

**2021 Budget Statement to the City Council Committee  
on the Budget and Government Operations**

**November 9, 2020**

**Rachel Arfa, Commissioner; Mayor's Office for People with Disabilities (MOPD)**

Good Morning Madam Chair, Vice Chair Silverstein, and honorable members of the City Council. I thank you and Mayor Lightfoot for your leadership and support of the Mayor's Office for People with Disabilities, in our work to make the City of Chicago the most accessible city in the nation.

Mayor Lightfoot nominated me to this role earlier this summer, and I began in July, in the midst of this ongoing pandemic. While it may seem daunting to take on a new role during these difficult, socially-distant times, I am no stranger to challenge.

As a deaf person, I had to learn how to advocate for myself, to have access to the world. This included accessing my education, and also my own city, including our public spaces, and so much more. Before coming to MOPD, I advocated for others as a disability and civil rights attorney, working to remove barriers to employment for people with disabilities and litigating civil rights violations.

Now, I am proud to serve as the first deaf Commissioner of MOPD, and the highest-ranking deaf person in city government nation-wide, and the first deaf person to serve as a member of any Mayor's Cabinet. This is an honor and responsibility I take seriously. I will use this opportunity to ensure that we create more opportunities for people with disabilities.

MOPD, created the same year as the Americans with Disabilities Act, promotes total access, full participation and equal opportunity for people with disabilities. Our comprehensive approach to systemic change for people with disabilities includes: the delivery of independent living services, education and awareness about disability, policy solutions, and collaborating with fellow city departments and sister agencies, towards our goal of making Chicago a world-class, disability-friendly city.

First, we are investing in building the capacity of City departments, including in our own department, where we are increasing efforts to expand staff knowledge through trainings on topics including: disability awareness during Covid-19, communication access, human trafficking, accessible technology, adapting services to virtual platforms, and diversity and racial equity. We currently provide resources to City departments and agencies to ensure City programs and services include architectural and communication access. Going forward, MOPD will coordinate with every City department to complete the Americans with Disabilities Act Title II Self-Evaluation and Transition Plan and implement accessibility liaisons in each department. For example, this includes ensuring physical accessibility, ensuring materials are in alternate

formats and scheduling American Sign Language interpreters and/or captioning. MOPD is partnering with Assets, Information and Services (AIS) to leverage new, devoted resources to increase digital accessibility on websites and ensure that technology purchased by the City is accessible to people with disabilities.

We are also working to ensure accessibility of the built environment. MOPD hired a building inspector, which permits us to conduct accessibility surveys in partnership with the Department of Housing to ensure that public funded housing is in compliance with accessibility laws and codes. This fulfilled an outstanding need, and in this budget, we are adding a second building inspector position. These two positions will allow MOPD to track and ensure that all construction is built according to approved plans, provide hands-on technical assistance in each of our wards and to businesses. We are also improving our internal processes to ensure all appropriate architectural projects are submitted to MOPD for review.

During this ongoing pandemic, our staff are adapting MOPD programs and services to ensure our ability to serve the public through telephone and virtual video platforms, in addition to onsite. Our Disability Resource Unit provides prompt responses to inquiries and connects the public to MOPD services including our independent living services, case management, in-home personal assistance, and home modification. MOPD collaborates with Meals on Wheels to provide home-delivered meals to people with disabilities age 60 and above and distributes free amplified landline phones and cell phone amplifiers to individuals who are deaf and hard-of-hearing.

MOPD is committed to increasing employment opportunities for people with disabilities, including by implementing the recommendations of the Mayoral Task Force on Employment and Economic Development for People with Disabilities. MOPD received a grant through Citibank's Empowered Cities Initiative, which allowed us to hire a designated staff person to implement these priorities. The Task Force priorities include supporting entrepreneurship, workforce strategies, student transition needs and access to banking and financial literacy. MOPD is also connecting with various employment efforts including the Chicago Cook Workforce Partnerships, and the Department of Human Resources (DHR). MOPD also monitors compliance with the Chicago Minimum Wage Ordinance that eliminates Section 14 (c) certificates in the City of Chicago, by 2024, which urges the end of sheltered workshops and promotes competitive employment opportunities for people with disabilities.

MOPD is a partner with the Department of Transportation (CDOT), in continuing to make our sidewalks more accessible, by installing Accessible Pedestrian Signals (APS). In large part due to the \$3.95 million, which is made up of both federal and local funds, APS will be installed at approximately 100 locations (between 25 and 100 intersections) 2022. MOPD also works with CDOT on its Capital Plan to ensure accessibility and opportunities for collaboration. MOPD serves on Mayor Lightfoot's Pedestrian Advisory Committee, which solicits input from stakeholders, including the disability community on City infrastructure and issues affecting pedestrians.

MOPD partners with Business Affairs and Consumer Protection (BACP) and the Accessible Transportation Advisory Council to increase the number of wheelchair accessible taxis and ride share providers, and implement strategies to improve services for people with disabilities including through driver training on disability awareness. MOPD monitors rideshare accessibility plans and service delivery timing to customers using wheelchairs.

MOPD collaborates with the Office of Emergency Management (OEMC) to make sure people with disabilities are included in the City's emergency preparedness plans. MOPD participates in OEMC's Mass Care and Sheltering Work Group, which serves as the coordinating body in planning emergency assistance, sheltering and human services resulting from natural and/or human caused incidents, and in table-top exercises and on-location drills to ensure incorporation of disability needs and access. MOPD is a collaborator to the Department of Aviation efforts to update emergency planning for O'Hare Airport, as well as on making Chicago's airports more accessible.

MOPD will continue to provide dedicated services and advocacy on behalf of Chicagoans with disabilities. MOPD's budget reflects the department's best efforts to sustain integral programs, services and priority initiatives in the coming year. MOPD is committed to addressing disparities, maximizing all available resources to increase accessibility, and fostering equal opportunity and independence for people with disabilities, who live, visit and work in Chicago. On behalf of MOPD, we thank Mayor Lightfoot, and the members of the Chicago City Council. With your support, we will advance our work to make Chicago our nation's most accessible and inclusive city. Thank you.