

**Company:** C-Strategies Inc., Chicago IL

**Company Description:** C-Strategies is an award-winning, 100% women-owned, WBE and ACDBE certified strategic communications and public affairs firm led by government, public policy and campaign veterans that uses results-driven tactics to build strategic plans, guide public opinion and manage crises for clients.

**Nomination Category:** Individual Awards Categories

**Nomination Sub Category:** Social Change Maker of the Year - Disability

**Nomination Title:** Karen Tamley, President & CEO



1. Which will you submit for your nomination in this category, a video of up to five (5) minutes, explaining the achievements since July 1, 2023 of the nominated woman, OR written answers to the questions? (Choose one):

Written answers to the questions

2. If you are submitting a video of up to five (5) minutes in length, provide the URL of the video here, OR attach it to your entry via the "Add Attachments, Videos, or Links to This Entry" link above, through which you may also upload a copy of your video. If you are submitting written answers to the questions for this category, provide them in the spaces below:

N/A

3. Briefly describe the nominated individual: history and past performance (up to 200 words):

**Total 200 words used.**

Karen Tamley is a nationally recognized disability rights leader and advocate for equity, inclusion and systemic change. As President and CEO of Access Living, a leading disability justice organization, Karen draws on decades of policy leadership and her lived experience as a lifelong wheelchair user to advance accessibility and civil rights. Growing up without legal protections for people with disabilities, she committed herself to advancing access in transportation, infrastructure, education, employment, and technology, and to defending the rights of those whose lives are too often undervalued.

Prior to her current role, Karen served 14 years as Commissioner of the Mayor's Office of People with Disabilities. In 2016, President Barack Obama appointed her to the U.S. Access Board that develops accessibility standards and guidelines, serving as chair in 2019. In 2021, Governor J.B. Pritzker appointed her to the Illinois Commission on Discrimination and Hate Crimes, where she helped launch a statewide help line for people who had experienced a hate crime or discrimination. After the U.S. Supreme Court in 2022 eliminated the ability to seek damages for civil rights violations under the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, Karen led Access Living's campaign to restore those rights for disabled Illinoisans.

4. Outline the nominee's achievements since July 1 2023 that you wish to bring to the judges' attention (up to 250 words):

**Total 246 words used.**

Karen has led Access Living through major legal, legislative and policy wins that advance the rights of disabled people in Illinois. Most recently, Access Living delayed a vote in the Illinois Senate on a bill that would have legalized physician-assisted suicide, raising awareness about the disproportionate harm such legislation could inflict on disabled and uninsured communities.

Under Karen's leadership, Access Living secured passage of a bill requiring the Illinois Department of Corrections to collect and report data on its use of hospice and end-of-life care, ensuring dignity for incarcerated individuals with disabilities. Then, Access Living won a lawsuit against an MRI provider that had denied service to a wheelchair user. As a result, the provider must now implement new protocols guaranteeing accessible care.

Karen and her team also developed a plan to make all CTA rail stations accessible, with four renovated stations opening in 2025 that are accessible for the first time in over 100 years. She continues advocating for two critical transportation programs that provide on-demand service for people with disabilities, an essential alternative to systems that require advance booking.

In 2024, she joined a statewide coalition to pass the Dignity in Pay Act, ending the subminimum wage for disabled workers by 2029 and expanding inclusive employment access. She also oversaw the release of a study exposing service gaps for Chicagoans disabled by gun violence. In September 2023, Access Living reached a settlement in a lawsuit against the Chicago White Sox over inaccessible ticketing practices.

5. Reference any attachments of supporting materials throughout this nomination and how they provide evidence of the claims you have made in this nomination (up to 250 words):

**Total 84 words used.**

The supporting materials included with this nomination offer documentation of Karen Tamley's leadership and Access Living's impact under her leadership across legislative advocacy, litigation, research, and public education. The news articles and press releases validate the success of Access Living's initiatives outlined throughout the nomination. Also included is Karen's recent op-ed in Crain's Chicago Business marking the ADA's anniversary. Finally, a video on Access Living's homepage provides a powerful overview of the organization's values, priorities, and accomplishments — many shaped directly by Karen's vision.

6. Explain why the achievements you have highlighted are unique or significant. If possible compare the achievements to the performance of other players in your industry and/or to the nominee's past performance (up to 250 words):

**Total 224 words used.**

Karen brings a disability-led, coalition-driven model to systemic change. She believes deeply in the mantra, "Nothing about us without us," ensuring disabled people are not just included but leading. At Access Living, over half the board and a significant portion of staff identify as disabled. Every initiative is led or informed by people with disabilities, a structure that distinguishes Access Living from most social service organizations in the country.

Since assuming leadership, Karen has prioritized high-impact policy change, evidenced by multiple legislative wins this year alone, from defending end-of-life dignity to advancing employment equity and healthcare access. Her team's lawsuit against a major healthcare provider, and successful advocacy for disabled CTA riders, demonstrate a deep commitment to practical outcomes — not just awareness.

Unlike many nonprofits that serve disabled populations but lack representative leadership, Access Living's work is powered by the very communities it supports. Karen's lived experience — combined with decades in public service — makes her a trusted advocate at every level, from City Hall to Springfield to Capitol Hill. The organization's achievements reflect this rare combination of authenticity, strategy, and tenacity.

Karen's work goes beyond simply addressing disability issues and reshapes how society values disabled lives. In a year marked by backlash against civil rights gains, her leadership has ensured forward momentum for one of the country's most marginalized communities.

## Attachments/Videos/Links:

[Karen Tamley, President & CEO](#)

[REDACTED FOR PUBLICATION]