

2020 Legislative Candidate Questionnaire for Developmental Disabilities

Name: Tarra Simmons

District: 23

Position: Representative, Position 1

1. If you have a personal connection or professional experience with someone who has a developmental disability, would you describe its impact on you?

My closest cousin has an intellectual disability which he was born with. We are both now in our 40's, and I'm grateful that with a lot of support he has been able to marry a woman with an intellectual disability and live independently. They both rely upon subsidized housing and social security benefits to make ends meet, but it is very difficult for them.

I was also the step-mother to a son with non-verbal Autism. He utilized the services of Holly Ridge and in-home caregivers. I experienced first-hand the challenges it was for families to meet work obligations and provide care for our most vulnerable family members, even in a two-parent household. I know not everyone has the right amount of support to keep our family member in the home, and we must work to increase caregiver compensation and expand hours/services to families such as mine.

Lastly, I had the opportunity to work for Disability Rights Washington for nearly one year while I was in law school. I received phone calls, provided technical assistance, supported legal advocacy, and conducted monitoring visits to facilities where people with intellectual and developmental disabilities resided. These experiences informed my professional advocacy and I'm running to increase my impact and advocacy for our most vulnerable community members.

2. What are your top three legislative priorities and how would you help people with developmental disabilities in them?

Three of my top priorities are fighting for an economy that works for everyone by strengthening support for small businesses and fighting for the rights of workers, advocating for tax reform and wealth redistribution and making sure housing is affordable for everyone. In addition, I will focus on expanding comprehensive and affordable healthcare and increase investments in education to reduce disparities.

Creating an economy that works for everyone means that we must improve employment opportunities for people with developmental disabilities. I would support strengthening services that help students transition into the workforce along with workforce training programs so that more people with developmental disabilities have access to employment. I would also fight for the rights of workers with developmental disabilities and help ensure that employers in Washington do not have discriminatory policies, as well as fight for a living wage.

As a former nurse, I know our healthcare system is broken. I saw firsthand how many people utilize the emergency room as a form of primary care because they had no access to insurance.

Healthcare costs is one of the leading causes of bankruptcy, and I believe we have a responsibility to reduce costs and increase access to quality, affordable healthcare. I would ensure that people with developmental disabilities have their unique healthcare needs covered by regular insurance, and advocate for programs that help to address disparities in the healthcare system.

Education was my pathway out of poverty, and I will fight so that all students have access to quality K-12 schools, early childhood education and expanded access to higher education, including job training and apprenticeship programs. I would ensure that students with IEPs receive the support they need, especially during this challenging time when education has been disrupted and moved online. I would also

invest in more paraeducators to ensure that students with developmental disabilities are receiving appropriate instruction and assistance. Finally, I would advocate for more wrap-around services so that all kids facing barriers to academic success can get the medical, social/emotional, or special learning services they need.

3. With the current economic crisis, how would you protect services that people with I/DD and their families need?

Covid-19 has put on full display our inequities, and now is the time to increase investments in our social services, rather than cutting them. Through tax reform so that those at the top pay their fair share and divesting from the prison system, we can work to fix our economic crisis while also protecting and properly funding the services people in our community rely upon, which includes services for people with intellectual and developmental disabilities.

4. Is there other information you'd like constituents with developmental disabilities and their family and friends to know?

I'm running for office because I believe that everyone in our community deserves an advocate, and that includes those with developmental disabilities. I am committed to ensuring that everyone in my community has access to equal opportunities and economic security. I am ready to lead on day one given my strong relationships with other elected officials and stakeholder groups, and my years of experience fighting for progressive legislation at the state level. My door will always be open to you, and I'm excited to continue the fight with you!