

Statement of Amber Smock

Cook County Commission on Human Rights

Thank you for the honor of this opportunity to be considered for an appointment to the Cook County Commission on Human Rights. I would particularly like to thank Ranjit Hakim for approaching me about the possibility of serving the Commission and apprising me of how I might contribute to the Commission's efforts to further ensure that the Cook County Human Rights Ordinance truly serves all the people of Cook County. I believe that the Commission has untapped potential to better serve the people of Cook County, and I want to be part of the effort to realize that potential, especially as it relates to disability issues.

Disability status has always been relevant to human rights work, but it has not always been a recognized or visible component of this work. I have been especially fortunate to work at Access Living for the last eleven years and gain a front line role in the disability movement, in a Chicago-based disability-led organization run by a woman who is a significant national and international disability rights leader, Marca Bristo. As a person with hearing loss, engaged in the Deaf world, I can affirm that I have been personally transformed by the advocacy work I do, and I wish to carry that forward to others.

At Access Living, our goal is to look at how social change can benefit all disabilities, not just a few. We provide both direct service and advocacy, so that any person with a disability who comes to us with a problem will have several avenues to solve that problem. We look at problems of exclusion and oppression with a highly developed "disability lens," one that incorporates disability civil rights law along with a sense of moral justice. These problems include some of the types of issues that come before the Commission, especially discrimination in employment and places of public accommodation.

I would like to highlight three main assets I can bring to the Commission.

First, I can bring a strong broad perspective on disability within issues of concern in Cook County, especially some of the topics you see in the news right now. For example, the death of Laquan McDonald at the hands of the Chicago Police Department is tied to his life as a young black man with lived experience of disability, who interacted with services for young people with disabilities. Another example is the problem of disability access in emerging rideshare companies like Uber and Lyft, and access to "roomshare" Airbnb offerings.

Second, I can also help provide perspective on disability problems within individual cases. Many times advocates can get stuck helping people with disabilities because they do not know what is appropriate or possible. Of particular concern is that sometimes disability can "fly under the radar" in individual cases of discrimination. Many kinds of disabilities have strong social stigma, such as mental illness and alcoholism, and people can be very reluctant to claim bias for fear of being "outed."

Yet it can be very important for people to be able to lay claim to their disabilities in order to protect their rights.

Third, one of my core strengths is outreach. I have an extremely strong network of disability organizations and allies that I think would serve as a good pool for possible outreach for the Commission. I believe there are many groups who do not fully understand what the Commission has to offer. Also, part of my Access Living outreach involves teaching non-disability groups to understand disability, ranging from nonprofits to corporations, across a wide variety of ethnic and economic statuses.

Disability naturally coexists with all the other statuses a person may have, such as gender status, ethnicity status, citizenship status and more. For me, serving people with disabilities also means enforcing their rights as persons belonging to any protected class. However, inclusion is important for all of us. The diversity of Cook County is one of the best parts about living here, and our diversity should be visible, thriving and protected.

To conclude, I would very much like to be part of the County's commitment to enforce the Human Rights Ordinance, but also to help be a part of helping those who live in Cook County understand why the Commission is an important resource.

Thank you for considering my candidacy as a possible appointee to this Commission.