

I. Introduction

Good morning, Chairman Dowell and the honorable members of the Committee on Budget and Government Operations and the City Council. Thank you for the opportunity to present the Mayor's Office for People with Disabilities (MOPD) budget request for the fiscal year 2023.

The Mayor's Office for People with Disabilities (MOPD)'s mission statement is to foster accessibility, full participation, and equal opportunities for people with disabilities, in all aspects of life, through systemic change, information and referral, education, and training, public policy, and direct services. Today, I share with you the impact of MOPD on our residents with disabilities.

I also want to thank the staff of MOPD, who work with me every day to serve our residents with disabilities, and throughout this year have stepped up in new ways, which all benefit our city. I do not do this work alone, but with my incredible team. One week ago today, we lost a valuable member of our department, Erick Lopez, a nationally regarded expert in benefits counseling who worked with individuals with disabilities and families. I honor Erick's dedication to our department over his two-decade career at MOPD.

People with disabilities live in every single one of our 77 community areas. Disability is the only group that anyone can become a member of at any time. Disability is both visible and invisible. Many people are born with a disability, or may acquire a disability through age, or as a victim of gun or community violence.

II. Employment

I am proud to share with you, today, about the hard work we have accomplished in the past year. Just this past Friday, Mayor Lightfoot cut the ribbon opening a major initiative at MOPD – our Career Center. Our Career Center was funded in last year's budget, as a proposal, and it is now a reality, and reflects a \$1.2 million dollar investment by our city in working to increase disability employment.

The Career Center began providing services virtually and remotely on July 26, which was the 32nd anniversary of the Americans with Disabilities Act. On Friday, October 14th we held a celebration of our physical space, located at the Central West Community Center, at 2102 W. Ogden. The Central West Community Center was the original name given to the building by Mayor Harold Washington when the building was dedicated in 1987, and we are now bringing back both the name and the vision.

Our Career Center serves people with disabilities in finding jobs and careers, provides career readiness services including preparing a resume, practice interviews, goal setting and counseling on disclosing disability in the job search process and requesting reasonable accommodations. Our Career Center includes 1 program director, 4 career placement counselors, and benefits counselors. We also hired an ASL interpreter as we center accessibility in our design for the Career Center. We are working with Rush University Medical Center on data collection so that we can identify emerging needs.

I am thrilled to share that, in the 10 weeks since the Career Center opened, we have **68** clients and **10** people who have obtained jobs, with another 9 job interviews that took place last week. We are already seeing results. I'll share with you about two of our clients:

- Carl, a man in his early twenties came to our center and shared that his dream was to get a social media position, which combined his interests in customer service and developing messaging, and photo and video editing. With help from our Career Placement Counselor, he applied for the Social Media Internship at the Lincoln Park Zoo, one of MOPD's partners. Will prepared with Carl for the interview, and Carl was offered a paid social media internship -- an important first paid opportunity in building a career in social media coordination.
- Jackie asked for help getting a job from our Career Center. She has a B.A. degree in Communications from Northeastern University and was not able to find a job. Our Career Placement Counselor worked with Jackie to update her resume and cover letters. After applying, Jackie received an interview for a Customer Service position at the Improv Olympic (iO) Theater. She was offered the job and accepted! Not only will this position give her job experience, but she has learned skills to enable her to seek other employment in the future.

Our Career Center also provides benefits counseling to any SSI/SSDI clients on how to how to properly report wages while working and any other guidance needed. John, an SSI recipient, who was receiving \$841 per month, was reluctant to go to work because he was afraid of losing benefits which included access to health care. John met with a benefits counselor who explained he could earn \$3,027 gross monthly and maintain benefits. John is now working at a part-time job at Amazon and continues to receive the support he needs.

III. Housing

a. HomeMod

In 2022, MOPD's Home Modification (HomeMod) Program expanded its services to people with disabilities by offering expertise in accessible modifications in homes of senior residents. This work includes ADA lifts and ramps for seniors, a program previously managed by the Department of Housing. Our HomeMod program is able to take on this work efficiently by working with vendors to obtain reduced material costs for a larger volume of projects.

We helped to make a home accessible for a client this year who has a mobility disability and uses a manual wheelchair. We made the bathroom accessible by building a roll-in shower with hand-held controls and added grab bars, allowing the client to use the bathroom independently without assistance from her family. Lead was discovered in the home during the initial home assessment; we remediated the lead in the home, making it safer. This client's health needs declined and was now in need of a Vertical Platform lift (VPL) to access her home. HomeMod has begun work on the permit process so that the lift can be installed. These modifications will allow the client to continue their education as a Ph.D. student at a local university.

b. Accessibility Compliance

This year, we doubled the staff for the Accessibility Compliance Unit (ACU), by adding two accessibility inspectors and two project managers, which results in our increased ability to survey accessibility in our City. We also work closely with the Department of Housing to inspect accessible housing units during various phases of construction and are developing a data base of available accessible housing units, to ensure accessibility is included during the construction process. This database will increase our ability to connect residents with accessible housing. ACU also maintains its permit review process. This year 325 accessibility plan reviews and 210 pre-permit plan reviews were conducted. Finally, the additional inspectors have been able to provide important assistance and expertise to city-wide programs, such as inspecting shelters and other facilities for migrants arriving from Texas.

IV. Increasing services to disabled victims of gun and community violence through U.S. Department of Justice grants

MOPD has increased our capacity to serve disabled victims of gun and community violence. Our front-line staff member has built resources on different disability resources available to our clients and receiving two federal grants from the U.S. Department of Justice will allow us to increase our services in this important area.

First, MOPD was awarded a grant by the U.S. Department of Justice; Office on Violence Against Women to provide services to women with disabilities who experience gender-based violence in the amount of (\$425,000). This work is critically important as people with disabilities are at a higher risk of sexual violence as those without disabilities. We will do this work together with community partners including Anixter Center and Healing to Action.

MOPD was also awarded a \$350,000 earmark from Senator Duckworth, also funded through the U.S. Justice Department, to serve people with disabilities who have become disabled through gun and community violence. This increases our capacity and ability to serve so many of our residents and provide resources on living with disability and continue to live independently.

V. Increasing Access to City services

MOPD continues our work in making the City of Chicago the most accessible city in the nation. This includes developing best practices around providing disability access for people who are deaf and hard of hearing, blind and low vision, have intellectual and developmental disabilities, physical access, and more. Often, this accessibility overlaps with language access and we are building resources so that we can effectively serve anyone who seeks services.

This year, we hired two American Sign Language (ASL) interpreters for our department needs, including the Career Center. Our budget requests include two ASL interpreters who will interpret for Mayor's Office events and other departmental needs.

We also worked closely with AIS to hire a digital accessibility specialist who will be based in AIS and will work to increase accessibility of our information technology city-wide.

VI. Strengthening Our Department

Under my leadership, MOPD has been re-structured and re-aligned so that we can effectively serve our residents with disabilities. Each of our programs has been made more robust with new organization as well as through new hires who bring new skills and enthusiasm. In all, MOPD hired 16 new staff. We also re-designed our frontline model by ensuring that, whether residents visit our City Hall or our location at 2102 W. Ogden, our residents can access services.

VII. Celebrating disability

Finally, we honor and celebrate disability through the arts. On October 14th we celebrated the unveiling of a 60-piece mural created by artist Sam Kirk, now on the exterior walls of the Central West Community Center, a space shared by MOPD and the Department of Family and Support Services (DFSS). This was a partnership with the Department of Cultural Affairs and Special Events (DCASE) funded through city dollars. The mural provides a contemporary visual of what it means to be a person with a disability and/or a senior citizen in Chicago. Sam Kirk incorporated designs into the mural which were collected from insight and feedback as a result of MOPD-led community engagement sessions with the disability community. Sam Kirk also added additional accessibility elements including lenticular design depicting active movement of individuals using American Sign Language (ASL), and elevated elements encouraging tactile interaction. The mural features a poem by Lily Diego-Johnson, a woman with a disability who is a first-generation American, artist, and social worker, that provides insightful words.

We also celebrate the Artist-in-Residence at our Central West Community Center, Ariella Granados, bringing opportunities for creativity to our space. Ms. Granados is an artist with a disability who uses multi-media including from telenovelas and advertising images. The Artist-in-Residence was funded 50% through the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) and 50% through city dollars. Ms. Granados will provide engagement opportunities with those that our building serves, including people with disabilities and senior citizens.

This year, we celebrate all of our accomplishments and look forward to continuing to work together in the coming year.