

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?

I've had experience with my nephew, who had a cascading series of disabilities resulting from ALS. In my volunteer work for nine years with CareCuts, I've encountered and worked with many people with disabilities. One, a lady named Jeraline, was homeless, dealing with mental health challenges, and victimized daily in terrible ways. Through CareCuts, we were able to get her out of that environment; today, though she can't live alone, she is no longer abused, she has a job, is productive, and is far removed from the frightened shell of what she was when we first met her.

My mother is wheelchair-bound, which is something many people might not think about until the moment when a flight of stairs separates your loved one from the place they are trying to go.

The best way to understand the challenges of disabilities is to engage with the people who have them. That's why I support, wherever possible, improving the means of finding more ways for people with disabilities to engage with the community at large.

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?

On City Council, I would look very favorably on providing more resources to this office.

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?

Recognizing that there are innumerable demands on the city's taxpayers and the city budget, there is a need to meeting the requirements of the ADA. As such, the highest priorities should be addressed first in terms of enabling the greatest number of people to be served. I will be an advocate to see that these issues are not back-burner items.

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?

The issues surrounding affordable housing are many and complex. Cities across the country are grappling with the same issue. Home values in Knoxville rose 107 percent between 2015 and 2022. Land values, construction costs, inflation, and other factors are all affecting housing. The city has dedicated \$50 million over the next 10 years to affordable housing programs. On City Council, I'll work to see how, and where, people with disabilities can best be served.

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 is that everyone who needs transportation should have access to transportation; however, I can't in good conscience say that the budget will be sufficient to pay the costs of that vision. I will do my best to improve accessible transportation options in Knoxville.