

Name: Mark Thomas
Incumbent? No
Office Sought: Alderman
Ward: 44th

- 1) Do you have or would you install a written policy in your office regarding sexual orientation and gender identity discrimination?**

Yes, I would install a written policy.

- 2) Have you started or would you start sensitivity training for your staff members regarding LGBT-related issues?**

Yes. This is especially important given the demographics of the 44th Ward.

- 3) Have you taken or would you take any steps to further HIV/AIDS treatment and education programs? If so, what are those measures?**

If I am elected as Alderman I will work with my fellow members of the City Council to increase the funding and availability of preventative education programs and HIV/AIDS treatment centers.

- 4) What is your position on abortion as it pertains to the law?**

I support a woman's right to choose. Family planning is a personal issue, not a legal one.

- 5) What is your position regarding funding for HIV/AIDS treatment and education?**

Funding for HIV/AIDS treatment and education programs needs to be increased to provide STD education in schools and community centers, along with providing condoms, anti-retroviral medication assistance, and other support to HIV positive individuals. However, even that number is not truly enough, and we will need to receive grants from various nonprofits and community outreach groups to provide an adequate level of service.

- 6) Do you favor marriage equality (marriage between two people of the same gender)?**

Yes

- 7) Do you favor hate-crimes legislation that increases penalties for crimes committed based on the sexual orientation or gender identity of the person attacked?**

Yes

- 8) Do you believe LGBTs should become foster parents if they are qualified?**

Yes. I do not see how an individual's sexuality is an important factor in determining whether they would be suitable parents.

- 9) Do you believe LGBTs have the right to adopt children if they are qualified?**

Yes, see above.

10) Would you keep committees such as the City of Chicago Commission on Human Relations Advisory Council on LGBT Issues?

Yes

11) What are your thoughts on a school that would be designed specifically for LGBT students, much like the Harvey Milk School in New York City?

Many LGBT children face bullying and intimidation in school because of their sexuality. I would support providing a safe learning environment like the Harvey Milk School where LGBT children can receive an education free from harassment, but I think it's even more important to create strong anti-bullying programs and educate children for tolerance in every school.

12) Would you advocate for mandatory anti-bullying policies/training in Chicago public schools?

Yes, and these policies and educational programs should be started early in a child's education.

13) Would you advocate for mandatory LGBT-inclusive history education in Chicago public schools starting in middle school?

Yes

14) Would you advocate for mandatory comprehensive, LGBT-inclusive and age-appropriate sex education in Chicago public schools starting in middle school?

Yes

15) What would you recommend to have a better relationship between police and the citizens they serve, including people of color and the transgender community?

Inclusiveness and sensitivity training are a start. Greater representation of people of color and members of the LGBT community would also be beneficial—people of all walks of life are called to serve their community, but may not always feel welcome in particular roles.

16) If you are an incumbent, did you vote for the recent increase in the city's minimum wage and, if a challenger, would you have? Also, what do you think is the ideal minimum wage for the city of Chicago?

I would have voted for the increase in the minimum wage had I been in office at the time. As a small business owner I know the challenges of raising the wage, but I also understand that the minimum wage has not kept up with worker productivity.

I do have reservations about the ordinance, however: I believe that any significant raise in the minimum wage needs to start with companies that earn \$50 million or more in sales first, in order to introduce more currency into the local economy. This will provide the small businesses

with a profit cushion to ease the transition into a higher minimum wage.

Personally I believe that the minimum wage in Chicago should be \$13/hr in order to keep up with housing and living expenses. But, as I mentioned earlier, any raise in the minimum wage needs to be handled carefully in order to give small businesses the chance they need to survive the transition.

17) How do you propose to handle the crime rate in Chicago, especially in minority neighborhoods?

Addressing crime in Chicago is a two-part process. The first step that we need to take is to hire an additional 1,000 police officers to make sure that all of our neighborhoods receive the attention that they need. The Chicago Police Department has moved officers from lower crime areas to neighborhoods with high crime and violence rates, which is understandable given the limited resources they have to work with. But a much better solution would be to adequately staff the police department to ensure that every neighborhood is safe and secure.

However, hiring more police officers is only half of the solution. Crime is a business, and it is filling a void in the city—specifically the lack of access to good jobs. If we really want to tackle the high crime rates in Chicago we need to address the root cause by increasing opportunities for employment in economically depressed neighborhoods to provide an alternative to black market criminal jobs. A recent University of Chicago Crime Lab study showed that high school students in high-crime neighborhoods who were provided with summer employment had 43% fewer violent crime arrests than the control group. Even more interesting, those benefits carried on long past the end of the program.

If we want to address the crime rate in Chicago we need to provide an alternative option. If we invest in our neighborhoods, particularly where there is a high rate of crime, we will see a return on the investment.

18) What do you feel is the biggest problem facing your ward? How do you propose to tackle that problem?

I have been surveying voters across the ward over phone and email about the issues that matter to them, and crime is by far the biggest response. The residents in my community are worried about the number of robberies, attacks on LGBT people, and petty crimes that impact the quality of life in Lakeview, and I have taken an aggressive stance on addressing the issue.

The first step I would take is to fight to get back the more than 100 police officers that we have lost in the 19th District. In late 2013 I created a petition urging the Alderman and CPD to fill the empty positions in the 19th District, and within days nearly 600 people signed it. However, we still have to deal with the crime that we have until those positions are filled. That is why I am promising to go out on the street with licensed and insured off-duty police officers to spot and deter crime as it is happening until we clean up our streets. Something needs to be done, and the incumbent Alderman has been too slow to respond.

19) Some studies show that 40 percent of homeless youth are LGBTQ. What would you do to provide more resources for prevention, education and services for the entire homeless youth population?

One of the ways we can address youth homelessness in the LGBT community is through a combination of education and support. Providing better tolerance training and sexual education programs can not only have a major impact on LGBT discrimination, which plays a major role in youth homelessness, but also reduce the spread of HIV/AIDS later in life. Additionally, all public and charter schools need to have counselors in place who are sensitive and knowledgeable about this issue to offer assistance to LGBT children.

On a similar note, many young people are homeless because they face discrimination at home and/or at school, and often feel forced into a life on the streets. Tolerance training in school can address one part of the problem, but we should also think of parents rejecting their children based on sexuality as a form of abuse. We need to provide counseling services and intervention in these situations to help build understanding and keep families together.

I would also develop a relationship between my office and the AIDS Foundation of Chicago, a premier HIV/AIDS, LGBTQ assistance organization in Chicago to offer resources, assistance, and services to the LGBTQ community in the 44th Ward. This partnership would allow us to reach more LGBTQ youths while also offering more assistance to them. As Alderman I will use every resource at my disposal and reach out to those nonprofit organizations and community groups that can offer the most assistance.

20) New York City eliminated barriers to transgender people changing their birth certificates. They just need a letter from a doctor to do so. Would you support this for Chicago?

Yes

21) Are any members of your current staff—either campaign or general office personnel—openly LGBT?

The LGBT community has always been strongly represented in the Alley Stores. I have not asked my campaign staff about this issue, but I know that several of my volunteers are LGBT.

22) Please list any and all experience you have on LGBT-related issues

They Alley Stores have been LGBTQ-friendly for 40 years, long before it was socially acceptable to do so. I have worked hard to create a safe space where my employees and customers can feel free to express their sexual identity—or not—as they see fit. I have been an ally to the LGBT community and a strong supporter of the Pride Parade throughout my entire time in business. I also served as the chairman of the North Halsted Market Days committee, which hosts another one of the largest LGBT festivals in Chicago. I will always play the role of friend, advocate and employer for the LGBT community in Lakeview.

23) What do you feel is the biggest problem facing the LGBT community today?

Not long ago the answer would have been the push for marriage equality, but now that we have won that battle I have to answer with discrimination and the youth homelessness that often results from it. This is followed closely by medication affordability, and last but not least, housing. We have to do a better job at reaching and educating young LGBT people to reassure them that they have assistance and support.