



Finger Lakes **Independence** Center

Opening Doors to Independence

Our Mission

To empower all people with disabilities while creating an inclusive society through the elimination of social and architectural barriers.

What's New at FLIC

The Finger Lakes Independence Center surveyed candidates for Assembly District 125 to gather their views and perspectives on issues that are important to people with disabilities. The questions are based on New York Association of Independent Living's policy priorities and programs that impact many people living in New York. For more information about the policies, you may visit: <https://ilny.us/advocacy/advocacy-priorities>

Assembly District 125 Candidates:

- Sujata Gibson
- Beau Harbin
- Lisa Hoeschele
- Anna Kelles
- Jason Leifer
- Jordan Lesser
- Seph Murtagh

We thank all of the candidates for their responses.

Tell us about work that you have been part of that involved people with disabilities.

Sujata Gibson: My husband and I have been active in the camp hill movement as short term volunteers and supporters. My work as a lawyer includes working with different abilities. I'm working on a class action now on behalf of medically fragile children, many of whom have disabilities. I also used to organize direct care workers.

Beau Harbin: In my time on the Cortland County Legislature, I have worked with Access to Independence on moving forward the county wide housing survey. I advocated in favor of paying fair wages to individuals with disabilities instead of lower than minimum wage, and I helped get two mobility scooter charging stations installed in the County Office Building in my role as Chair of Buildings and Grounds.

I am currently working to make sure the entire County Office Building is handicap accessible (even after all these years there are hallways which are not accessible).

Lisa Hoeschele: My work has involved most recently dealing with individuals with mental Health issues, many of whom have additional physical disabilities. We make every effort to accommodate these disabilities with translators and voice replicating software. We have also hired many staff members with sight, mobility or other disabilities and have been happy to be able to accommodate their needs as they serve our clients. On a personal note both my daughter and my nephew have diagnosed cerebral palsy and we have had to work with PT/OT/medical Providers and schools to ensure they get what they need to be their best selves.

Anna Kelles: My experience and work with people with disabilities is of a personal nature. Outside of my own classification as a child with a visual disability in school, I have had the privilege of working for a family to help care for their two daughters. In 2015, I was part of a home care team providing 24-hour care for the family's two daughters who had a rare genetic disorder where they were physically immobile, blind, and were non-verbal. They also suffered from constant seizures. The family converted part of the downstairs of the house to create a full apartment for the daughters and with the support of state program funding were able to provide full care for the daughters at home. During my time with the family I got to know the big-hearted, playful, and even at times mischievous sisters and witness the joy they brought to everyone they met. Living at home with a team of caregivers, who were more like a second family, was critical for the quality of life of the daughters, the family, and the entire community.

Jason Leifer: Most of the work that I have personally been involved in that involved people with disabilities is in my law practice. Clients sometimes have need that Courts need to consider when making decisions in court, whether it is a criminal case of a family court case. As a Town Supervisor and prior to that as a Town Board member we needed to ensure that any projects we funded took into account accessibility for people with disabilities. Our Rail-Trail project that was started in 2016 is one of these projects.

Jordan Lesser: Working as Legislative Counsel for the current Assemblymember, Barbara Lifton, has allowed me to be a champion for and advocate for people with disabilities in the 125th Assembly District for over ten years. This includes: 1) fighting to increase the Independent Living Center base funding level each year to make *Olmstead* a reality across New York, 2) seeking full funding for the NY No Wrong Door assistance program entry point to long-term care, 3) increase Access to Home funding to allow those with disabilities and low to moderate income to have accessible homes, 4) passing, several times, a “visitability tax credit” so homeowners can afford critical accessibility renovations, 5) and more. I have worked for years with the Finger Lakes Independence Center and Access to Independence, Inc. based in Cortland.

Additionally, my mother worked for many years as a Speech Pathologist at TST BOCES, and I would observe and assist with her classroom at times, providing an understanding and familiarity with the disabled community.

Seph Murtagh: (FLIC did not receive a response)

What are your views on the Access to Home program?

Sujata Gibson: This is very important.

Beau Harbin: I support this program and believe it is a critical element to ensure individuals can stay in their homes instead of having to be institutionalized due to a

lack of accessibility. We need to fully fund the program and make sure no one who needs ramps and other measures go without.

Lisa Hoeschele: I think it's a good beginning but should be Expanded to a larger population of individuals.

Anna Kelles: Access to Home is a supportive housing program that is absolutely critical to individuals with disabilities and those in the aging population with significant physical limitations. This grant program, run through municipalities and not-for-profits allows for modifications for people to return to or stay in their homes. The right and ability to live independently in one's own home, to be able to physically access all the resources in one's home should be a basic human right. Autonomy empowers a sense of dignity and contributes significantly to mental health. People with disabilities are more likely to have both greater healthcare costs in their lives and more likely to be unemployed, depend on public assistance, or be technically classified as low-income. Renovations in homes that make the home physically accessible in many cases is out of reach economically yet is the difference between being able to live independently or being forced into an institutional environment, which not only negatively impacts quality of life but is also significantly more expensive for the state than the cost of the grant program for accessibility renovations. Similarly, for our aging population, many on a fixed income, and face parallel economic barriers to renovating their homes. This program makes both public health sense and economic sense and I would work to make sure it is sufficiently funded.

Jason Leifer: I support the program and believe that it should be fully funded. People need to be able to access their homes and should have the opportunity to live in their homes for as long as possible.

Jordan Lesser: I fully support this program and, as mentioned above, have worked in budget negotiations to boost the available funding for this critical need. People with disabilities deserve to have a choice about where they live, and providing this financial assistance makes autonomy and residential living possible to many.

Seph Murtagh: Access to affordable, accessible housing is an issue for many in our community, and can be even more challenging for persons with disabilities. The ability to live safely and comfortably in one's home is vital to cultivating healthy, robust communities; for disabled persons in particular, it fosters independence, grows self-worth and self-confidence. Providing funding to assist with costs associated with making residential structures accessible is a core part of increasing the independence of persons with disabilities, unfortunately, for several years the Governor has cut funding for this program. Restoring funding to this program is an important step in making our community more inclusive and accessible.

What are your views the Consumer Directed Personal Assistance Program?

Sujata Gibson: In full support (as for access to home).

Beau Harbin: Programs like CDPAP that allow individuals to get the assistance they need in their homes from care providers and others is critically important. Individuals need to also be allowed to continue to select an assistant who is right for them. We need to fully investigate and take action on any reports of abuse by assistants. Finally, as with everything we do need to make sure this program is fully funded.

Lisa Hoeschele: I like the flexibility offered to the consumer by the program but

worry about making sure supports are in place for consumers to make choices.

Anna Kelles: What is important about this program is that it allows for an individual in need of assistance to have a say in their own care, either directly or through a person designated to act on their behalf. An individual must obtain an order of service from a doctor and then must go through a complete social and nursing assessment. Once these criteria have been met, an individual can qualify and is then responsible to hire, train, supervise, and when necessary terminate employment of a caregiver. This program is designed to clearly identify where the program will be the most effective and where there is sufficient infrastructure for independent oversight. As a result it is economically highly efficient while providing another clear way for people with disabilities to maintain their independence and quality of life. As with other programs in this list it is critical to continue to fight for sufficient program funding. I would be a reliable supporter for funding needs for this program.

Jason Leifer: I think that it is a good program because friends and family can be compensated to care for their family member or friend. This means that they do not need to choose between caring for a loved one or taking care of their own households.

Jordan Lesser: Again, this is about essential control over your life, as a person with disabilities. Allowing, through CDPAP, for a “consumer” or family member, friend, etc ... to control the who, how, when and what of a home health aide’s services is paramount. It allows for real decision-making about the lifestyle of those who are disabled and I fully support the program.

Seph Murtagh: Access to healthcare services, which includes having access to personnel that assists with activities of daily living (ADLs) or skilled nursing services, is a right for all of us. The CDPAP has created a system that has many benefits, such as the ability of patients to choose, hire, train, and supervise the person providing in home care, it supports some of our most vulnerable citizens. However, some of the aspects that make it such a popular program, also make it a system that is vulnerable to fraud, waste, and abuse. The program should absolutely continue and funding should not be cut, these are services vital to the population they serve, with that said, I do support more oversight and regulation of this program to ensure that people are actually receiving the services and care they need.

What are your views on the Visitability Tax Credit?

Sujata Gibson: Vital

Beau Harbin: I would continue Barbara Lifton’s sponsorship and support of this bill in the Assembly. For far too long the Governor has blocked this bi-partisan legislation that has passed both sides of the Legislature. We can help homeowners update their homes to allow greater visitability and make them access to everyone. We need to keep finding ways to allow people to remain in their homes and seemingly common sense approach would be to allow them to get a tax credit on improvements for this purpose, just like we allow for green energy improvements.

Lisa Hoeschele: I agree we should support the initiative to ensure new construction can accommodate those with physical disabilities and a tax credit is a good way to incentivize this activity.

Anna Kelles: In 2019, Assembly Bill A2493 (S2424) passed both houses unanimously but was vetoed by the governor. It would have provided for a pilot program to allow for a tax credit of \$2750 for a retrofit or renovation of a primary

dwelling unit that supported universal visitability of the home. This program would have increased the number of individuals and households that could have afforded to renovate their homes and counter social isolation that many people with disabilities experience. Assemblyperson Barbara Lifton was a cosponsor of this bill and I would absolutely continue in her footsteps to bring forward legislation that would establish a visitability tax credit program.

Jason Leifer: I support it because it seems to fit with the goals of the Access to Home Program. It would allow people to stay in their homes rather than go to an assisted living facility. In addition, it would encourage people to retrofit older homes with the basics needed to make them more accessible to people with disabilities.

Jordan Lesser: The Visitability Tax Credit is something I was proud to work on with Assemblywoman Lifton, as mentioned in question #1, and make sure she supported the credit during budget negotiations over the last several years. Unfortunately, the Governor has vetoed the bill several years in a row, but I am eager to work with ILC organizations in the Assembly in 2021 and ensure that it is finally signed into law.

Seph Murtagh: For several years Governor Cuomo has vetoed the Visitability Tax Credit Bill most recently vetoing a bill co-sponsored by Barbara Lifton in late 2019. He continually points to the Access to Home program as a sufficient program to address making housing more accessible. It is important to note, that with increased funding cuts to the Access to Home program there are simply not enough resources to go to individuals who want to make improvements to their homes. Passing the Visitability Tax Credit would allow many individuals to make improvements to their current homes, or make new construction fully accessible, something that often is the deciding factor in being able to remain living independently. I will continue with Assemblywoman Lifton's work on this issue and continue to sponsor legislation that creates a Visitability Tax Credit.

What are your views on the Long Term Care Ombudsman Program?

Sujata Gibson: Very important - as many of these we do need more funding so this program can be more accessible.

Beau Harbin: We need to continue to support and encourage advocates for those in long term care. They provide a vital need to help ensure our residents in care are getting proper supports. Families are not always near enough or equipped to handle the process of advocacy so we need these trained advocates working for our most vulnerable residents. We need to keep pushing the federal government to fund and support this program.

Lisa Hoeschele: This is a needed program and should remain and grow in terms of robust supports.

Anna Kelles: As one of the only state programs that provides advocacy and information assistance for individuals living licensed adult care homes to help them maintain quality of life, this program is a critical aspect of our long term care for our aging population and individuals with disabilities that require residence at an adult care home. I think the program is important and would fight to see it sufficiently funded. This will be particularly important in the face of COVID-19 recovery. Many adult care homes may be facing staff reductions that or both temporary and permanent that will affect the quality of care of residents. Patient advocacy and information sharing will be critical to ensure that complaints are heard, advocacy for sufficient staffing is communicated effectively to state agencies, and standard of care is retained.

Jason Leifer: It is a necessary program because as more and more older adults and people with disabilities are living in nursing homes, assisted living, and other licensed adult care homes, all of which are increasingly being bought and operated by large companies that are more concerned about profits over people, we need strong patient advocates. It is likely that we will need to hire more advocates as our population continues to age.

Jordan Lesser: Often, people with disabilities are not given an equal voice in our society. The Long Term Care Ombudsman Program helps to balance that unfortunate reality by establishing a dedicated professional (the ombudsman) to advocate on behalf of people who live in assisted living centers, nursing homes, or similar care centers. I believe that the hallmark of a society is how it treats those who face the most challenges. To me, having an ombudsman who will listen to the needs and concerns of disabled living center residents, investigate complaints, and work with state agencies, service providers and the public to address any issues is of the utmost importance. I will always support this program in Albany and will not let you down.

Seph Murtagh: Local ombudsmen are vital to protecting the welfare, health, safety, and rights of people who live in nursing homes. They serve to advocate for senior citizens, investigate, address, and resolve concerns and problems. This is especially necessary given the ongoing health and safety issues surrounding COVID-19 in nursing homes. As legal ramifications for nursing homes have become increasingly limited we must rely on ombudsmen to advocate and push for reforms that will protect nursing home residents.

What are your views on transportation for people with disabilities in rural areas?

Sujata Gibson: We need to do more.

Beau Harbin: On the Ag, Planning and Environment Committee of the Cortland County Legislature, I have worked and advocated for greater transportation options and local supported options. Our transit system provides transportation to the major locations within our community but it does not go everywhere and is not always at convenient times. I have worked with our Mobility Manager to help review the scheduling and roll out of buses. There was a move at one point to eliminate the specialist position of Mobility Manager to cut costs but I and others worked hard to secure this critical position to allow individuals a single point of contact. I also worked with a local disability rights advocate to bring 2 scooter charging stations to the County Office Building to allow people to charge their mobility scooters while in the building. We need to expand further transportation options however and make greater connections between our communities.

Lisa Hoeschele: It's abysmal now. We need to invest in increased accessibility to public transportation in all our communities and these transportation options should ensure access for the physical disabled.

Anna Kelles: This is a broad topic and can refer to support for nonprofit organizations like Gadabout, Friends of Service Helping (FISH), and TCATs first mile last mile pilot program all which provide transportation services locally for people with mobility limitations. It can also include grants for car accessories and modifications that can allow some individuals with disabilities to continue to drive. I would certainly be in support of funding these programs as our New York Assemblyperson.

Jason Leifer: Rural transportation networks need to be expanded. It is a problem that affects everyone, not just the elderly or the disabled. This takes money to purchase vehicles and hire drivers. On-demand ridership models could be used but they must be available on platforms other than just cell phones because in rural areas there are still many places that do not have reliable cell service or internet service. Also, to protect riders, there must be a way to register drivers, which is done with licensed taxi services or municipal bus services. Working with counties, towns, cities, and villages the State should develop regional transportation improvement plans for rural residents.

Jordan Lesser: I remember very well the “Medicaid Redesign Team” established by the Governor several years ago (during the previous economic recession) which heavily slashed the availability of non-emergency Medicaid transportation. This reduction in service especially hit rural residents with disabilities is the hardest, and even threatened the solvency of public transit systems across rural counties. I worked alongside Assemblywoman Lifton for years to address this problem, even convening a roundtable with DPH staff, upstate mobility managers, and local officials. While the problem may not be as severe today (although I hear about high cost overruns for Medicaid transit companies, defeating the initial purpose of the redesign) it is far from solved. To effectively provide rural transit for those with disabilities, and really, to all, I call for a public taxi service (achievable with minimal funding due to favorable insurance rates, government action vehicles, etc...) to operate in rural areas of the state with nearly no public transit service. More details about this proposal are available upon request.

Seph Murtagh: Accessible, affordable transportation in our district is so important for people with disabilities to achieve and remain living independently. There are many organizations in our district who are dedicated to providing safe, affordable, and reliable transportation for people with disabilities, the service area and eligibility of riders must be expanded to serve all that are in need. Funding at the state level needs to be increased to allow for more access to transportation services.

What are your views on the small business Tax Credit for employing people with disabilities?

Sujata Gibson: I am in support.

Beau Harbin: I support providing a tax credit to small business who employ people with disabilities. Our current approach of paying those individuals lower than minimum wage is a flawed and unfair system. In May 2019, I voiced my opposition to a resolution in the Legislature brought by the JM Murray center in which the Legislature was asked to oppose the Raise the Wage Act (HR 582) and the Transformation to Competitive Employment Act (HR 873). I shared with the legislature a quote from Aaron Baier ‘In 2019, people with disabilities should not be facing futures with segregation and subminimum wages. They should be allowed to reach their full potential in a competitive integrated environment. They and all workers should earn a fair day’s wage for a fair day’s work.’ This was why I voted no and encouraged others to do the same.

Lisa Hoeschele: I think it’s a good start but there should be direct subsidies for the nonprofit community to be able to do the same.

Anna Kelles: There are currently two programs administered in New York that fall under this category: The Workers Employment Tax Credit (WETC) and the Work Opportunity Tax Credit (WOTC). These programs provide a creative way to encourage businesses, including small businesses, to employ individuals with

disabilities. I am in favor of them though I would add that it is important that there is an assessment of the business for compatibility with the employee's needs in the vein of an employment first model and that all employees in this program have an independent advocate.

Jason Leifer: I think that it is a good way to encourage employers to hire people with disabilities but we must also make sure that they are paying employees the same as employees without disabilities. As much good as it does though, it doesn't seem to address the reasons for the lower participation rate of people with disabilities in the workforce.

Jordan Lesser: I support this tax credit to improve the likelihood of employment for people with disabilities, and encourage a small business to make the investment into staff who are disabled. In the Assembly I will continue to support this tax credit.

Seph Murtagh: Gainful employment is the pathway for people with disabilities to achieve and maintain independence, but there have to be jobs available to fill. Providing tax credits to small businesses to employ persons with disabilities provides an incentive to expand the hiring of people with disabilities. While there are currently several tax credits that exist at both the state and federal level, expanding these programs help eliminate barriers to employment for people with disabilities.

How will you make your campaign accessible to people with disabilities?

Sujata Gibson: I want to make sure that I'm including people with disabilities and driving policy ideas through their input. I also have committed to making sure to meet constituents in many settings to increase accessibility.

Beau Harbin: I am committed to making sure our campaign is inclusive for everyone. One of my first volunteers is an ASL interpreter. Unfortunately, we have not been able to have the town halls as expected where she would have played a key role but I did make sure early on that seek her out both for her support and enthusiasm but also for her skills to ensure we included everyone in the discussion. I have made information readily available across multiple social media platforms with content for all. And before we were forced to stop going door to door due to the pandemic, I would make a point to visit disabled supporters and voters to seek them out and get their input and feedback.

Lisa Hoeschele: by ensuring that campaign events (if we do get to a time when social distancing is not a problem) are accessible and include translators or closed captioning for the hearing impaired.

Anna Kelles: During this campaign I have worked to provide campaign materials in multiple formats. Right now for example, I have written material as well as video material. My video material that has audio content, like my teacher appreciation video, has subtitles. When I reach people by phone I do offer to do a video conference as well if they are hearing impaired.

During this COVID-19 crisis I have been sending out extensive daily summaries of county, state, and federal resources and information to help the community navigate all guidelines and regulations being put out and information on all individual and business support to help mitigate the impact on our lives and economy. I also worked to form an COVID-19 food task force and emergency food hub so that we can better coordinate all local producers and distributors of food and ensure that there is food delivery to those who do not have the ability to leave their homes. These efforts, although not directly related to my legislative work or my campaign for the NYS Assembly, highlights my priorities and the nature of the work that I will do as our state representative in New York.

Jason Leifer: Right now, because of COVID, it is difficult to make a campaign accessible to individuals at all, but I have been holding Town Hall meetings on Zoom, writing op-ed, pieces, and making my phone number and email address available. I am always available to talk.

Jordan Lesser: Hopefully, the range of campaign materials I am producing (articles, mailers, radio interviews, YouTube videos) will be accessible in some way to all. I have included ILCs on my email list to get direct word out to the community, but am certainly open to further suggestions as how to best engage important constituents with disabilities.

Seph Murtagh: It is an important time now during COVID 19 that each and every individual are aware about community resources and initiatives. Your campaigns are part of the community initiatives and a source of information.

First, I think that it is important that all of our campaign materials be accessible to people with disabilities: this includes our social media, our campaign website, and printed materials. If people with disabilities don't have easy access to my campaign's information, I am not serving all of the constituents in this district. Additionally, I think it is really important to consider how policy decisions impact all people, and how they can best serve all members of this community; advocating strongly for policies that fight for disability rights, remove barriers, and support disabled people. This means working closely with members of our community with disabilities to know how I can best serve them.

News from the Tompkins County Board of Elections

INSTRUCTIONS FOR COMPLETING YOUR ABSENTEE BALLOTS.

Governor Andrew M. Cuomo has signed legislation (S.8130-D/A.10516-A) extending the deadline to submit absentee ballots until the day of the election. To be counted, primary ballots must be postmarked by June 23rd.

ABSENTEE VOTING DEADLINES, 2020

Election Day (June 23, 2020) voting will still take place.
Polls are open from 6:00 AM until 9:00 PM.

Click [Here](#) for POLL SITE CHANGES for in-person voting
for the June 23rd Primary

[\(Early Voting Hours\)](#)

The Tompkins County Board of Elections Office has electronic "Ballot Marking Devices" (BMD) available for voters requesting audio or visual assistance in casting a ballot. Please call the Tompkins County Board of Elections at (607) 274-5522 for more information.

ALL VILLAGE ELECTIONS ARE POSTPONED
UNTIL SEPTEMBER 15.

ABSENTEE VOTING for COVID-19

Pursuant to Governor Cuomo's Executive Order, those wishing to vote by absentee ballot in the June 23rd Primary because of COVID-19 concerns may select "temporary illness" on the absentee form ([click here for absentee form with instructions](#))

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