



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: Christopher Swann

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



Fully fund and staff OCR and OSERS. These aren't bureaucratic offices. They're enforcement mechanisms that make disability rights real. Without them, the ADA is just words on paper.

I'll strengthen the ADA by closing loopholes, expanding covered entities, and creating real consequences for noncompliance. Right now enforcement is complaint driven and underfunded. We need proactive enforcement with teeth.

I'll use appropriations fights to block attempts to gut these offices. You can't dismantle civil rights enforcement through executive action if Congress refuses to fund it. And I'll name every Senator who votes to weaken disability protections.

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

Restore full staffing to OCR and OSERS within the first year. Increase budgets to expand proactive enforcement. Create regional offices so enforcement happens closer to where violations occur.

Establish automatic penalties for repeat violators. If a school district keeps failing to provide FAPE or a business keeps refusing reasonable accommodations, they lose federal funding until they comply. Use the leverage we have.

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

We promised 40% when IDEA passed. We're funding 10%. That's a broken promise that's been ignored for decades.

Fully funding IDEA is non negotiable. That means appropriating the additional 30% we owe, about \$23 billion annually. Phase it in over 10 years with mandatory increases tied to inflation. No more waiting for Congress to find the money. It's an entitlement. Fund it like one.

Expand what IDEA covers. Too many kids fall through the cracks because their disabilities don't fit neat categories. Broader eligibility standards and stronger enforcement when schools try to avoid obligations.

Address the teacher shortage. Pay special education teachers more. Forgive their student debt. Give them protected professional time for IEP meetings. You can't fully fund IDEA without qualified teachers to deliver services.

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

Healthcare is a human right. Either you believe that or you don't. I do. That means Medicare for All.

M4A guarantees healthcare to everyone regardless of income, employment, or disability status. No more fighting with private insurers. No more medical bankruptcy. No more choosing between medication and rent.

H.R. 1 already passed and cut \$1 trillion from Medicaid. I'll fight to repeal those cuts with everything I have. Use every procedural tool to force votes. Make Senators publicly defend cutting healthcare for disabled people.

Expand Medicaid coverage: dental, vision, hearing aids, assistive technology, mental health services. These should not be add ons. They should be standard.

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, make HCBS mandatory. No state should force people into institutions because they chose not to fund community services. Olmstead is clear. Make HCBS mandatory and fund it properly.

Increase federal matching rates for HCBS to incentivize states to expand capacity. Give states a higher match for HCBS. Make community care the financially smart choice.

Pay home care workers living wages. You can't recruit quality workers at \$12 an hour.

Federal minimum wage of \$20 for home care workers with annual increases tied to inflation. Use Medicaid reimbursement rates to force states to raise wages.

Quality comes from adequate staffing ratios, training requirements, and worker protection.

Federal standards for caseloads, mandatory training on disability rights and person centered care, whistleblower protections.

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



Criminalizing homelessness is cruel and ineffective. You can't arrest your way out of a housing crisis.

Housing First works. Get people into stable housing immediately, then provide wraparound services including mental health treatment, addiction services, case management.

The federal government should directly build housing, including supportive housing for people with serious mental illness. HUD purchases land, constructs housing with on site services, transfers ownership to community cooperatives with permanently locked affordability.

Expand federal funding for community mental health centers and mobile crisis teams.

When someone is having a mental health crisis, they need healthcare providers, not cops.

Fund Crisis Intervention Teams nationwide.

Use federal civil rights enforcement to challenge laws that criminalize sleeping in public places or living in vehicles. These laws violate the Eighth Amendment. DOJ should sue every jurisdiction that criminalizes homelessness.

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

Public transit is infrastructure for democracy. Disabled people shouldn't be an afterthought.

Increase federal transit funding from \$12 billion annually to at least \$100 billion.

Paratransit should be funded at levels that ensure same day service, expanded service hours, and geographic coverage that matches fixed route service. If a bus runs at 2am, paratransit should too.

Reward accessibility improvements on fixed route transit. Cities that make all stations fully accessible, ensure all vehicles accommodate wheelchairs, and maintain elevators consistently should get bonus funding. Right now there's no incentive to go beyond minimum ADA compliance.

Make transit free. Fare collection creates barriers and generates minimal revenue compared to cost of collection. Free transit increases ridership, reduces emissions, and makes cities more accessible. Use federal dollars to eliminate fares on all public transit including paratransit.

Transit policy should be driven by people who rely on it most. Disabled people on planning boards, in decision making roles, leading transit agencies. Nothing about us without us.

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 is a poverty trap. \$914 a month is below the poverty line. The \$2,000 asset limit hasn't been updated since 1989. The marriage penalty punishes disabled people for building families. This isn't a safety net. It's a cage.

Replace SSI with a comprehensive guaranteed income system that covers everyone. Every adult receives a monthly check that phases out gradually as income rises. If you lose a job or become disabled and income drops, the check increases automatically. No separate applications. No two year waits. No asset limits.

For someone unable to work due to disability, this would provide substantially more than current SSI. Bring people up to at least 200% of the poverty line, with adjustments for household size and regional cost of living. No benefits cliff. Work part time without losing all support. Save money without being penalized. Get married without losing benefits. This system absorbs SSI's bureaucracy into the Social Security Administration. No more waiting two years for a decision. Just automatic support when income drops.

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

H.R. 1 already passed. Its cuts to SNAP force millions off benefits and create bureaucratic barriers targeting disabled people. I will fight to repeal those cuts.

SNAP needs to allow purchase of prepared foods and hot meals. The current restriction forces disabled people who can't cook to either go hungry or trade benefits illegally. If



someone needs prepared food because of their disability, they should be able to buy it. Eliminate work requirements that harm disabled people. Work requirements don't increase employment. They just push people off benefits. The exemption process is burdensome and often fails.

Longer term, my guaranteed income proposal would replace SNAP with direct cash people can use however they need. Phase in guaranteed income while maintaining SNAP initially, then sunset SNAP only after the new system is delivering adequate support.

The principle is dignity. SNAP restrictions treat poor people like children. Give people resources and trust them to make their own decisions.

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

Immigration detention is a human rights crisis. It's worse for disabled people who often don't receive adequate medical care, reasonable accommodations, or accessible facilities.

I'm calling for a Universal Due Process Act that guarantees constitutional protections for anyone detained by federal agencies, including ICE and CBP. Warrant requirements, right



to counsel, real judges instead of administrative officers, full appeal rights.

For disabled immigrants specifically: mandatory disability screenings at intake, immediate provision of assistive devices and medications, accessible facilities, qualified interpreters for deaf or hard of hearing detainees. Presumption against detention for people with serious medical needs or disabilities. Community supervision with case management is more humane and effective.

Use appropriations to force compliance. If ICE or CBP facilities fail accessibility audits or mistreat disabled detainees, cut their funding until they fix it.

Real solution is ending mass detention entirely. I support abolishing ICE. The agency is unreformable. Replace it with a system that prioritizes family unity, provides real pathways to citizenship, and treats immigration as a humanitarian issue, not a criminal justice problem.