



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: Willie Preston

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

The treatment of people with disabilities by the Trump administration is a moral scandal that cries for justice. I know this personally as the father of a son with autism, who has been a fierce advocate for disability rights. Access Living and allied groups know the crisis ongoing right now all too well because your work created the very legislation and programming that is being dismantled before our eyes - with no real input from the affected community. I really believe in the “Nothing About Us Without Us” ethos and have tried to live my values as a lawmaker in the Illinois Senate - where I have always sided with the push for access, dignity and inclusion for those with disabilities.

Obviously, I will fight for full restoration of the Office for Civil Rights and Office of Special Education and Office of Special Education and Rehabilitative Services.

If and when Democrats retake the majority, I will advocate for the use of every tool in the toolbox to restore and expand disability rights. And as a sitting legislator, I know all the tricks to get things done - be it budget reconciliation, making new legislation, appropriation, oversight or litigation.

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

As a former street activist, SEIU janitor, butcher and union carpenter, I've learned skills that have served me well as a state senator - whose BOLD bills on everything from restoring felons rights to bringing massive investments to safety-net hospitals have passed with broad and bipartisan support. Realistically, to restore and rebuild the federal administrative structure we'll need to override the current administration's vetoes - even IF we retake the majority. And if that doesn't work, we will escalate.



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 Illinois State Senate, I have always voted for proper funding for special education, an issue deeply personal to me as the father of a child with autism. I’ve also been a leader in bold new legislation.

This includes a new law to expand requirements for school districts to notify families of students with disabilities of advocates experienced in helping students with Individualized Education Programs. It goes into effect Jan. 1.

When it comes to federal education policy, it comes down to resources and we’ll need to claw back some of the TRILLIONS of dollars that we forked over to Wall Street, mega-corporations and the ultra-rich in the Big Ugly GOP spending bill. Making the rich pay their fair share - and making sure seniors, working families and people with disabilities see their economic security protected - will be a priority of my time in office.



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

As someone who grew up in poverty without access to healthcare - and who needed it several times as a youth after being a victim of violence - I know the misery and terror the absence of care brings.

The trillion-dollar cuts to Medicaid in the Big Ugly GOP spending bill are facially cruel to people with disabilities and MUST be reversed by the next Congress and I commit to voting for that.

But more than that, I commit to constant communication with groups like Access Living to see what more can be done.



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

People with disabilities who want to be independent and stay in their homes or in a community setting should be given that dignity, period.

The person should be the center of any efforts to reduce these waitlists, which should include strengthening data transparency and improving funding. As a former SEIU member, I know that a chief goal should be attracting and recruiting a workforce that can meet the needs of this population IN need. This means better wages and working conditions for caregivers, period, and this will come from working in partnership with SEIU and their clients.



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

The homelessness crisis for people with disabilities has so many human-made causes. Lack of resources for community-based and other services. Housing markets being manipulated by vulture capital firms like BlackRock. Indiscriminate policing. Legislative Indifference.

I grew up in extreme poverty and faced homelessness and substandard housing myself, so the issue is a real one for me.

In Congress, I commit to fight for integrated “Housing First” models. For more street outreach. For more resources to treat substance abuse disorders. And for resources to crack down on discrimination in housing, whether racial or ability-based.



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 know that groups like T.F.A.S. have provided a roadmap for both policy and advocacy - and this aligns with my profile as an activist who will NEVER take no for an answer, especially when it comes to something so essential as transit.

In Springfield, I've fought for increased funding for accessible transit in the RTA and CTA systems - and I'll do the same in Washington.

At any level, the best designed system - which must be enacted at the federal level - will



include universal designs (and inclusion by specialists in disability needs) from the outset. We MUST NOT roll back mandates for accessible features. I fully support increasing a voucher system for FLEXIBLE paratransit. I also support an expansion of AMTRAK's use of accessible features.

And I will make sure that transportation workers get the training they need to ensure proper service for people with disabilities.

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

Again, having been poor - probably poorer than anyone running for this race - I understand what economic terrorism looks like and the current SSI benefits and asset limits shock the conscience.

We MUST lift the caps on these asset limits and MUST increase SSI benefits, especially after we handed over trillions to the super-rich so they can buy an extra yacht or build some space ships.

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 someone who grew up poor and on SNAP, I know the economic terror of missing a meal - or going hungry. I commit to forming a SNAP Defense Caucus while in Congress to include people who have been on food stamps or assistance and are committed to ending food insecurity in the United States.

I also recognize that people with disabilities have unique needs when it comes to food insecurity and commit to fighting for more access and inclusion in any policies affecting their own lives.

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

There is no question that migrants with disabilities are being denied services and stripped of dignity by this current administration. We need hearings and oversight now to hold everyone involved in the process accountable