

## **Mayor's Office for People with Disabilities**

### **2025 Budget Hearing**

**November 7, 2025**

**Rachel Arfa, Commissioner**

Thank you, Chairman Ervin, Vice Chairwoman Lee, Mayor Brandon Johnson, and members of City Council. I am honored to be here today to share with you the highlights of yet another incredible year at the Mayor's Office for People with Disabilities (MOPD). I want to thank my hardworking team at MOPD for their dedication – it is a privilege to work alongside each of you. And I want to thank everyone who works with us to make the City of Chicago the most accessible and inclusive city in the world. We do not do this work alone; we do this work with you. From the Mayor's Office to members of City Council, to our City departments and sister agencies and of course community members, we all collectively advance accessibility.

There is evidence of MOPD's far-reaching impact in both visible and less visible ways. In today's statement, I will share examples of our impact. Before I begin, I want to celebrate the accessibility present here. First, you see our dedicated ASL (American Sign Language) interpreter team, comprised of our four staff ASL interpreters at MOPD, who have provided communication access for over 1,547 hours for Mayoral press conferences, City festivals, City services, and more. Last year, when I was here for my budget hearing, you raised concerns about using automatic captions during these proceedings; we partnered with the Office of the City Clerk to implement real-time captioning to ensure accurate messaging. I am pleased to share that real-time captioning is now available at all regularly scheduled City Council meetings and upon request.

Mayor Johnson and the Mayor's office, City departments, and sister agencies are partners in our city-wide accessibility, including serving as access officers and ensuring a point person on public-facing accessibility in every City department and sister agency. We convened our access officers every month this past year. As a result, departments collaborate to share ideas and solutions and provide increased accessibility, elevating disability like the Department of Aviation did by making the Sunflower Lanyard available at our airports, making air travel more comfortable for people with non-visible disabilities, and we partnered with BACP to host an event for Uber and Lyft drivers to raise awareness about service animal best practices.

We have also built a robust training team. This year, we led more trainings than ever before, providing 60 trainings to 2,049 attendees. We conducted seven Aldermanic trainings, attended by 31 Wards were represented, and four Office of the Mayor trainings, and employers and community organizations. Topics include Disability and Access, How to Host Accessible Meetings and Events, Service Animal Best Practices and Inclusive Hiring Practices. Thank you all for attending our trainings and learning more.

This matters because we know that one in four adults in Chicago has a disability. This is one of the many data findings due to our partnership with the Chicago Department of Public Health research team on the Healthy Communities Survey. Not surprisingly, the highest population of people with disabilities is over the age of 65. The second highest group of people with disabilities is people between the ages of 18-29, which only reinforces our priority to serve youth and young adults with disabilities. We have released a two-page summary, available on our website, and are finalizing a longer report that will be published. <sup>[1]</sup> One important data point from our report is that we now know how many people with disabilities are in each of our neighborhoods. For example, we know that in the Austin neighborhood, 1 in 3 people have a disability or 25,609 people.

<sup>[1]</sup> [https://www.chicago.gov/content/dam/city/depts/cdph/statistics\\_and\\_reports/2024/Disability-Report-One-Pager-V3.pdf](https://www.chicago.gov/content/dam/city/depts/cdph/statistics_and_reports/2024/Disability-Report-One-Pager-V3.pdf)

We know that young people with disabilities want to work. Our Career Center, now celebrating its two-year anniversary, serves youth and adults with disabilities and supports career readiness, counseling on disability disclosure and reasonable accommodations, formal mentoring programs, and more. Forty percent of our clients are young people with disabilities between the ages of 16-26. We also bring together job seekers with disabilities and employers. For example, we hosted a networking fair in October, bringing together over 32 employers and over 150 job seekers. We continue to learn about follow-up interviews as a result of our event. Our Career Center also has the MOPD All Access podcast, with captions and ASL interpretation, highlighting disabled employment issues.

We also support City of Chicago employees with disabilities. I am proud to serve as the Executive Sponsor for the Disability Forward CHI employee resource group, the first ERG of its kind at the City, that brings together disabled employees and allies. Our video honoring October as National Disability Employment Awareness Month was on the City of Chicago's main page last week. We also launched a voluntary survey to collaborate with employees with disabilities to identify opportunities to continue building and retaining our disabled workforce and continue to collect responses.

We also support students with disabilities and families and partnered with Ada S. McKinley Community Services to launch a new \$5 million cash assistance program this year, funded through the American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) grant. In 2024, we are distributing \$500 to over 8,000 students with disabilities in K-12 grades who live in Chicago and meet income guidelines. Our application deadline is November 15, 2024. We have awarded 48 percent of our funds to over 3,825 students with disabilities who live in all 50 Wards of the City. Our outreach has been a city-wide effort, engaging all City Council members, city departments, and sister agencies, such as partnering with Chief Josh Long at the Office for Students with Disabilities at Chicago Public Schools, community stakeholders, and using radio ads and social media. We also attended report card pickup at 14 CPS schools on Monday, where we talked to students and families. We are on track to meet our goal of reaching over 8,000 families by the end of this year and will continue to make a big push right up to our November 15th application deadline. Currently, we have over 13,288 applications from over 12,000 unique households. Many of these families are learning about MOPD and City services for the first time. We intend to continue to build these relationships in the long term.

Another way we built relationships this year is through the launch of our program to serve people who acquire a disability through gun and community violence. Senator Duckworth championed this earmark, which was successfully funded through the U.S. Department of Justice. We prioritize areas identified in Mayor Johnson's People's Plan for Community Safety, in the Austin, Englewood, South Lawndale/Little Village and East and West Garfield Park neighborhoods. We are meeting regularly onsite with community leaders.

We believe that people with disabilities can live independently in all of our communities and our Home Modification program makes this possible. In 2024, through a record-breaking \$4.848 million dollar investment, we are on track to make 188 homes accessible. The typical accessibility modification is to make the entrance to the home accessible by adding a lift to the entrance, and also includes making bathrooms and kitchens accessible. This program is funded through CDBG, Corporate, CHA and DOH dollars, and the average cost of each modification is approximately \$21,000. We will continue to seek additional federal, State and local funding to meet the increasing demand. We also provided six hours of personal assistance weekly to 83 people with disabilities to be able to live independently in their homes.

MOPD is also a contributing member to Mayor Johnson's Cut the Tape initiative. Under my leadership, we have doubled our Accessibility Compliance Unit, which currently includes a Deputy Commissioner, Architect IV, two project coordinators, and two accessibility inspectors. I am pleased that our 2025 budget includes

[https://www.chicago.gov/content/dam/city/depts/cdph/statistics\\_and\\_reports/2024/Disability-Report-One-Pager-V3.pdf](https://www.chicago.gov/content/dam/city/depts/cdph/statistics_and_reports/2024/Disability-Report-One-Pager-V3.pdf)

adding much-needed second Architect IV position, which further demonstrates that our City values accessibility in our permit review process. Our team completed 222 pre-permit plan reviews and 407 permit reviews this past year.

We also completed 41 C-funded multi-family housing development reviews and continue to partner with the Department of Housing and serve as a contributing member of the DOH Steering Committee devoted to reviewing housing policies. Our team also answered over 150 requests for technical assistance from the public, architects, and developers.

This year, MOPD also launched the Chicago Housing Locator on our website, which identifies available and accessible rental housing, a needed resource for disabled housing seekers. Since launching in April, the locator has averaged 27,000 site visitors monthly. Finally, MOPD partnered with 2FM and the Public Buildings Commission to conduct over 85 City facility assessments, as part of an ongoing priority to ensure that City programs and facilities are accessible.

Thank you for your support of MOPD. I look forward to continuing our work and accomplishing even more in 2025.