

respect ability

FIGHTING STIGMAS. ADVANCING OPPORTUNITIES.

RespectAbility, a nonpartisan national nonprofit organization working to empower people with disabilities to achieve the American dream, is preparing a nonpartisan voter guide of all viable candidates in several Senate and gubernatorial elections on a variety of disability issues. This is being done in conjunction with our online publication, www.TheRespectAbilityReport.org, which is the definitive place for voters who care about the intersection of disability and electoral politics. We educate around key issues that impact people with disabilities. There are 56 million Americans with disabilities and many of them rely on us for background on public policy and elected officials. With the addition of family members of people with disabilities, that percentage increases exponentially to include one in every three households in America affected by disability.

Thank you for your time, service and ideas!

Respectfully,

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Demographics/Our Numbers:

One in five of Americans has a disability, according to the [U.S. Census](http://www.census.gov) Bureau. People with disabilities (PwDs) are America's largest minority group and the only one that, due to an accident or illness, anyone can join at any time. Indeed, America has 56 million PwDs including five million with developmental disabilities. Of the 22 million working age (18-64) people with disabilities in our country, fully 70 percent of them are outside of the labor force. This is despite the fact that most want to work. This hurts employers who have talent needs, PwDs who want jobs, and taxpayers who support the 11 million PwDs who do not pay taxes but instead may live on government benefits. Polls show that the majority of voters have either a disability or a loved one with a disability. Voters with disabilities and their families are up for grabs – and the actions campaigns take to reach out to these voters can make the difference between winning and losing.

Please keep each answer to 500 words or fewer. If you have more to say on an issue, please link to the appropriate place on your website for people to learn more.

1. What policies and actions do you support to reduce the stigmas of people with disabilities that are barriers to employment, independence and equality?
2. What is your record on improving the lives of people with disabilities, specifically in enabling people with disabilities to have jobs, careers or start their own businesses?
3. Do you have specific strategies for youth employment for people with disabilities? For example, what are your thoughts on apprenticeships for youth with disabilities?
4. The jobs of the future will largely require post-secondary education. However, on average only 65 percent of students with disabilities complete high school and only seven percent complete college. What policies do you support to enable students with disabilities, including those from historically marginalized communities and backgrounds, to receive the diagnosis, Individualized Education Plan (IEP) or 504 plan and accommodations/services they need to succeed in school and be prepared for competitive employment?
5. Today there are more than 750,000 people with disabilities behind bars in our nation. Most of them are functionally illiterate and 95 percent of them will eventually be released. What are your views to ensure that individuals with disabilities who are incarcerated gain the skills and mental health supports that will enable them to be successful when they leave incarceration?
6. People with disabilities are twice as likely to be victims of crime as those without disabilities. This includes the fact that both children and adults with disabilities are more likely to be victims of rape or sexual assault. They are also far more likely to suffer from police violence, partially because manifestations of disability can be misunderstood. How would you address these issues?
7. How would you ensure that people with disabilities have access to healthcare and the benefits they need while enabling them with opportunities to work to the best of their capacities without losing the supports they need to live?
8. What are your thoughts on ensuring that people with disabilities have the option to live in their homes instead of institutions and still have the community attendant supports they need to live?
9. How would you advance innovations (i.e., assistive technologies, devices) that can help people with disabilities become more successfully employed, productive and independent?
10. Are your office, website and events accessible to people with disabilities? If yes, please describe.

BACKGROUND AND RESOURCES FOR COMPLETING THE QUESTIONNAIRE

Below we have given you lot of information to help you think through your answers to the questions. View this Q&A for more information as well:

<https://www.respectability.org/inclusion-toolkits/disability-faq/>. Two other key resources as you create your plans are the umbrella organizations of the disability community: the Consortium for Citizens with Disabilities (<http://www.c-c-d.org>) and the National Disability Leadership Alliance (<http://www.disabilityleadership.org/>). We also are happy to connect you to issue specialists and/or to review your plans before you post them if you would like.

1. What policies and actions do you support to reduce the stigmas of people with disabilities that are barriers to employment, independence and equality?

Busting the stigmas, myths and misconceptions around people with disabilities should be part of America's overall workforce/jobs strategy. Low expectations and misconceptions are critical barriers to employment for people with disabilities.

A [Princeton study](#) shows that while PwDs are seen as warm, they are not seen as competent. Similarly, a study published by [Cornell Hospitality Quarterly](#) found that companies share a concern that PwDs cannot adequately do the work required of their employees. A successful jobs policy would include a strategy for communications/public relations to reduce such stigmas.

Governors have been incredible role models on this front – bringing media to best practices of inclusive employment. Governors Jack Markell of Delaware, Dennis Daugaard of South Dakota, Jay Inslee of Washington and Scott Walker of Wisconsin all have done this extensively. The media appearances made by these governors have been vital in demonstrating the business case for hiring people with disabilities. This type of systematic and ongoing communications campaign must continue if you want to maximize your success.

Today we have curb cuts, more accessible transportation and more high school graduates with disabilities, but sadly, negative attitudes and stigmas still exist. Myths and misconceptions about people with physical disabilities/differences, intellectual disabilities and mental health challenges prevent far too many people from entering the workforce. We live in a world where perceptions are shaped at lightning speed by social media, entertainment and news. Any stigma reduction campaign needs a multilayered approach in order to change the narrative around workers with disabilities so that they are seen for the abilities that they bring to the table.

2. What is your record on improving the lives of people with disabilities, specifically in enabling people with disabilities to have jobs, careers or start their own businesses?

What have you done in the past or plan to do to improve the lives of PwDs? Here are some things for you to consider covering in that question:

- Have you been active in disability issues? What have you done?
- Have you hired people with disabilities, and if so, for what kind of roles?
- Do you have a disability advisor and/or advisory board?

- Have you volunteered and/or donated to disability causes?
- Do you have a disability and/or a loved one with a disability?
- What are other things you have done for PwDs?
- Have PwDs helped you in your career or life?

Some other questions to consider:

- Did you appoint PwDs in your cabinet or other high-ranking offices?
- Have you hosted events that showcase the benefits of employing PwDs?
- Do you have a solid plan for the Workforce Innovation and Opportunities Act (WIOA) that will dramatically improve employment opportunities for PwDs?
- Did you have a state department or agency on disabilities? Did you create the department, and was its director a high-level member (i.e., cabinet) of your administration?
- Did you expand or shrink Medicaid eligibility and funding while in office, including Medicaid buy-in programs?
- Did you expand or shrink other disability services like your state's vocational rehabilitation services?
- Did employment of PwDs rise or fall while you were in office?
- Did the gap between employment of PwDs vs. without disabilities rise or fall while you were in office?
- Have you implemented specific initiatives focusing on employment of PwDs in your state, including veterans with disabilities, like Employment First?
- Did you match all of the federal dollars for disability services? If not, what federal dollars were left on the table?

Our nation was founded on the principle that anyone who works hard should be able to get ahead in life. All PwDs deserve to be able to work to achieve the American Dream, just like anyone else.

One in five Americans has a disability. In the quarter century since passage of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), many important barriers have been lifted including, but not limited to, physical architectural barriers and educational opportunities. However, only 30 percent of working age people with disabilities are in the workforce. This leads to poverty, prison and worse.

Studies show that fully 70 percent of working age PwDs want to work. Today, with assistive technologies such as screen readers and other sophisticated software, it is easier than ever for PwDs to achieve results on behalf of employers. Moreover, about 11 million working-age Americans with disabilities are living on government benefits, despite the fact that most want to become independent.

Successful implementation of the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act will be key. Thus, RespectAbility, along with a number of other disability groups, has created [the Disability Employment First Planning Tool](#). This document details best practices and effective models that are proven to work, be cost effective to implement, and be successful. We suggest you and/or a member of your team review this. [Check out our webinar](#) on this topic for more information.

The answer to employment challenges will not be found in Washington programs alone. It will take public-private-nonprofit-disability community partnerships that are based on win-win-win policies that will benefit PwDs, employers and taxpayers alike.

Encouraging entrepreneurship and small business creation among PwDs also is key. Entrepreneurship is a profound part of living the American Dream. Empowering PwDs to become self-employed and start their own small business is something that our nation can accomplish together. Improving and expanding grants that train PwDs to start their own business is something the U.S. Department of Labor and the U.S. Small Business Administration can do as a part of this plan. Likewise, expanding affirmative action and anti-discrimination protections for disability-owned businesses also are important steps that can help to employment opportunities.

At the same time, it is critical to help aging workers who are acquiring a disability to be “re-homed” in a new job so that they don’t need to exit the workforce prematurely.

3. Do you have specific strategies for youth employment for people with disabilities? For example, what are your thoughts on apprenticeships for youth with disabilities?

Early work experiences should be a critical part of a fully accessible education, and an internship should be a part of every student with a disability’s Individualized Education Program for every student with a disability. There are already many best practices that show how to achieve successful transitions from school to work for students with disabilities. [Project SEARCH](#), which is a one-year school-to-work program that takes place entirely at the workplace, is an excellent example of a program that truly helps individuals with disabilities succeed in job placement and retention. This innovative, business-led model features total workplace immersion, which facilitates a seamless combination of classroom instruction, career exploration, and worksite-based training and support. The goal for each program participant is competitive employment. Their employment outcomes are phenomenal: with programs in 43 states, and more than 2,000 young adults served each year, they have a 70 percent success rate for the participants who complete their program and have secured an integrated, competitive job. Programs like this show us how to create transition plans suited to the specific needs of individuals with disabilities and connect them with the post-secondary resources that will enable them to make the most of their lives. They are also fantastic for employers and taxpayers alike.

Improving post-secondary education opportunities, success and obtainment for PwDs is critical to empowering more PwDs to become independent and successful. Beyond college affordability, there is another critical barrier that keeps many PwDs from succeeding – the fundamental disconnect in most college programs between disability services and career services. Disability services often only look at accommodations on tests and classwork and not on how to transition into the workforce upon graduation. There needs to be better integration that brings awareness of the learning and working opportunities that are critical for successful transitions. The post-graduation transition plan should not be limited to a certain number of years post-graduation. PwDs often take additional time finding employment, and if they are still seeking employment two or three years post-graduation they may be excluded from these opportunities. Actively

encouraging work experience through internships is a critical part of supporting the success of students with disabilities.

High expectations and family engagement are key parts of promoting independence and improving employment outcomes. High expectations about employment and success among PwDs need to begin early. Expecting and working toward success are motivational factors that can support the ultimate entry of a student with disabilities into the workforce. For far too long, PwDs have faced stigma, myths, and misconceptions about their capacity to work, to become independent, and to pursue careers. Setting high expectations for success needs to begin with families and their involvement in the schools. There are many examples of how this can be done successfully. Our nation needs to radically expand the innovative work being done through the Promoting Readiness of Minors in Supplemental Security Income (PROMISE) grant. The PROMISE grant is a joint initiative of the Social Security Administration (SSA) and the U.S. Departments of Education (ED), Health and Human Services, and Labor to address many of the barriers to economic independence faced by youth SSI recipients and their families. A key part of the success this model has had is the fact that family becomes engaged in career training and job preparation.

- 4. The jobs of the future will largely require post-secondary education. However, on average only 65 percent of students with disabilities complete high school and only seven percent complete college. What policies do you support to enable students with disabilities, including those from historically marginalized communities and backgrounds, to receive the diagnosis, Individualized Education Plan (IEP) or 504 plan and accommodations/services they need to succeed in school and be prepared for competitive employment?**

Ensuring children with disabilities receive the education and training they need to succeed is vitally important. Nationally, only 65 percent of students with disabilities graduate high school each year compared to 86 percent of student without disabilities. That means there is 21-point gap in outcomes. Educators have a critical role to play in empowering more students with disabilities to succeed.

Many students with disabilities, especially minorities and new immigrants, do not receive the services they need to succeed in school and/or are never identified as needing help due to their disability. As a result, many are relegated to segregated schools, suspended or pushed out of school altogether.

Some facts to consider:

- Students with disabilities are more than twice as likely to receive an out-of-school suspension as students without disabilities.
- Male African American and Latino students with disabilities have the highest suspension rates of all students with disabilities.
- Youth with disabilities who do not complete a high school education are far more likely to interact with the criminal justice system than those who complete their degrees.
- Recent studies have found that only one third of undergraduates with learning disabilities were receiving accommodations. This research confirms that

wealthier students have an easier time getting proper diagnoses and receiving appropriate accommodations than those with fewer financial resources.

- The newly passed Every Student Succeeds Act provides for improved assessments upon entry for justice-involved youth including disability screening. However, that is not yet happening, and similar requirements are missing in the adult system.

Teachers are important partners in the efforts to overcome bias, barriers and stigmas by promoting and implementing best practices in the classroom. Find resources for teachers and recommended reading here:

<https://www.respectability.org/resources/education-resources-disability-issues/>.

5. Today there are more than 750,000 people with disabilities behind bars in our nation. More than 60 percent of them are functionally illiterate and 95 percent of them will eventually be released. What are your views to ensure that individuals with disabilities who are incarcerated gain the skills and mental health supports that will enable them to be successful when they leave incarceration?

According to the [Bureau of Justice Statistics](#), 32 percent of all federal inmates say they have a disability and 40 percent of prisoners in our jails have at least one disability. In 2016, RespectAbility, in consultation with a wide-ranging group of diverse leaders, prepared a detailed report, Disability & Criminal Justice Reform: Keys to Success. The report, which was [featured](#) on the PBS Newshour, looks at how youth with disabilities get caught in the school-to-prison pipeline, what happens to people with disabilities behind bars and how people exit the criminal justice system. We offered very specific proposals for progress. Learn more:

<https://www.respectability.org/resources/Ending-School-Prison-Pipeline/>.

Some facts to consider:

- Two-thirds of inmates in state prisons failed to complete high school and seven out of ten people in jail are high school dropouts.
- People with disabilities in the corrections system routinely have their rights violated. Inmates who are deaf, hard of hearing or have another disability frequently are put in solitary “for their own protection,” which can cause significant mental health challenges.
- More than half of all people in prison report that they have a mental health condition. Only one-in-three people in prison and one-in-six of people in jail are receiving mental-health treatments.
- The experience of prison or jail can worsen pre-existing mental health conditions and can indeed create new mental health disabilities among inmates who leave the system.
- Some people with mental health issues are completely stabilized with medications and therapy while incarcerated. However, if they do not have access to Medicaid when they leave, many will be unable to receive the treatment they need.
- Some estimates show that between 70 and 90 percent of people released from the justice system are uninsured. This lack of access to healthcare, treatment and

medication only diminishes a returning citizen's chances of successfully reintegrating into society.

- Ninety-five percent of the prison population will eventually be released, and each year 600,000 people leave incarceration. There is a severe lack of capacity to reintegrate them appropriately. Within five years, three quarters of people who are paroled will be re-arrested and two-thirds will ultimately return to the prison and jail systems.

6. People with disabilities are twice as likely to be victims of crime as those without disabilities. This includes the fact that both children and adults with disabilities are more likely to be victims of rape or sexual assault. They are also far more likely to suffer from police violence, partially because manifestations of disability can be misunderstood. How would you address these issues?

In [the most recent statistics available](#) – released in 2015 with data from 2013 – the rate of violent crime against PwDs was more than twice the rate for people without disabilities, while PwDs aged 12-15 and 35-49 were three times more likely to be victims of violent crimes.

PwDs also are more likely to be victims of police attacks. A [Supreme Court amicus brief](#) filed by the ACLU in San Francisco v. Sheehan stated, “A review of available reports indicates that at least half of the estimated 375 to 500 people shot and killed by police each year in this country have mental health problems.”

While the vast majority of officers only want to protect the community they patrol, officers not properly trained in dealing with PwDs are bound to make mistakes. When Freddie Gray died in police custody in Baltimore, much attention was paid to his race but less was paid to the fact he was an individual with a disability. It is well documented that Gray had lead poisoning as a child. While we are still trying to understand the full ramifications of lead poisoning, advocates and studies say it can diminish cognitive function, increase aggression and ultimately exacerbate the cycle of poverty that is already exceedingly difficult to break. In Gray's case, unaddressed disability issues helped put him on a life path that involved the criminal justice system. In addition, Gray's death was not an isolated incident, with similar cases across the country.

This does not even take into account people with other disabilities who were improperly handled by police, due to insufficient officer training. For example, police may think people with epilepsy, diabetes, cerebral palsy or disabilities resulting from a stroke are instead intoxicated or using drugs – and therefore subjected to unnecessary force by officers.

Likewise, too many innocent people of all abilities and races are being killed. Still, we recognize and value the role of police and the good intentions of the vast majority of those in law enforcement.

Police must be trained in how to respond to individuals with disabilities of all races. People who communicate, think, learn and emote differently must have the accommodations, supports and guidance needed to level the playing field. This also means that civil workers must receive training to ensure public safety for all citizens. It is also vital for children of ALL backgrounds to get the testing and services they need to

determine if they have a disability and to enable early intervention that can bring successful outcomes.

Ongoing low expectations for employment, negative stereotypes and a lack of appropriate transition services combine to lead to lives of isolation, poverty, poor health outcomes and higher rates of both victimization of, and crime by, PwDs.

Regarding sexual assaults, consider these facts:

- Children with disabilities are three times more likely to be victims of rape or sexual assault than children without disabilities.
- Every nine minutes an adult with a disability is sexually assaulted or raped.

According to the [National Crime Victimization Survey](#) (NCVS) and other studies, there is a correlation between individuals with disabilities and rates of sexual violence. Estimates show that around 59,000 adults with disabilities are raped or sexually assaulted each year. Those same studies show that adults with disabilities (hearing, vision, cognitive, ambulatory, self-care limitations, or inability to live independently) are 68 percent more likely than persons without disabilities to be a victim of rape or sexual assault.

These horrific statistics bespeak a reality of victimization that needs to be fought. Teaching children with disabilities self-advocacy skills also must include training in self-defense and education about how to seek assistance in the event of an assault. It is wrong enough that someone can be raped once but the fact that some people with disabilities experience repeated assaults is catastrophic. The necessary first step for addressing a horrific injustice such as sexual assault and people with disabilities is to understand the scale of the problem.

One study called [Courage Above All: Sexual Assault Against Women with Disabilities](#) found that “83 percent of women with disabilities will be sexually assaulted in their lifetime.” Approximately half of adults with cognitive disabilities will experience [10 or more sexually abusive incidents](#) in their lifetime. Lastly, to quote the Department of Justice’s report on [Crime Against Persons with Disabilities](#), “39 percent of all violent crimes committed against adults with disabilities were serious violent crimes...compared to 29 percent for those without disabilities.” These horrific statistics bespeak a reality of victimization that needs to change.

7. How would you ensure that people with disabilities have access to healthcare and the benefits they need while enabling them with opportunities to work to the best of their capacities without losing the supports they need to live?

The transition from school to work in the community for PwDs needs to address other barriers to employment. For many PwDs, it is not the lack of a job or job skills that preclude them from having a job but rather it is the lack of healthcare services that may only be covered by Medicaid, and issues with Medicaid eligibility that is the problem. The asset and income restrictions placed by Medicaid should be waived for individuals with documented disabilities that want to transition into the workforce in an effort to incentivize people to work rather than incentivizing people to remain on government support. For example, a person with a serious spinal cord injury should not lose the personal care assistant who helps them eat and get dressed in the morning if they take a

job. More states need to offer a “Medicaid buy-in” to help people move into paid work while maintaining the health-related supports they need.

Another issue is the lack of portability of benefits, particularly if a person with a disability receives Medicaid benefits such as personal care assistance but finds employment in another state. They are not able to easily transfer benefits without a lapse in coverage. This makes the transition nearly impossible when people require medical care or personal care assistance on a daily basis. This also is an issue if family caregivers pass away and other caregivers are not in the same state.

When an individual is collecting Supplemental Security Income (SSI) benefits based on disability, an SSI applicant or a current SSI recipient who is single cannot have more than \$2,000 in assets. SSI claimants who exceed the \$2,000 limit (\$3,000 if married) are ineligible for benefits. And, in fact, claimants who are over the resource limit will not even have their disability claim fully evaluated to see if they are medically eligible for disability benefits. They will get a “technical denial” of benefits.

8. What are your thoughts on ensuring that people with disabilities have the option to live in their homes instead of institutions and still have the community attendant supports they need to live?

There is a shortage of home and community-based care across all disability populations. While the pay rates for these workers and coverage caps need to be increased, it is still cheaper to have a personal care assistant than the cost of institutionalization – the only alternative when workers are not available for hospitals, nursing facilities, residential placement for children with medically high needs, and in similar situations. There is a critical need for home and community-based providers especially among the elderly as baby-boomers age.

Personal care assistants are primarily funded through Medicaid, and eligibility is restricted based on assets and income. This is a significant disincentive to finding employment for PwDs who require personal care assistants. PwDs should be able to receive the care they need to live on a daily basis, and have that care available should they need assistance getting ready for work in the morning. There is no point in getting a job if you lose the ability to have someone help you get ready for work in the morning.

In addition, the [“Priced Out in 2014” study](#) documents the severity of our nation’s housing affordability crisis:

- The national average rent for a modestly priced one-bedroom apartment is greater than the entire maximum SSI payment of a person with a disability. The average annual income of a single individual receiving SSI payments was \$8,995 – equal to only 20.1 percent of the national median income for a one-person household and about 23 percent below the 2014 federal poverty level.
- In 162 housing market areas across 33 states, one-bedroom rents were more than 100 percent of maximum monthly SSI payments. Rents for modest rental units in 15 of these areas were more than 150 percent of maximum SSI payments.
- Our housing crisis severely impacts PwDs -the most vulnerable people with the lowest income.

- Aging parents supporting an adult child with a disability feel pressured to find safe housing that maximizes their son or daughter's independence and dignity.

As a result of the housing crisis, millions of non-elderly PwDs have limited housing options and therefore, reside in homeless shelters, public institutions, nursing homes, unsafe and overcrowded board and care homes, at home with aging parents, or in segregated group quarters which, in some cases, are much more costly options and strip our fellow citizens of their basic human and civil rights.

It is critical to assure accessible, affordable, and safe housing options not only for PwDs (particularly those who experience intellectual disabilities), but also for our elderly citizens. Our nation is aging and this issue also impacts older adults who may experience disability challenges in later life as well as veterans who have disabilities.

9. How would you advance innovations (i.e., assistive technologies, devices) that can help people with disabilities become more successfully employed, productive and independent?

Assistive technology promotes greater independence by enabling people to perform tasks that they were formerly unable to accomplish, or had great difficulty accomplishing, by providing enhancements to, or changing methods of interacting with, the technology needed to accomplish such tasks. This includes assistive, adaptive and rehabilitative devices for people with disabilities from wheelchairs and hearing aids to screen readers and voice recognition software.

Assistive technology, mobility devices and other supports can enable many individuals to look beyond receiving services and instead into pursuing their dreams. Technology is a rapidly evolving element in the environment in which services are delivered and people with functional limitations live their lives. As such, the use of technology to mitigate limitations or the role of assistive technology in facilitating communications is importance to consider. Examples include screen readers for people who are blind or visually impaired, voice recognition software and various communication devices to enable people with disabilities to communicate with co-workers – and their co-workers to effectively communicate with them.

10. Are your office, website and events accessible to people with disabilities? If yes, please describe.

View <https://www.respectability.org/inclusion-toolkits/disability-faq/> to learn more about how to ensure your events are accessible, including an event checklist, and how to ensure your physical location, exterior spaces and signage are accessible. Also learn more about how to ensure your website and other materials including handouts are fully accessible and how to add captions to your online videos for free.