

Section 1: Candidate Information

• Full Name (Required)	Laura Gilchrest
• District running for (Required)	at Large (entire county)

Section 2: Questionnaire

How will you ensure that Prince George's County government leads by example in hiring, retaining, and promoting employees with disabilities, and what accountability measures will you implement?	We should expand our existing Project HIRE program and improve direct outreach, recruitment, and placement for Project HIRE through our non-governmental community organizations. People with disabilities currently represent 10.5% of the population and should therefore be similarly represented in our county government. We can increase and improve county recruitment and hiring through job fares and job placement through our disability offices and providers, as well as non-profit organizations serving people with disabilities. Making our county job board more accessible and user-friendly would also make a significant difference. Technology is a tremendous resource, and our county is fumbling it badly at the moment! Additional required cultural education and anti-bias training are also necessary. Knowing people with disabilities, caring about people with disabilities, and knowing how to actively and appropriately include people with disabilities are very different things. Making county jobs accessible and accommodating are also necessary and training to ensure that this is a consistent and continuous practice across the council and county government is essential.
---	--

What comprehensive employment initiatives will you champion to create meaningful career opportunities for county residents with disabilities?

While there are a few county-wide disability-centered career fairs, we should expand these to a greater frequency and work to bring all of our career fairs into ADA 503 and 508 compliance, so that every job fair already includes our disabled job seekers. This should also include providing reliable, free transportation to and from job fairs and job interviews. Incorporating universal design and comprehensive accessibility options so that they can be fully integrated experiences, including fully accessible online job fairs like those hosted by AbilityJobs.

Any future workforce development programs should similarly include training and professional development for disabled job-seekers. Additionally, I would propose comprehensive disability and accessibility training, including disability culture and culturally responsive inclusive practice, to all hiring and supervising positions within the county government (and make it available, or provide incentives to become trained/certified in accessibility practices and implementation, to private and non-profit hiring and supervisory roles). To ensure accountability, I would propose a robust disability audit of existing hiring protocols (our jobs site and county websites are an accessibility nightmare!) and job-seeker resources and ensure that responsible parties follow-through on timely changes, updates, and other improvements, via an existing office or adding an office to be fully-funded and staffed with staff to audit, analyze and report on the audits, and enforce audit findings and accountability. Alternatively, we could seek independent auditing contracts for the audits, analysis, and reports, and improve funding and staffing for reviewing and enforcing audit recommendations.

I would also personally meet with current organizations and disability services professionals and disabled job seekers regularly to identify what works, what hasn't, and what services we should improve, expand, or add to our existing resources. I strongly believe that those with lived experience should be involved in making decisions that affect them directly. I want to hear directly from our community and make sure the entire council, including myself, are accountable to the needs of disabled residents, not as an afterthought, but with genuine desire to make ours a vibrant, disability-inclusive community.

What comprehensive, county-wide accessible transportation solutions will you develop beyond existing paratransit services?

In our region we have generally accessible public buses and trains. That said, getting to and from public transportation as a pedestrian, or with a mobility device or via a metro accessibility service ride is far less timely, reliable, or safe.

I would also increase paratransit services through partnering with taxi companies and ride services to expand free rides for disabled residents to and from medical appointments and to and from metro stops, and as a scheduled shuttle service in low public transit and infrastructure accessibility.

How will you ensure that all new transit infrastructure exceeds ADA minimum standards and truly provides accessible, reliable public transportation?

I'll request a comprehensive county-wide transportation accessibility audit, from which future infrastructure can be accordingly planned, designed, and implemented to be inclusive of all. I'll propose legislation requiring all new transit-adjacent infrastructure proposals include accessibility impact assessments before plans may be approved. Plans that fail the resulting legislated inclusive design requirements would not be approved.

I would convene an intersectoral disability advisory council with at least half of the seats occupied by disabled residents along with advocates, field experts, transit workers, and representatives from Maryland and VA state assemblies and DC (state) government to evaluate and inform infrastructure and development to ensure universal, inclusive design that accounts for physical, social, and economic accessibility. I will also enable enforcement of, or propose mandating, comprehensive training and education on inclusive transportation best practices to reduce attitude and bias issues that affect accessibility and service. I also eagerly welcome the opportunity to collaborate in community-written policy proposals, that I will co-sponsor and work to pass with the council and advocate for in the State General Assembly.

There are a few other ways I would accomplish better transportation availability, accessibility, and reliability. One is by improving surface mobility around the county via increasing sidewalks and accessible pedestrian bridges and routes to and from metro stops, vehicles, and commonly used and public areas, like libraries, utilities, county facilities - including council hearings - as many of our buildings and neighborhoods are still not ADA compliant, increasing travel and transportation barriers.

What specific actions will you take to increase the supply of affordable, accessible, and integrated housing options throughout Prince George's County?

New single family homes and multi-generation apartments and condominiums must include a percentage of units for housing vouchers, rent control for elderly and disabled renters living many of whom live on fixed or limited income. Any new housing regardless of type must follow the principles of smart growth and include access to public transit, school systems, green space, and employment, and be built with multiple generations in mind. Rent prices should be tied to the cost of living and inflation indexes. I would enact programs to help residents to stay in their homes by making accessibility improvements, including renters. I would also advocate for incentives to rehabilitate, update/modernize, and make existing homes more accessible for multiple generations and to make existing housing stock more widely available for disabled househunters or their caregivers. These efforts would increase housing security for vulnerable populations, and make universal social inclusion much more feasible, in addition to improving intergenerational wealth and economic equity in the short and long-term, while improving home equity and property values for those who choose to sell or buy in our community. Housing is a human right and our policies should reflect a desire to build stable, accessible, thriving communities that include everyone.

What policy changes will you advocate to improve healthcare access including provider training and accessible medical facilities?

Again, regular, systematic, unannounced accessibility audits across the county, in addition to fielding and investigating complaints to the ADA coordinator's office are one place to start and I'd work with my colleagues to ensure that the council fully funds and staffs this effort. I would also expand free medical appointment transportation to anyone who needs it and does not qualify due to being uninsured, underinsured, or not a Medicaid or Medicare participant. Folks with Long-Covid, ME/CFS, or other invisible illnesses that put them at extremely high risk of infection may not be able to safely rely on mass transportation or an Uber/Lyft driver that has taken the appropriate precautions. All medically vulnerable patients without alternative transportation, or who can't get to public transportation should be able to make their appointments without having to cancel and reschedule a long-awaited, hard to get, or critical appointment because their caregiver had to call in sick, had a vehicle breakdown, or simply don't have another way to make their appointments.

I have spent my career as an anthropologist and someone with complex medical history and autoimmune disease understanding barriers to healthcare accessibility and quality of care. As a result of being a patient and caregiver or support person for others with illness I know how things like mandatory masking for providers and staff, ignorance or bias about disabilities, and medical myopathy can have lasting impacts on the mental and physical well-being of individuals seeking care. I have several thoughts about how to address this systemically in the long-term and would love to convene a "roundtable" or working group to hear from others about their good and bad experiences in the county (and state) and to include their ideas in a comprehensive proposals for continuing education training and education for existing practitioners and curriculum improvements to pilot (and adopt) in our pre-med, medical schools, and allied health training and certification programs. I would leverage my training in medical anthropology, relationships with universities and colleges and connect them with our County disability services to develop programs to increase awareness and offer forums, seminars, and training to our future healthcare workers, disability advocates, and policy planners. I would also work with existing disability institutions and organizations to recruit and support county-wide training and education programs based on known complaints and regular accessibility audits.

I'll also meet and advocate with our state and federal counterparts to improve access to telehealth, home visits where needed or appropriate, and state-wide boards of nursing, medicine, and other licensing bodies where indicated to address curriculum and minimum certification standards.

How will you expand integrated, trauma-informed mental health services specifically designed for children and adults with disabilities?

Trauma informed mental health care is absolutely critical across our county. For children and adults with disabilities this is also the case, but they need additional considerations due to the key experiences that distinguish them from non-disabled people needing mental health care. In many cases, receiving regular medical care or encountering bias, discrimination, hostility or abuse when going about their daily lives adds compounding issues that must be considered and incorporated into any mental health services. I'm a certified Youth and Adult Mental Health First Aider, and will work with Maryland MHFA trainers to develop a disability-specific MHFA curriculum, appropriate for first responders, educators, caregivers, and service providers and even bystanders.

Ongoing county-wide mandatory training and continuing education programs specifically focused on the needs of children and adults with disabilities, in conjunction with the previously mentioned proposals and funding priorities can help. This should also include free training and support resources for families and caregivers as well. We can do this cost effectively by developing online, self-paced training and educational resources that are easily accessible to our residents. Some of the other recommendations I've made to improve accessibility, also address the need for increased social inclusion and robust support for their caregivers and opportunities to develop secure, consistent relationships.

Ensuring that our services and programs are fully-funded and staffed will support long-term consistency, continuity, and sustainable care for residents with disabilities. I'm committed to making sure that our essential services and public goods are not subject to budget changes and are always prioritized in budget decisions. People with disabilities should also be involved in decision-making and program designs, including developing, raising awareness about, and providing training for trauma informed mental health services for children and adults with disabilities.

How will you ensure that first responders receive regular training on interacting with and supporting people with diverse disabilities?

Emergency preparedness plans MUST incorporate and prepare for people with disabilities. Sirens and audio alerts don't work for deaf or hard of hearing residents, and may cause dysregulation in people affected by loud or sudden sounds and abrupt changes in routine. Visual notices don't work for people with vision-related disabilities. When I began working at GWU, the emergency preparedness plan informed me that students in wheelchairs or who relied on elevators to access their classrooms, dorms, or other campus facilities, should be left at the top of the stairwells to wait for rescue. I personally spoke with my students to develop an agreeable alternate safety plan that did not involve abandoning them in an emergency. We can and must do better.

My dad, now retired, worked for a city fire department for many years. When he retired and went to work in public policy he trained first responders in ways to safely care for, transport, and engage with people with disabilities, and specifically with the unique needs of disabled children. Traditional CPR could be deadly for someone with Osteogenesis Imperfecta.

There are organizations, agencies, and experts providing evidence-based training around the country and even in our region already, we simply need to prioritize these evidence-backed solutions in our budget and in our first responder training. If county-wide legislation does not already exist mandating semi-annual training for Fire/EMS, police departments, and healthcare workers, I will propose and pass legislation to require comprehensive, certified training and ensure that it includes monitoring and evaluation and enforcement mechanisms, so that the legislation functions accordingly. I'll also expand Mental Health First Aid and Youth Mental Health First Aid training across first responder and adjacent care workers. All of these programs already exist in some form and are common-sense objectives. There is no reason we shouldn't already have these practices in place.

How will you ensure adequate funding and accessibility of programs that help older adults maintain independence when they acquire disabilities?

As an elected official I will make basic needs and public goods a non-negotiable budget priority, including our disability programs, services, and resources. It is discriminatory and unethical to treat disability as a disposable or otherwise non-critical resource and to threaten disability service and programs and other public goods when budget issues arise. In fiscal terms, I have a comprehensive plan to diversify the tax base in Prince George's County to ensure that our public goods, including disability programs and services, are always fully funded and can be expanded. That plan involves fair taxes on large and mega-corporations, land value and vacancy taxes, a redistributive tax on the ultrawealthy in our county, and a program to provide tax benefits or levy tax penalties on business and corporations based on their employment practices. Tax benefits would incentivize companies to hire and pay living wages, including disabled employees, and to provide comprehensive health insurance, paid vacation, unlimited paid sick days, and limited, non-serious incidents throughout the fiscal/work year. I would also work with our counterparts in the State General Assembly, the Prince George's County delegation among others to ensure that state-level legislation meets or exceeds expectations to fully fund disability programs and services, to ensure that the Developmental Disability Administration is fully funded and fully staffed.

Improving program accessibility across the board through website updates, public outreach, and referral networks will allow more people to access resources when they need them. I also want to make sure that people have access to fund for updating their homes if they suddenly need a wheelchair or a stairlift or other resources that might demand a change in the design of their home. Moving is difficult and expensive, but we should have resources to update homes for accessibility, especially as people age and/or become disabled.

What will be your top three legislative priorities to advance disability rights and full inclusion in our county? (Please list and briefly describe your top three priorities.)

Pertaining to disability rights:

Specific protections and mandate to fully fund offices, services, and programs that serve people with disabilities in our County. It's lovely to say we'll expand programs or conduct audits or make other changes, but without ensuring the funding mechanisms these become temporary projects or contingent on ever-changing funding across administrations. Establishing funding priorities and proposing the tax plans and funding mechanisms to guarantee funding for those changes in perpetuity, regardless of who is in office or what the state or federal governments decide to do, will ensure that programs like the DDA are never on the chopping block when budgets get tight.

Prioritizing accessibility improvements and standards in all county facilities and official business. Our county buildings are not in compliance with minimum ADA standards, an incredible oversight and violation of civil rights. They must be made physically accessible to all residents without delays. All of our official meetings and events must include ASL interpreters, recordings, and closed captions. Our websites and online resources must be updated to comply with universal accessibility standards, which will make them not only more usable for people using screen readers and other adaptive technologies, but also more user friendly for every resident.

Ensuring that all future transit and built infrastructure includes an accessibility impact assessment and includes inclusive design. Social inclusion is much easier when all spaces are accessible to everyone. Barriers that make our disabilities more disabling because of hostile or otherwise exclusive design should be eliminated when making inclusive design a requirement for our county. Establishing a resident-centered disability advisory council or oversight group will also be essential to each of these priorities.

As always, I will forever be open to public comment, residents, and the concerns, wisdom, and great ideas from affected communities.

Consent & Submission

Consent checkbox (required)

I consent to my responses being shared publicly in full.

✓

Campaign Website or Contact Information:

www.electlauragilchrest.com