

# Cox And Peterson Speak Out On Disability Issues | CPD Blog

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In the run-up to the election, the Policy Team at the Center for Persons with Disabilities interviewed a number of Utah candidates regarding their stance on disability issues, including gubernatorial candidates Spencer Cox (R) and Chris Peterson (D).

Both gubernatorial candidates offered some disability background in their interviews. Cox said his wife graduated from Utah State University in special education, and he has done some disability law. Peterson was raised by a single mother with a disability and has other family members with disabilities.

All the interviewees in the “Getting to Know the Candidates” series were asked the same questions. To view the full interviews and learn more about the proposed Utah Constitutional Amendment G, visit the CPD’s [policy page](#).

## Summary Of The Cox And Peterson Interviews

**In light of COVID-19, many students with disabilities are at risk of not obtaining a fair and appropriate education. How can Utah work towards ensuring all students will receive a fair and appropriate education during the pandemic and beyond?**

“This is one of our continued challenges,” Cox said. “The way school was disrupted early on, we’ve seen gaps increase.” He spoke of the state’s efforts to improve connectivity to the Internet, using CARES act money to improve the fiber optic network and provide hotspots to families without Internet access.

Even once the pandemic ends, Cox said the work will not be over. “We believe and hope that the pandemic will have a limited time frame... We always talk about going back to normal, and that’s a mistake. Normal had gaps,” he said.

“I’m a teacher. I’m a professor at the University of Utah,” Peterson said. He spoke of trying to make accommodations for his students, not only because it’s good for the student, but good for society. “We get the advantage of an additional worker, an additional student, an additional person out there who may have special skills that they’ve developed because of the challenges they’ve faced because of their disability.”

It’s important to make sure the Utah State Board of Education is helping, and another challenge is funding. “We have chronically underfunded our public schools for decades,” he said. “Part of that is because we have relatively large families.” But Utah also has a good economy. “We have the resources to be a leader in education.” And part of providing resources for schools is providing them for students with disabilities.

**What can Utah do to increase the employment rate of Utahns with disabilities as they face the challenges and barriers of the COVID-19 pandemic and those that were present prior?**

Both candidates emphasized that the issue goes beyond employment for people with disabilities. They both said they would support vocational rehabilitation as a way to move people with disabilities into the workforce. They also agreed that people with disabilities are an underutilized resource in Utah.

Before the pandemic, employers struggled to fill jobs, Cox said. They didn’t always recognize that people with disabilities were good candidates. He has focused on disability awareness.

“One thing I’d like to see is a more aggressive outreach effort to try to provide education,” Peterson said, “To get those employers out there to recognize that there’s an enormous pool of talent out there with very loyal, productive workers. ... We can also signal that in the state agencies as well.

“I would want to send a signal from the very top of our government that we want inclusion in our very top government jobs. ... It has to start at the top.”

“We feel very fortunate to have the lowest unemployment rate in the country,” Cox said. “But what I’ve encouraged our teams to do is really dive into those numbers.” He acknowledged that COVID-19 impacted some industries and groups of people more than others.

Cox emphasized career counseling, medical treatment counseling, assistive technology, on-the-job training and placement assistance to improve the services available.

“We don’t just want to focus on the unemployed but the underemployed as well,” Cox said.

“In my own life experiences, many of my family members have been disabled,” Peterson said. “Their ability to find gainful employment has made an enormous difference in their life, but also they’ve given back to their communities.”

### **What is your plan to ensure people with disabilities can privately and independently receive, mark, and submit their ballot in this election and any elections that may occur under similar circumstances?**

Both candidates recognized that Cox has had more direct involvement in elections, in his role as lieutenant governor. Both also said electronic voting for people with disabilities, which has been piloted in the state of Utah, is a good option for people with disabilities in Utah. Cox said he hoped it could expand through all counties, once the Utah Legislature gets more comfortable with it. “Unfortunately these platforms are not cheap and there are security issues that we’re always working through.”

Other options have been looked at, Cox said, including taking accessible voting machines to the homes of people with disabilities. “It’s something I’m very supportive of. ... We’re going to be experimenting with things over the years.”

Peterson said that in talking to people with disabilities, he has consistently heard online voting would help. Though he doesn’t advocate online voting for everyone, he does support secure, online voting as a reasonable accommodation. “It’s a practical solution we should be looking for to facilitate access to the ballot.”

### **Many disability service providers struggle to keep staff turnover rates low during the best of times. The COVID-19 pandemic has especially affected these service providers because of the increase in health risks and changes in service accessibility. How can Utah better support service providers during the COVID-19 crisis and in the future?**

Peterson talked about wages and benefits. “I think that many Utahns across the state who have never had to rely on a home health care aid... don’t realize how very modest the compensation is for these critical jobs,” he said. “People need not just jobs. We need living wage jobs. I was shocked to find out that there were disability service providers that themselves don’t get health insurance. ... Our minimum wage in Utah is in the seven dollar range, and that is a shocking wage.”

“Reducing staff turnover... is an issue the state has been working on for the past six years,” Cox said; and over that six years, those improvements have reduced staff turnover by 18 percent. COVID brought new challenges, and CARES Act funding allowed for another temporary increase of about 13 percent in service provider rates.

Another challenge was providing telehealth through a virtual platform. “This is certainly something I advocated for before the pandemic,” Cox said. And if there is a silver lining to the pandemic, it is that people are discovering telehealth as an option. “We know that can’t, of course, completely supplant what we’re doing,” he said.

### **Utahns experience some of the highest rates of mental health issues, but Utah also has ranked among the lowest in offering mental health services. How can Utah encourage the expansion of mental health services, especially in rural or low-income areas?**

“This is something I’ve been working on the past four or five years,” Cox said. “It’s part of this Utah Paradox. Utah ranks high for the number of health and happiness related outcomes—in fact there was a study done last year that said we were the happiest state in the nation—while also being the state with some of the highest rates of mental illness and of course suicide. We’re part of this suicide belt.”

Cox said he has worked with Utah Rep. Steve Eliason to come up with legislation to address mental health in Utah. Over the past three years, close to 20 bills have addressed mental health. “We are certainly headed in a better direction.”

While COVID caused more stress among Utahns and budgets were in more trouble, those gains stayed in place after special session.

That said, “We have to think differently about the way we deliver services,” Cox said. “Not every mental health concern needs a psychologist or psychiatrist.”

“Both in my role in working with the state legislature and in implementing laws and executive programs, I will do everything I can to treat mental health services on par with other physical health care services,” Peterson said. “For too long we have drawn a line between different types of physiological diseases, where something like bipolar disorder... is treated on a different level of compensation or insurance benefits from other more physical diseases like diabetes.”

Suicide, substance abuse and other mental health issues are some of the greatest health issues Utahns face, he said. “We have a high teen suicide rate... that is a shock to me, and it’s also another consequence of underfunding education.” Peterson argued that guidance counselors in schools could help. “We’ve got to provide those resources in schools.”

### **What can the state of Utah do to ensure law enforcement officers are adequately trained to de-escalate situations that involve people experiencing a mental health crisis?**

“I don’t support defunding the police,” Peterson said, “but I do believe that we can talk about some reasonable police reforms to try to decrease this violence, some more training on conflict de-escalation, make sure we do implicit bias training... not just with respect to race but also with respect to disability.”

He advocated keeping track of officers who chronically abuse powers. They need to be in a different line of work, he said. In addition, “We’ve already talked about mental health services. You know who else needs that? Our police officers do.” Police officers often witness terrible things, he said. They should have access to services that can help them maintain their own mental health.

Too often, Cox said, people in crisis call 911 for help, and dispatchers send police, fire fighters and an ambulance. “We’re asking law enforcement to do too much. We can train them to do it but maybe we should not ask them to do some of these things.” Sometimes it may be more appropriate to send a mobile crisis intervention team; “therapists in a minivan.”

Utah has started work with such mobile crisis teams, he said.