

CODI Mayoral Forum – Charles Thomas

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 is about to reach its 30th anniversary; yet there is still a long way to go to ensure accessibility for and inclusion of people with disabilities.

1. Describe your experience with individuals with disabilities in Knoxville. How have you included individuals with disabilities in your campaign efforts? How do you plan to include this population during your tenure as Mayor?

My most direct experience has been through my service on the Citizen's Advisory Board to KAT (1 year), and on my service on the KTA Board (5 years). As a City Council member, I would work to continue to improve transportation services and make them even more responsive and accommodating. The area of transportation would be my main focus in efforts to improve the lives of people with disabilities and seniors. It is an area I have experience, and believe I can make real contributions. I will be seeking an appointment with CODI soon so that we may discuss other areas of involvement regarding disability and aging issues face-to-face.

2. The City of Knoxville has aging and outdated recreational facilities and park spaces that are included in an ADA study to identify what needs to be done to make these areas inclusive, and able to promote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. We have received 1.4 million dollars to date to remediate 21 facilities. While this is a good start toward making these facilities ADA compliant, more funding is needed to complete additional improvements. What is your plan to ensure that accessibility and ADA compliance is a necessity when it comes to providing resources and funding?

3. How will your leadership as Mayor encourage other departments and local businesses to support greater civic participation by residents of all ages and abilities?

4. For years, the City of Knoxville has supported the meaningful employment of individuals with disabilities by participating in National Disability Employment Awareness Month activities, hosting several job seekers with disabilities throughout the city, as well

as regular engagement with the Knoxville Area Employment Consortium. Describe your past participation in these efforts, and how you would improve them.

5. Knoxville's Disability Services Office 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 providing City employee accommodation requests. CODI has long supported the expansion of this office in order to provide additional supports and services to individuals with disabilities who live and visit Knoxville. How are you going to ensure that our City makes more headway in supporting persons with disabilities through an expansion of disability services?

6. 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. How will you engage individuals with disabilities to be included in key City leadership posts?

7. Living with a disability is very expensive, and the lack of accessible housing and aging 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 housing units required to address this systemic issue?

8. Transportation options are a critical concern for thousands of individuals with disabilities and those aging in the Knoxville area. How will you address the lack of accessible cabs/Uber, lack of and compliance with accessible street parking, accessible sidewalks, bus stops and crosswalks, and the lack of accountability for access in emerging transit technologies?

9. Homelessness is a term that goes a lot deeper than what is actually seen on the surface and is greater than just mental illness and addiction—veterans, persons with disabilities, victims of domestic violence, individuals with job loss, individuals not qualifying for services, opioid addiction, etc. How do you perceive homelessness in Knoxville and how are you going to combat this issue during your term as Mayor?