

Mayor's Council on Disability Issues (CODI) 2023 Mayoral Forum

Wednesday, August 2, 2023 5:30 p.m. – 7:00 p.m.

Large Assembly Room, City County Building

**** City Council Candidates ****

Please return answers to MDziubak@KnoxvilleTN.gov by August 3, 2023 at 8:00 a.m.

Most people aren't born with disabilities, but as we age, we tend to develop disabilities which can be temporary or permanent and can change over time. In fact, people with disabilities and seniors make up almost half of the population in the United States. The Americans with Disabilities act was signed into law in 1990 and has just reached its 33rd anniversary; yet there is still a long way to go to ensure accessibility for and inclusion of people with disabilities.

1. There are various types of disabilities including developmental, hearing, intellectual, invisible, mental health, mobility, physical, and visual disabilities amongst others. Active leadership by persons with disabilities is necessary to ensure that any decisions made are made with these voices being present to identify how those decisions may impact our community. Please describe your experience with individuals with disabilities. How will you engage with and help to increase the engagement of individuals with disabilities?

As someone that has worked with young people professionally, I have had the privilege of working with quite a few young people that are differently abled. Some physically but the majority of them were developmentally disabled. When I directed an after-school program several years ago, we had several parents who were pleasantly surprised with the positive experience that their children had. In my current role as the Executive Director of the Change Center, I am actively working with the local nonprofit Spark to help people with disabilities get connected to equipment that will greatly improve their quality of life.

2. Knoxville's Disability Services Office (DSO) serves over 300 residents and visitors with disabilities each year, and is comprised of one full-time, and one part-time employee. This office is responsible for providing information, addressing ADA complaints, guiding the City's ADA compliance efforts and implementation of the ADA Transition Plan, providing City employee and constituent accommodation requests as well as reviewing procedures, programs and policies for compliance. CODI has long supported the expansion of this office in order to provide additional support and services

to individuals with disabilities who live and visit Knoxville. With specific examples, how would you ensure that our City makes more headway in supporting persons with disabilities?

I agree wholeheartedly that we need an expansion of Knoxville's Disability Services Office. While I was a student at the University of Tennessee, I saw our campus expand disability services, and it was easy to see the benefit that it was for students. Not only do Knoxville's current residents deserve more robust service, but an expanded office would be attractive to potential residents and companies as well. People want to move to cities where they believe they can receive the support they need. During my time knocking on doors in various neighborhoods, I have heard individuals talking about how hard it can be to find the answers they need to some of their issues, particularly related to public transportation.

3. The City of Knoxville has aging and outdated recreational facilities and park spaces that are included in a 2015 ADA study to identify what needs to be done to make these areas inclusive, and able to promote healthy lifestyles for people of all ages and abilities. While the City has renovated a number of facilities, more funding is needed to complete the renovations to the remaining facilities from the study and ADA Transition Plan. What is your plan to help ensure that accessibility and ADA compliance is a known requirement when it comes to providing internal and external resources and funding for these projects?

First of all, I would like to advocate that the city budget reflect the funds necessary to keep following the ADA Transition Plan for the next several years until all of the recommendations have been completed. I think the city council and the mayor would benefit from semi-annual, if not quarterly, updates on where the city is with reference to the Transition Plan. Regularly scheduled updates are the only way that we will ensure this important work is on the top of our minds.

4. Part of a robust age-friendly plan is having adequate and affordable housing where older adults can age in place. To quote AARP, "affordability is only affordable if it is also accessible." For many older adults, the cost of living in Knoxville is an extreme burden, with senior homelessness on the rise and support networks diminishing because of the costs to live in the City. Knoxville's lack of accessible and affordable housing and a rapidly aging population compounds the problem. This can force individuals to live in institutional settings vs. independent living within their communities. How will you help to increase the percentage of accessible and affordable housing units in proximity to community gathering spaces and health services that is necessary to address this systemic issue?

This is obviously part of the much larger housing crisis that Knoxville finds itself in, but one of the ways we can help is to change the way we zone in some

areas to accommodate more multi-family development along some of Knoxville's busier corridors. I agree that it does no good to add more housing units for seniors that are not close to the amenities and services they need. We need to convince our fellow residents that this a city-wide issue, so all of our communities will need to contribute to the solution.

5. Transportation is more than simply vehicles or buses and includes infrastructure such as sidewalks, curb ramps, and pedestrian signals. Accessible options are a critical concern for thousands of individuals with disabilities and those aging in the Knoxville area. These options should be safe, affordable, dependable, and user-friendly. What is your vision for the future of accessible transportation in Knoxville?

My vision for active transportation infrastructure involves a more robust public transport system and increased opportunities for walking and biking. A lot of coordination would be required to ensure that all of these moving parts are implemented smoothly and without creating too many points of tension in other areas of the city infrastructure. With some federal and state grants to undergird the work, the benefits to the city would be invaluable. Not only would we make Knoxville an even more attractive city to people from other cities, but we would also be solving some problems from many of our current residents.

I want the city to continue to revamp the KAT system as there are so few options for so many of our residents. I'm anxious to see what the new microtransit system will look like, and I would love to see that expanded if it finds any success. I also would love to see more sidewalks, particularly on some of our larger thoroughfares where people find the majority of the services they need. We also need sidewalks that coincide with the majority of our bus stops. It makes no sense to drop people in locations where they will then have a hard time walking the rest of the way to their destinations.