

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

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 increase the engagement of individuals with disabilities in key City leadership posts or advisory boards?

- *CODI is the **MAYOR's** Council on Disability Services – It's important to me that we have this committee – and I'm glad that I've been able to play a more active role – coming to more meetings and understanding some of the issues that you are working on. Thank you for playing such an important role – both to me, as well as the City as a whole.*
- *My service on the Knox County school board opened my eyes to the challenges & barriers that those with disabilities (students, parents & caregivers) face; from elevators to entrances to playgrounds, we worked hard to make KCS facilities more inclusive and accessible for our entire community*
- *The last three and a half years have significantly increased my awareness & conception of how Knoxville should be serving our disabled community*
- *With the intention of improving awareness and engagement, very early on in my first term, I issued a proclamation declaring July 26 as Knoxville ADA Awareness Day*
- *My good friend & mentor, UT professor Otis Stephens (d.2016), was an invaluable source of insight on what it means to live & work in Knoxville while visually impaired. Closer to home, I have members of my own family, as well as members of my staff, who are disabled and have to navigate life in Knoxville - this is a challenge that directly impacts so many of us and one I will continue to prioritize.*

- *I am very proud to have appointed people not only to CODI but also other boards because of their perspective on inclusivity for people with disabilities:*
 - *Joel Simmons (KTA Board)*
 - *Mary Tom Adams (Director of SPARK) on Mayor's Maker Council*

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 through an expansion of disability services?

- *Our Disability Services Office is a small but mighty team – like so many departments, they know how to do a LOT while recognizing that as government departments, we have to live within our means.*
- *I want to first recognize Stephanie for her recent lifetime achievement award from the Disability Resource Center – well deserved and a testament to her commitment and impact that she's had within the community.*
- *As with so many of our small offices, Stephanie knows that partnerships are critical to success – and she and Misha work with colleagues across City departments to make progress far beyond the immediate walls of the Disability Services Office (Housing & Neighborhood Development, Engineering, Parks & Recreation, KAT, so many others)*
- *These partnerships are critical to my aspiration that we continue to always increase opportunities for people with disabilities by facilitating full and equal participation in all aspects of life in Knoxville. We will continue reducing architectural, procedural, physical, and communication barriers as well as promoting equity in housing, parks and recreation, employment, transportation, and civic & cultural activities*
- *One specific way to ensure we can make headway is through City-wide training. This has long been something Stephanie has advocated for, and now that we have an HR Department, we are looking forward to adding more training opportunities for staff across our departments.*

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 ensure that accessibility and ADA compliance is a known requirement when it comes to providing internal and external resources and funding for these projects?

- *We are planning to adopt universal design in my 2nd term*
- *Aforementioned training through HR for staff as part of Q2 answer.*
- *I am proud to be making steady progress toward recommendations identified in the ADA Transition Plan. The crux of the plan focuses on an assessment of 21 City parks and facilities, and thanks to input from CODI and our ADA Office, we've been making improvements – to these facilities and more - some examples include:*
 - *Sharp's Ridge Memorial Park - All Access adaptive trail PLUS improvements to overlook and East Picnic area (2020)*
 - *Sam Duff Park in S. Knoxville - Bathrooms, Sidewalk, Parking lot (2022)*
 - *Morningside Park (Design underway through BCBST Healthy Place grant)*
 - *Applying for \$500,000 grant to support improvements at Holston River Park*
- *We also go beyond just the improvements listed in the Plan:*
 - *Ft. Kid Park, featuring accessible surfaces, fully accessible pathways and accessible merry-go-round*
 - *Fountain City Park – Significant ADA improvements when we took over the park from the Lyons Club.*
 - *Augusta Quarry - there is extremely limited access now – but a full redesign is underway to make this an accessible space for people with mobility disabilities (a \$5M project with private support).*
- *Dedicating substantial YOY increase in ADA/access improvement funding – ADA funding exists across departments (not just in Disability Services Office). In FY24*
 - *\$500,000 - Capital funding for Disability Services (up from FY23)*
 - *\$165,000 - Cal Johnson Rec Center ADA Trail*
 - *\$500,000 - City Wide Curb Cuts*
- *Increasing promotion of targeted programs such as Dynamic Recreation (Softball Soccer, Basketball, etc.), which aims to provide leisure and recreational opportunities for individuals with varying disabilities in the community.*

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. As Mayor, how will you 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?

- *I appreciate CODI and Disability Office for championing efforts to make Knoxville an Age Friendly Community through AARP.*
- *I was fortunate to have attended a roundtable hosted by AARP specifically to explore these issues with a broad cross-section of community leaders. There is a real recognition that we have to improve access to affordable homes for all kinds of people, in all types of families, at all different price points.*
- *Housing is one of my top priorities – now – and in the future.*
- *We have made real progress in this area, most notably the creation of a \$50m Affordable Housing Fund that has helped support the creation of over 2000 affordable homes that meet visitability standards for Knoxville families.*
- *Looking ahead, two aspects I'm most excited to tackle: Permanent Supportive Housing and Missing Middle Housing*

Permanent Supportive Housing

- *Just last week, we approved \$500,000 to support Liberty Place, which will provide 32 affordable permanent supportive apartments specifically for Veterans.*
- *Other examples from the last few years include:*
 - *Dogwood Springs (2022): 52 units specifically for seniors*
 - *Villages at Holston Court (2020): 24 units of supportive housing for seniors and people with disabilities*
 - *Callahan Flats (Under Construction): 58 one-bedroom units for people with disabilities*

Missing Middle Housing

- *This is a concept that came out of the AARP discussion and the recognition that options like duplexes, triplexes, cottage courts, and more – are particularly well suited to serve seniors who want to age in place, or families who may be caring for an aging parent or adult child with disabilities.*
- *Unfortunately, there are a lot of barriers in City zoning code that keep these otherwise desirable options from being built.*
- *We want to change that – and are working right now to study what changes we could make in Knoxville to unlock this important housing option in Knoxville.*

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?

- *I like to think in terms of Equitable Mobility – that no matter where you live or how you move around the City - that you have the ability to get where you need to go **safely**.*
- *KAT is obviously a big piece of this and we can point to the following:*
 - *\$14M annual funding for KAT operations*
 - *\$1.3M allocated in my first term to improve bus stops across the City*
 - *Working with CAC to coordinate dispatch in order to better serve paratransit users,*
 - *Working with Justice Knox to design a microtransit pilot that would complement our fixed-route service in target areas – something that could be used by riders of all abilities.*
- *More broadly - **Vision Zero**: a commitment to an aspirational goal of eliminating traffic fatalities on city-controlled roads by 2040.*
 - *Moving around our city should not be a life or death proposition. Unfortunately, for those who walk or roll through our city – vehicle crashes involving those pedestrians are disproportionately fatal.*
 - *Cross-partner team that analyzed where and why life-altering crashes happen in Knoxville so that we can work together to prevent them in the future.*
 - *Just last month we completed the Knoxville Vision Zero Action Plan that outlines a comprehensive approach across education, engineering, and enforcement to improve our transportation systems and make them safe for all users, regardless of ability, such as:*
 - *Enhanced cross walks and refuge islands*
 - *Speed management controls*
 - *New sidewalks and bike lanes — and ADA improvements to existing infrastructure*
- *In a second term, I will continue the work of making Knoxville a city that is welcome to all, regardless of background and physical abilities. Accessible transportation, in all its forms, is a critical element in creating a city that can be enjoyed by everyone.*