**EQUIP FOR EQUALITY**

Summary of FFY 2026 Priorities- Year One of the Three-Year Priorities and Plan

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# What Are Our Priorities?

Equip for Equality is the federally mandated, governor appointed Protection & Advocacy System for Illinois. It is our job to help break down barriers that stop people with disabilities from making their own decisions and living the life they want. We do this at no cost to our clients. Our priorities list the types of problems we can help people with. Every year, we ask the public what issues we should focus on. Then we update this list based on what we hear. This document can help you see whether and how we can help with your problem.

# How We Choose Who We Can Help

We help as many people as we can, but we do not have enough resources to give every person who calls us the amount of help they want. By “resources,” we mean the money our funders give us and our staff time. Most often, we give callers information that will help them know their rights and/or the name of another organization that can help. To spend more time helping someone with their problem, all the following must be true:

* The legal problem is in Illinois.
* The person has a disability or disabilities.
* The person’s legal rights under disability rights laws were violated.
* The person will cooperate with us on the case.
* The person will probably not win without help from Equip for Equality.
* Losing the case will seriously hurt the person or the disability community.
* There are few or no other places that will be able to help.

Even if a person’s problem meets all the points above, we may not be able to help if we do not have the resources to do so.

Sometimes, we will take a case that does not meet all the above points if taking it on will help a lot of people.

If we cannot take a case, we will give the person information. For many people, this information is enough for them to help themselves. We also will give the person the name of an organization that might be able to help.

# Areas We Focus On

We use our limited resources to help protect the rights of people with disabilities. We help people live a life free from discrimination, abuse, neglect, and exploitation, and have choices about their life.

When we have resources, we usually help when a person with a disability has a legal problem in one of the areas below. You can see which of our funders pay for these at the end of this document. Our priorities are advocating to try to *help*:

1. Make sure people are not abused, neglected, taken advantage of, or denied their rights. We focus on places like institutions, facilities, and community service providers
2. Oppose improper discharges or service denials. We focus on times when it could hurt someone or force them into a big facility
3. Get people services and supports so people with disabilities can live in the community
4. Make sure public places, colleges, universities, and government programs are accessible. We also make sure they don’t discriminate against people with disabilities
5. Support rights to have service and emotional support animals
6. Oppose or end having a guardian
7. Stop guardians if they are not following a person’s wishes
8. Stop disability discrimination that leads to too many people in jails or institutions
9. Help incarcerated people get the disability services and accommodations they need to be safe, treated fairly, and get back to the community
10. Oppose legal barriers to re-entry and community living for people with disabilities
11. Oppose job discrimination and help employees get reasonable accommodations at work
12. Get services and assistive equipment from Medicaid or Division of Rehabilitation Services
13. Make sure students in special education get the services they need. We focus on trying to make sure students are found eligible for special education and get the special education supports they need in schools where they can be with non-disabled students. We also try to make sure they get the behavior help they need so they are not expelled or suspended, have good transition plans for future success, get technology to help them communicate, and are free from restraint, seclusion, and abuse. Finally, we make sure school meetings and materials are in a language parents understand. [Learn more here.](https://www.equipforequality.org/get-legal-help-from-efe/cases-we-handle#speced)

**How we help:**

**Most of the time:** We give people advice to help themselves or refer them to other places that can help.

**Sometimes:** If the problem meets the points above, we may work more closely with the client. We may also talk with the facility, business, or government program breaking the law. This is most likely if it could lead to changes that will help many people.

**Less Often:** We may take a case to court, due process hearing, administrative hearing, or other direct representation. Most times we only do this for very serious problems that could affect many people, not just one person. We can only do this if we have the resources.

# Current Projects

We also have ongoing projects to help meet the needs of people with disabilities. These projects can be class action lawsuits, monitoring projects, special reports, or other projects that we take on to meet the needs of many people with disabilities in Illinois. Sometimes we can help callers with these projects but sometimes they are limited to very specific people. Right now, these are our Current Projects:

**Health, Safety, and Well-Being**

1. Monitor facilities and community providers that serve people with disabilities for abuse, neglect, and poor services
2. Monitor people moving out of state-operated developmental centers (SODCs) and into the community
3. Review Social Security Administration representative payees to make sure they follow the rules
4. Stop abuse of people with disabilities in nursing homes owned by a specific company (class action lawsuit)

**Moving into the Community**

1. Help people with developmental disabilities move out of large facilities and into the community (class action lawsuit)
2. Help people with mental health concerns in large facilities move into the community (class action lawsuit)
3. Help people with mental health concerns and/or physical disabilities move out of Cook County nursing homes and into the community (class action lawsuit)
4. Advocate for Home and Community-Based Services to follow the rules and keep people safe
5. Help people get what they need to stay in the community

**Disability Discrimination**

1. Work with the state in expanding employment for people with disabilities
2. Break down barriers to transportation for people with disabilities
3. Help to make polling places accessible for people with disabilities and older adults

**Making Your Own Decisions**

1. Help people with disabilities get involved in public policy
2. Teach people what guardians are supposed to do and options besides guardianship

**Police, Courts, Prison, & Re-Entry**

1. Work to lessen the harm that incarceration causes to people with mental illness
2. Monitor to make sure the Chicago Police Department follows a consent decree about use of force. We also work to make sure people with disabilities are treated fairly during police stops
3. Give legal help to people with disabilities whose communities are affected by incarceration

**Special Education**

1. Work with children from birth to 6-years-old with disabilities get the help they need
2. Help court-involved youth get the education they need to get back on track. Get special education and high school education for youth who are in adult prisons (class action lawsuit)

# How We Choose to Take a Case to Court or An Administrative Hearing

We do not go to court for every person we help because there are lots of ways we help people without going to court. When deciding if we will take a case to court, we also think about:

* Can the person help themselves or fix the problem if we don’t take the case?
* Does the case have merit?
* Will the case help other people with disabilities by changing a law, policy, or business?
* Does the case have important legal issues under state or federal disability rights law?
* Will the case help raise awareness or public support for disability rights?
* Will winning help make sure Equip for Equality keeps or expands the legal rights to help people with disabilities?
* Do we have the resources needed to work on the case?

# Outreach and Training

We make self-help fact sheets and give trainings to:

* People with disabilities
* Their families
* Employers
* Service providers
* Businesses
* Community partners

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# Cases We Can’t Take

**Money and Job Problems**

* Bankruptcy, losing your home, debts, or taxes
* Employment problems not related to disabilities
* Financial abuse that is not from a service provider, guardian, power of attorney, or representative payee
* Worker’s compensation
* Unemployment insurance

**Healthcare Problems**

* Confidentiality, including HIPAA
* Medical malpractice and wrongful death lawsuits
* Problems getting medical records
* Private insurance problems

**Home/Apartment**

* Housing and renting problems. We can help in some cases where the problem is about zoning, emotional support or service animals, or moving to the community from jail or prison.

**Facility Problems**

* Discharges from facilities like nursing homes, SMHRF, ICFDD, supportive living facilities or assisted living facilities. We may help if the person is part of a class action. Our class actions are listed in the Current Projects above.
* Complaints about living in or discharge from private psychiatric hospitals

**Family Problems**

* Parents’ rights
* Requests to become a guardian
* Family law problems like divorce, child support, adoption, and custody cases, and orders of protection in those cases
* Wills, trusts, and estate problems

**Other Life Problems**

* Discrimination problems that are not about a disability
* Immigration
* Legal malpractice lawsuits
* Personal injury lawsuits
* Problems outside of Illinois
* State circuit court accessibility
* Traffic tickets

# Equip for Equality’s Major Funders

It is helpful to understand what we are allowed to do with the money we get. Each of our funders pay for very specific things.

**Protection and Advocacy for Developmental Disabilities** *(Funds 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 11, 13, 14, 15, 18, 21, 22, 24, 26, 27, 31)*Federal money to help people with developmental disabilities.

**Protection and Advocacy for People with Mental Illness** *(Funds 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 11, 13, 14, 19, 20, 21, 22, 24, 26, 28, 29, 30, 32)*Federal money to help people with mental illness or emotional problems, with a focus on people in institutions

**Protection and Advocacy for Individual Rights** *(Funds 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 11, 13, 17, 21, 22, 24, 26)*Federal money to help all people with disabilities. This includes age related disabilities.

**Protection and Advocacy for People with Traumatic Brain Injuries** *(Funds 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, 13, 21, 22, 24)*Federal money to help people with traumatic brain injuries who have legal problems related to their brain injury.

**Protection and Advocacy for Beneficiaries of Social Security** *(Funds 1, 2, 3, 6, 7, 11, 13, 23)*Federal money to help people with disabilities who get money from Social Security get or keep a job.

**Protection and Advocacy for Assistive Technology** *(Funds 4, 8, 9, 11, 12, 13, 21, 22, 24)*Federal money to help people with disabilities get assistive technology in the classroom or to get, regain, or keep a job.

**Protection and Advocacy for Voting Access** *(Funds 25)*Federal money to help make sure people with disabilities are able to vote.

**Protection and Advocacy for Beneficiaries with Representative Payees** *(Funds 16)*Federal money to help protect people with disabilities who get money from the Social Security Administration and have a representative payee who takes care of their money.

**Client Assistance Program** *(Funds 4, 11, 12, 13)*Federal money to help people with disabilities use rehabilitation services and independent living programs.