

Chicago Coalition for the Homeless Mayoral Candidate Questionnaire

State Representative La Shawn K. Ford – January 27, 2019

1. In the course of a year, 80,000 Chicagoans experience homelessness. One in four of them is a child struggling to stay in school. Four out of five are African American or Latino. This number also includes people living “doubled-up” or staying temporarily with others because they lost their housing. If you become Mayor of Chicago, what would be your plan for addressing homelessness?

My Volunteer Health Adviser of more than 13 years, Dr. Thomas Huggett, who with his team has provided health care to those experiencing homelessness on the West Side for more than 20 years, says that people experience homelessness for many different reasons. I am running for mayor to work for racial healing, especially with our police on the West and South Sides, and especially for those who experience homelessness. People also need opportunities for real jobs to support themselves and their families, and the economic disinvestment on the West and South Sides will be reversed in my administration. As a state representative for the last 12 years, I have worked hard to give people with criminal backgrounds a chance to work by passing laws that “Ban the Box”, seal certain records, and expunge other records. I will build trade schools that will lead to jobs with more than a living wage. I strongly support the \$15 minimum wage. Through the West Side Heroin Task Force that I co-founded, we advocate for treatment and true supportive housing for those with substance use disorder and mental health issues, especially those who suffer the effects of trauma and/or domestic violence. I want to make our city the most insured city in the country so people can access the medical and behavioral health services that they need. We have to strengthen emergency assistance to keep people in their homes before they become homeless, and we have to fight for affordable housing throughout our city.

2. “Street homelessness” can be defined as living on the street or another place not meant for human habitation. “Tent Cities” or “Encampments” have been a common symbol of people experiencing street homelessness throughout Chicago and other major cities. If elected, how would you address street homelessness?

We need more support for street outreach teams who get to know people living on the streets and can gain trust and offer options, especially for those with severe mental illness and ongoing substance use disorder. More funding and support will come for programs like Franciscan Casa in Pilsen where people living in encampments on Lower Wacker Drive or on Des Plaines are offered low-barrier, safe housing with 24/7 care management support. We need more low-barrier housing where a person’s partner and pet is allowed, and a harm reduction approach is taken to deal with substance use disorders. We need to rehabilitate the many abandoned buildings on the West and South Sides and turn them into affordable, supportive housing. I introduced legislation in the last General Assembly that would create the Access to Affordable, Permanent, and Supportive Housing and Services Act, allowing cities like Chicago to provide housing and supportive services upon a determination that a person experiencing homelessness is living in a public space - my mayoral administration will advocate for reintroducing this legislation. Housing is also health care, and my administration with work with Illinois DHS and HFS and managed care organizations to direct money toward supportive housing for persons with severe medical or mental health issues. Working with experts employed by agencies who do this work every day, listening to what works and what doesn’t work in Chicago and other cities, and modifying our response to the needs of those most in need will be our approach.

3. Different government agencies use different definitions of homelessness. The Department of Education includes households who are living temporarily with family or friends because they cannot afford their own place to stay, known as doubled-up, in addition to households staying on the street and in shelters. The HUD definition of homelessness only includes those living on the street and in shelters. What definition of homelessness would your administration utilize when distributing city-generated funds?

We have to recognize that those who are doubled up with family, friends or just acquaintances without contributing to the rent may be even MORE vulnerable than those who stay at shelters, so we would use the Department of Education definition when distributing support and funds. I have experienced this situation in my own family, and I understand how stressful it can be for the whole family – the person who is experiencing homelessness, and the family that wants to help but often doesn't have the resources to give what is really needed.

4. CPS has identified 4% of its total enrollment as homeless, with almost 18,000 homeless and doubled-up students identified this school year. It's common for students experiencing homelessness to encounter a multitude of barriers that prevent them from being able to obtain the same education as their peers. How would you help students experiencing homelessness?

As a teacher in CPS for 6 years, I am very sensitive to the needs of students. In the classroom, I could tell when a student was struggling, and it was often not because of the academics but because of something going on outside of school. Students experiencing homelessness often have long bus rides to school, have problems doing their school work in a shelter or a less stable environment, have less support from their families, and often move from school to school if the family is moving very often. Both parents and students who are experiencing homelessness need social service support at their school, and instead of cutting the social service support within CPS, we must enhance it so students can thrive. More supportive housing is needed for unaccompanied youth. I voted for and strongly supported legislation in the 98th General Assembly that allows unaccompanied minors ages 14 to 18 to be able to consent to their own routine medical care. Working with university students, in the 99th General Assembly, I introduced and passed a House Resolution which urges the boards of trustees of every public university in Illinois to provide housing scholarships to college students who are registered as homeless. I also envision public-private partnerships where basic needs such as food, clothing and transportation are met for families and students experiencing homelessness. It is only by helping those most in need that our whole city will thrive.

5. What would you do to increase pre-school enrollment for homeless students?

I have introduced legislation in the current General Assembly that provides that, beginning July 1, 2020, a family eligible for child care services whose income is at or below 185% of the most recent United States Department of Health and Human Services Federal Poverty Guidelines for the applicable family size shall pay only a \$1 fee as a co-payment for child care services. My mayoral administration will work with my Springfield colleagues to lower the barriers that exist so every child can receive the quality child care and pre-school services that they deserve and need to thrive in life. When child care agencies were not getting paid under the Rauner administration, I was joined by many leaders of these agencies to meet with state officials that led to the restoration of \$300 million of child care funding for low-income families. I introduced and passed legislation that lowered the mandatory age for school attendance from

age 7 to age 6 in the state of Illinois. Early childhood education is very important to me and will be a priority in my administration, especially for those who are homeless.