



DISABILITY LAW CENTER

3330 Arctic Boulevard, Suite 103
Anchorage, AK 99503

www.dlcak.org

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1. As you have read in the news, the Alaska Division of Public Assistance has had chronic understaffing leading to a significant delay in individuals receiving critical supports such as Medicaid and SNAP ("food stamps").

How would you streamline eligibility requirements and program performance so people with disabilities can get and keep necessary services and benefits such as Medicaid, food assistance, and housing assistance?

I support the move to implementing broad-based categorical-eligibility criteria, and investing in technology and streamlined processes that reduce redundant paperwork and increase efficiency. A major step would be continued progress in moving to a central online portal where Alaskans, with assistance when needed, can apply for and manage multiple benefits in one place, with simplified eligibility checks. I will also work to reduce bureaucratic barriers, ensuring that once a person qualifies, they can maintain their benefits without frequent re-certifications. For people with disabilities, in particular, we must ensure that services are more responsive and integrated, consistent in administrative requirements, offering wraparound care that considers medical, housing, and food needs holistically while minimizing administrative overhead in order to maximize benefits to individuals.

2. Alaskans with disabilities support a system in which each person directs their own supports, based on their strengths and abilities, toward a meaningful life in their home, their job and their community.

How will you protect and support the rights of individuals with disabilities so that they can make informed decisions about their own healthcare and personal wellbeing, ensuring autonomy and access to necessary services?

People with disabilities deserve the right to make informed decisions about their healthcare and personal well being. I will support legislation that strengthens the right of individuals to direct their own care by ensuring access to transparent, consistent, easy-to-understand information about available services. This includes maintaining and expanding funding for programs that allow for self-directed care, where individuals can choose their caregivers and tailor support services to their unique needs. Additionally, I will advocate for expanded access to navigation and advocacy services, so that individuals have the necessary support to make empowered decisions. The state must also ensure that healthcare providers are adequately trained to respect the autonomy and rights of people with disabilities.

3. Individuals placed under court-appointed guardianship are adults who rely on their guardian to ensure they are housed, and their most basic needs are met. The guardian is also responsible for ensuring protected persons receive public benefits, on which protected persons typically depend. Currently, there is a lack of qualified guardians in the State of Alaska

What are your ideas for solving the guardianship crisis?

The shortage of qualified guardians and many other critical positions in Alaska is a serious issue. We must address broad based issues driving people away from Alaska as well as specific issues with each position. My approach would include working with community partners to expand training and certification programs for guardians and considering state-supported programs that provide professional guardianship services. We can explore innovative models, such as

mentorship or peer-support programs, where experienced guardians help train new recruits. It is also critical that we ensure adequate compensation and support for those who take on this important role, to encourage more individuals to become certified guardians. Additionally, I would advocate for greater oversight and support to ensure that those under guardianship receive the necessary services and care to lead fulfilling lives.

4. The Department of Justice has found reasonable cause to believe that the State of Alaska violates the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) by failing to provide community-based services to children with behavioral health disabilities, relying instead on segregated, out-of-state institutional settings - specifically, psychiatric hospitals and psychiatric residential treatment facilities.

What is your vision to support in-state mental health services which support children with behavioral health disabilities and their families?

Alaska must prioritize community-based services that allow children with behavioral health disabilities to receive care close to home, rather than in out-of-state institutions. Alaska has some of the highest healthcare costs in the country, requiring formulas that allow for better Medicare coverage. I envision a system where our in-state mental health infrastructure is bolstered through increased funding for local facilities, training programs for mental health professionals, and the integration of behavioral health services into existing healthcare networks. We should build more in-state residential treatment facilities and offer incentives for professionals to practice in Alaska. Additionally, we need to focus on investing early to reduce long term costs including: early intervention, prevention and skill building services that keep families together, maximize success in public education with fewer necessary accommodation IEP/504 costs for schools, greater potential for lifelong independent living and integration into the workforce, and reduce the need for long-term institutional care.

5. Children with disabilities who attend our state schools often need to have adjustments made to their schedules and/or the education services they received (accommodations) as well as modifications to the curriculum used to teach them to receive an equitable and appropriate education.

What steps will you take to improve education for students with disabilities, including ensuring proper accommodations and modifications within the classroom, increasing parental involvement in the Individualized Education Program process, and raising awareness of the rights of students under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act?

Ensuring equitable education for students with disabilities requires commitment on multiple fronts, with a priority placed on listening to parents and teachers and creating a positive learning environment for all of the students in a class. As noted above, my vision includes increased early investments in services that provide more independence and potential for integration into classroom education, with necessary accommodations, with an intent to reduce the requirement or scope of an IPE, use of 504 strategies or no necessary interventions when appropriate, striving for greater early development investments that may reduce long term public costs. I will support funding to hire more special education teachers and specialists to ensure students have access to the accommodations and individualized support they need. I view this as essential for each student, as well as essential for supporting the teacher, and learning for the entire class. Additionally, I will advocate for increased parental involvement in the IEP process, making sure that families have the resources and information to participate actively in decisions and supporting their child's education in school and when away from school. Raising awareness about the rights of students under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) is also critical. I will support additional funding for schools that have received the distinction of nationally recognized Unified Champion School, to further support schools' steps toward inclusive and intentional environments. I support training for teachers and administrators to ensure that schools are fully compliant with federal law and that all students can succeed.

Phone (907) 565-1002

1-800-478-1234

Fax (907) 565-1000