardless of who introduces it.

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 will work to rebuild the federal administrative infrastructure by hiring candidates based on their specific qualifications and expertise, not on optics or loyalty. I will staff enforcement agencies only with career professionals, bolstering technical expertise in Education, HHS, CMS, and DOJ. I will enforce and maintain multi-year hiring plans to stabilize these offices and eliminate disruptive upheaval with each administration. I will overhaul federal data systems so agencies track compliance in real time, not just after harm occurs.

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 support increasing IDEA funding to the originally designated 40% federal commitment. This can be accomplished over a defined multi-year schedule, with mandatory increases written into statute. States cannot plan responsibly when federal funding fluctuates. I would also fight to ensure IDEA dollars supplement rather than replace state funding. Underfunding special education is not just a budget failure; it shifts costs to families, teachers, and local districts that are already stretched.

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 categorically oppose any and all cuts to Medicaid and Medicare and will vote against H.R. 1 or any legislation that reduces eligibility, benefits, or reimbursement. I stand firm in defending Medicaid's long-term services and supports while insisting on strengthening HCBS as a direct alternative to institutional care. Access to healthcare is essential infrastructure and a fundamental human right; it is not a welfare program and must be defended as such without compromise.

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 support making HCBS a mandatory Medicaid benefit. Currently, optional services are subject to reductions, even when there is a clear medical need. To help reduce waitlists, I would suggest implementing targeted federal matching increases as an incentive, specifically for states that expand provider networks and streamline administrative processes. Additionally, to address workforce shortages, we should consider measures to increase wages, provide comprehensive training, and establish reciprocity of professional credentials across state lines. Community-based care remains a more humane and cost-effective alternative to institutionalization.

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

Criminalization of people in need does not solve homelessness, and it actively worsens mental health outcomes. I do not support ordinances that penalize survival behavior such as sleeping in vehicles or in public spaces. At the federal level, I would advocate for expanded funding for supportive housing tied directly to mental health and disability services. I would also encourage stronger coordination between HUD, HHS, and DOJ so local governments are less likely to use law enforcement as a substitute for healthcare and 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

Paratransit must be recognized and funded as essential core transit infrastructure; it cannot be treated as an afterthought. Federal transit plans should require proportional operating support for paratransit that is coherent and tied to every route and service. Investments in fully accessible buses, rail platforms, and stations are also needed to expand reasonable options. Ultimately, reliability and coverage must be valued alongside compliance.

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

SSI asset limits are outdated and may actively trap people in poverty. I support raising the asset cap to reflect the true and current cost of living and indexing it to inflation going forward. I also support increasing monthly benefit levels to reflect actual housing and healthcare costs. The disability determination process must be shortened through better staffing and higher medical-evidence standards, so people are not left without income for years while their cases are pending.

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 strongly oppose any legislation that cuts SNAP or imposes work requirements on people with disabilities. It is critical that we modernize SNAP rules so beneficiaries can also use their benefits for prepared meals. There are some people in this country for whom disabilities make cooking impossible. Lawmakers must address food access policies that acknowledge real-world challenges and avoid outdated assumptions about ability, time, or work ethic. I urge policymakers to enact updates that expand SNAP to include prepared meals, and I encourage the public to contact their representatives and support these vital changes for all SNAP recipients.

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



Federal disability rights apply regardless of citizenship. Accordingly, DHS and ICE are expected to uphold these standards. It is possible to maintain secure borders while ensuring humane treatment. For this reason, I support the implementation of mandatory third-party medical inspections in detention facilities, alongside enforceable accommodation standards and transparent reporting requirements to Congress. I also encourage expanding access to legal counsel for detained individuals with disabilities so that any concerns can be properly addressed.