

2020 Legislative Candidate Questionnaire for Developmental Disabilities

Name: April Ferguson

District: 23

Position: State House of Representatives 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?

I am the mother of an 11-year-old boy with Autism. I love my son very much and want to see him have as many opportunities as a boy should have. I have although experienced in society a lack of real knowledge and understanding about Autism and the spectrum causing my son and I to experience many Judgments. I have experienced even discrimination including statements in the past when trying to get him into sports “special Olympics is for children like yours”. I have had to struggle to ensure that he is given every opportunity he deserves including his right to have access to meaningful education. For years of my son’s early life he was nonverbal. I often have had little to no support or help with my son because finding someone who can understand his unique differences has been difficult. My son was not challenged enough in his early elementary years because of what I felt was a label that he was low functioning and nonverbal. His first school even went so far to say, “he cannot really do anything we are teaching him life skills like vacuuming”. When I changed schools I had hope that I would find a place where they would not just provide him access to education but that it would be meaningful. The new school provided meaningful access and appropriate level of support he needed and the result was his life changed. He spoke for the first time and begun to learn how to write, basics of math skills. Today my son can talk to me in full sentences and is overcoming barriers Autism had put on him. I believe it is not enough to just offer a service or give access to a service, but we must make that service meaningful.

The difference between school one and school two was that the second school provided meaningful access not just access and because of it my sons trajectory in life changed. I also as a business owner had in the past hired Individuals with special needs and have advocated for them not to be Judged based upon their limitations and rather valued for their contributions and successes. In past I had a young women that was hired with a special need who had gone to school for her career and yet the I found the State of Washington licensing agency questioning and doubting her ability to perform due to the fact she had a disability. This was one of the most impacting moments of my life because I had a young son at the time and was a new mother of a child with special needs. Seeing how this employee of mine was treated by the State of Washington employees worried me about my sons own future and that his right to happiness could be impacted by Judgments of others.

These experiences made me aware of the need to ensure meaningful access to services and to make sure these services are being used to increase quality of life for both the individual with special needs and the people they rely upon for their care.

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

- Amongst my top priorities is creation of laws that better protect parental rights. Many cases of children entering the foster care system involve children with Special needs. Far to often during the investigative process the symptoms and behaviors associated with the diagnosis of individuals with special needs is not taken into account and these parents are put through Judgments that misunderstand both their parenting skills and the developmental stage their child is in and their unique needs. These parents should have their child’s special needs taken into account when their

parenting skills are Judged. I believe we need a Families with Special needs act that protects parents and children in the investigative process and requires case workers to consult with the child's behavior specialist and other specialist at the parents request when they are concerned about a behavior in order to determine if that behavior is typical for that child and not outside of the norm. There should be a process to role out if a behavior with a child is "typical" for that child or not or if it is due to actual neglect or abuse of the child. This is important so that parents do not go through the continued scrutiny of case workers during investigations and that we do not see the continued large numbers of children with special needs entering the foster care system. Discrimination in the investigation process of children with special needs is too common and should not be tolerated by our society. We have progress to make in this area as a society.

- Education of children with Special needs I believe needs to be better defined. What access to education is vs Meaningful access to education? All too often children with Special needs have an IEP created for them that does not challenge them, focuses too much on life skills and does not offer enough in academic skills. We need to do more than just give the child access to education and services. We need to give children with special needs meaningful access to education and services. Too often we see critical programs for special needs children the first on the chopping block when education budgets and School District budgets are low. Cutting the funds going into the education of children with special needs all too often impedes upon their right to education because it impacts the quality of education they are receiving. We need to better define what Meaningful access to education is and that children with special needs have a right to not just access but to meaningful education.

- I believe that we need more focus on opportunities for skills training in order to help prepare individuals with disabilities for employment. There is a wide variety of special needs all coming with a large degree of different impacts on an individual. We need to work to help tailor training programs to work with individuals to meet the adjustments that may be needed to help them succeed in the workplace. I believe we need to work with employers more to help tailor the training and resources to facilitate success in the workplace for individuals.

- I will work to prevent discrimination against individuals with special needs in the work place that is caused by government regulations that can place a hardship on those with special needs and that serve to impact negatively their ability to enter fields where they may have otherwise excelled in. The overregulation of many of the trades makes it difficult for many with special needs to enter the trade fields. I will work to increase access to apprenticeship programs that will help individuals with special needs to find skills they may enjoy and be able to succeed in.

- Special issue of interest I have is to increase para educator support as well as respect towards the para educator field. Para educators are often lower on the pay scale, yet their job is the education of those with special needs. They are often treated as lower level teachers and as a mother with a Special needs son this has sent a message to me that the education of my child is less of a priority and of importance than that of typical developing children. I have seen Para Educators put on the chopping block all too often. I in 2012 had to advocate for return of para educators to the classroom when a school district cut the budget and para educators were among those to go. I also again had to advocate in 2016 for Para Educator support on a school bus when my sons physical, and emotional well being was harmed to great detriment of his trajectory in life. This happened because lack of Para educator support and the result was the violations of my son's rights under the Disabilities act. I have since advocated for Para educator support and believe we need reform in our education system regarding the right to access education and to not just give access but to give meaningful access.

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

The economic crisis our society is currently going through due to the statewide shut down and restrictions on our economy will have an impact on programs statewide. It is important that we ensure that all law makers understand that programs serving adults and children with special needs cannot be underfunded and that many of these programs are required to be funded per Washington state Constitution. It is not an option to put these programs on the chopping block because it would violate the rights of those with special needs to have access to the services per Washington State Constitution Article XIII, Section 1. I believe it is important that those with special needs and their families and advocates are informed of these rights and that we protect these services. The reason these services exist is to protect the rights of those with Special needs to have their needs met, to lead fulfilling lives and is based in the right to happiness and equal rights.

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

Yes, I relate with you and I understand the hardships that we with a family member with special needs can sometimes bare. I strongly believe in ensuring quality of life and the right to pursue happiness and fulfillment for those with Special needs. This is why Article XIII Section one was written into the Washington Constitution because you have a right to access and have opportunity to have a high quality of life and pursue happiness and services and programs serving those with special needs are needed to ensure that quality of life. I understand that more often then not the parent of a child or adult child with special needs is the number one advocate in their child's life and I can promise you that as a State Representative I will ensure those with Special needs have their right to access resources protected. I will advocate for you and your child the same as I have done for mine with diligence and conviction. I will work to prevent programs from being put on the chopping block that ensure the quality of life for those with disabilities. I will work to help manage Washington funds responsibly so that resources and services for Children and adults with special needs do not wither away during troubling times.