



## Texas Disability Issues Forum

Monday, September 19, 2022

Austin, Texas + virtual

[TDIF.REVUPTexas.org](http://TDIF.REVUPTexas.org)

### 2022 TDIF Survey: Agriculture Commissioner

#### Susan Hays response

1. The disability community lives by the motto “Nothing about us, without us.” We must have a seat at all decision-making tables that affects us, which is every table. What steps, if any, have you taken to make your campaign accessible for people with disabilities and to ensure that our perspectives are heard? What specific plans do you have to incorporate the voices of people with disabilities into your decision-making processes, if elected?

“The Texas Department of Agriculture (TDA) has been ineffective, opaque, and closed under Sid Miller. Not just people with disabilities but a broad swath of Texans have been shut out of decision making at the agency and its potential to serve different communities within Texas. I begin by recognizing what I don’t know. Once elected, and during the transition period, I will arrange briefings from organizations like CTD for an overview of the current shortcomings in TDA programs. Once I take office, I plan two initial strategies to ensure people with disabilities are at the table. First, each program will be directed to have a plan for including the concerns of the disability community. Second, I intend to create a position to both liaison with the disability community and to serve as a cross check on the effectiveness of each program to effectively serve people with disabilities.

As for the campaign, mine is a small and scrappy operation, so there is not a staff big enough to designate such a liaison. Instead, I, as the candidate, ask questions, listen, and seek the experts with issues relevant to the community arise.”

2. What role does the Agriculture Commissioner office have in ensuring that Texans with disabilities have the same access to the programs of the Agriculture Commission, such as the Texans Feeding Texans initiative, as people without disabilities?

“The Ag Commissioner should have a strong role in ensuring Texans with disabilities have the same access to all programs in which she plays a role. It’s the job! The Commissioner should be demanding accurate data from staff, including a break-out

of services to people with disabilities versus other populations, mapping out the shortcomings in each program, and looking for both the funding resources and the quality organizations/grantees to fill them. I am a big believer in starting with facts and data, assessing resources, then measuring the results as those resources are deployed.”

3. Would you support the legalization of or decriminalization cannabis in Texas?

“Absolutely. Texas should immediately fully expand the medical cannabis program and let doctors practice medicine. Decriminalization should be rolled out with legalization (that is, regulation of cannabis products). Otherwise, the black and grey markets will fill the void. I have a detailed critique of Texas cannabis laws along with a roadmap of what Texas should do to change them here, which includes decriminalizing and legalizing simultaneously so that patients and other consumers can have access to safe, accurately labeled products.”

4. What does/ will your office do to assure children with disabilities will have access to school meals as children without disabilities?

“First, pay attention to the job. I get the distinct sense that Texas left a lot of resources on the table during COVID that could have been drawn down to help feed people. Second, assess the human resources at TDA implementing the school meal programs to identify and lift up the dedicated civil servants and replace those who are not working for the people of Texas. Then, a legal review of the protections under federal and state regulations to ensure equal access for people with disabilities, then a practical review of what is really happening out there in the field (that is, identify the scope and root causes of any problems). Identify solutions and whether they require statutory changes or are within the rulemaking power of the office. (And if the former, get cracking at the Legislature!)”

5. How does the State Office of Rural Health work to include the needs of Texans with disabilities living in rural communities? What can be done to make the program work better for Texans with disabilities?

“Under Republican leadership, rural health care has been quite literally dying on the vine, which means that disabled folks all around the state are unable to access services/critical care to which they are entitled. That harm is of course amplified when it comes to people with disabilities. The SORH needs to come out of the

basement, get the funding it deserves, and become a policy work hub to both accurately identify the precise shortcomings of rural health care, but also come up with creative solutions.

Rural broadband and telemedicine offer game-changing opportunities to bring better healthcare to rural Texas. The disability community liaison will be important in identifying how to make SORH work better for people with disabilities in all corners of the state. I am dedicated to transforming rural health care so that Texans can live where they are from, where they want to live, and where offers the healthiest lifestyle for them.”

6. What additional policies and priorities, other than those already discussed above, do you plan to focus on to improve the lives of people with disabilities? If you have yet to develop them, what is your plan to learn about disability issues?

“Generally speaking, for far too long, our state government has been out of reach to everyday Texans. The leadership has not been interested in whether government works at all, but only interested in the next Republican primary election. My plan to learn about disability issue is to keep my eyes and ears open, and my mind and heart focused on doing what’s right by Texans. Even if an issue is not directly in TDA’s jurisdiction, expect me to speak up, speak out, and advocate. (And, if I’m not, pick up the phone and call!) I will do everything in my power, every day, to make Texas a better, safer, happier place to live for all of us, especially Texans with disabilities.”