Disability Unscripted 2020: Samuel Habib Interviews NH State Senator Dan Feltes, Democratic candidate for Governor
drcnh.org/videos/disability-unscripted-with-samuel-habib-dan-feltes-interview

State Senator Dan Feltes: Hey, Samuel.

Samuel Habib: Hi, Senator Feltes. Thank you for taking some time for this interview.

DF: Absolutely. You got it. Thank you for doing this.

SH: I'm Samuel Habib. I am 20 years old and I live in Concord. I use a communication device to communicate and have pre-programmed questions for the interview in advance. I can also speak but it takes a lot of energy and it can be hard to understand me. Feel free to ask me to repeat myself if you do not understand me.

DF: Will do. Thanks.

SH: If there is no additional funding from Congress, how would you address the budgetary gap and its impact on supports and services for people with disabilities?

DF: Thank you for that question. Right now, Samuel, the budget gap in this fiscal year is about 143 million. We'll know for sure after the audit, but there's over 200 million in Federal CARES Act money in the State Treasury right now. And under the revised U.S. Treasury Secretary guidance, if managed correctly, that could fill the budget gaps in this fiscal year. Now, Chris Sununu has not said that he would do that. That should be done. The state budget and the long-term care supports and in-home supports, including for persons with disabilities, needs to be met right now. And so he hasn't said that he would do that. He should. The second year, the budget gap is bigger. We don't know the full scope of it yet, but we need to meet it. Now, if the feds don't step up, Samuel, as you mentioned in your question, we need to meet the gap and we need to maintain those services. We have opportunities to do that, including, by closing tax loopholes for big corporations, including multi-state multinational corporations that enjoy in our business

Protection and Advocacy System for New Hampshire
tax code. The biggest chunk of the state's revenue and state budget is business taxes and corporate taxes. There's plenty of loopholes. In fact, only about 50% of corporations pay anything to the state of New Hampshire in any given year. In the last budget, we closed some of those loopholes to generate historic education funding and healthcare funding, and the current governor opposes closing those loopholes. I think we ought to close those loopholes to make sure that healthcare and support for persons with disabilities, living with disabilities and education are all funded the way that they should be. So hopefully the federal government at, some point, provides another relief bill but if they don't, we need to make managing this budget a top priority. And by the way, this is one of the biggest challenges coming in for the next governor, for the next legislature. And we've heard Chris Sununu say recently that he wants to go back to 2019 spending levels in the state budget. Literally, that's what he says. That would devastate education, social services, healthcare and services with persons with disabilities. Absolutely devastate it. So, there's a lot at stake in this race. We're not gonna. We cannot afford to go back to 2019 levels in the state budget with everything people are facing on the ground. And look in 2010, the last economic crisis, the Great Recession, we saw what happened when that kind of approach to budgeting had taken place under Bill O'Brien. We saw what happened. Thousands of people, tens of thousands of people fell through the cracks, including our most vulnerable. We can't let that happen in this crisis. That's at stake. That's on the ballot in this race, how you approach that budget. Chris Sununu wants to go back to 2019 spending levels. We need to protect that budget and the services for persons with disability, healthcare services, education, we've got to protect it and build off of it.

**SH:** In December, I will turn 21 and enter the adult developmental disabilities system. Will you commit to protecting funding for adults with developmental disabilities so that we don't go back to a wait list?

**DF:** Yes. And in the last budget, that's what we fought for in the majority. And certainly as a majority leader of the State Senate, Chair of the Ways and Means Committee, Vice Chair of the Finance Committee, we made sure to make the budget so that was the case. And we gotta do that moving forward, too. That needs to be a part of it. And, just to put a finer point on this, Samuel, during the last economic crisis when we faced this kind of budgetary situation, again, the Great Recession, I was serving as a legal aid lawyer with New Hampshire Legal Assistance and saw roughly two-thirds of my colleagues lose their jobs who were working to help people, including persons with disabilities, at a time when the help was overwhelming and the need was greatest. And I saw and represented people who got devastated by those budget cuts in the Great Recession. And I saw firsthand, and I'm not gonna let that happen as governor. We're not gonna
let that happen in this crisis. The people who need the help the most right now ought to have someone in their corner in the corner office. That's what this should be about. By the way, big corporations are doing just fine even under COVID. It's folks, it's low to middle income families and services that are needed, including in-home services. Those are the kinds of situations that we need to be looking out for. Not those at the top, not big corporations who, like I said, are even under COVID doing okay. We gotta look out for people who need it most. And I saw it firsthand during the last economic crisis. That's not the kind of budget that I'm gonna do. I will not stand for that kind of budget.

SH: COVID-19 has threatened to overwhelm the resources of medical providers to a point where doctors may be forced to choose which patients receive treatment and which do not. No one wants to limit medical care for COVID-19 patients, but plans need to be developed in case rationing becomes necessary. Currently, an advisory committee is developing guidance for hospitals. What would you want to see included in this guidance?

DF: Well, first and foremost, there should be no rationing. Period. And we have gone to battle a number of occasions with including the health insurance carriers and who they cover and what situations they cover. We need to take aggressive action to make sure that health insurance coverage carriers are treating everybody with respect and dignity. And recently we passed prescription drug relief, including for capping out-of-pocket expenses for persons living with diabetes and knocking down some of the prior authorizations that health insurance carriers put up with respect to care. We need to continue that work. And the health insurance carriers are gonna end up being okay. We need to make sure our people are okay. And in terms on the Medicaid side, same thing. We gotta make sure that we maintain care. That's gotta be the priority. I've refused to accept the proposition that this needs to happen. And we need to do everything in our power to prevent that from happening.

SH: I have been included in regular classes since elementary school and that helped prepare me for college. What will you do to help kids with disabilities be included in regular education and college?

DF: So there's a whole host of things that I think we need to do. Obviously, the state needs to step up more with respect to special education costs. The federal government hasn't fully funded the IDEA but we need to at the state level, make sure that access is available and not just access,
but full inclusion as much as possible. No doubt about it. And it's one thing to promote access, it's another to promote inclusion. And so, we need to take those steps at the state level, including more fully supporting that requirement. Number two, at the higher ed level, that needs to be part of the equation, too. In the last budget, we did freeze tuition with respect to community college and UNH University System within the budget that the Democrats and the legislature crafted. And ultimately, despite vetoed by Sununu, ultimately accepted. But it was part of that funding and it was part of those links, you can make sure that further funding is contingent upon accepting responsibility and promoting an inclusive learning environment for everybody. So that's number two. And number three, we passed job training legislation to make sure that certificate programming, apprenticeship programming, those kinds of programming, specifically reach out to, and include persons with disabilities. So, not everybody necessarily wants to go to community college or UNH. If they want to get into an apprenticeship program or certificate program and have that opportunity, they should have that opportunity. And so we ramped up that funding, that bill was vetoed by Sununu but we put it into, in large measure, into the budget. And so we need to make sure that those public private partnerships, sometimes with community college and businesses, certificate programming, sometimes there are six month certificates instead of the full, generally speaking, the full two years of community college. We need to make sure that those are available, accessible and inclusionary for everybody. And again, we specifically put persons with disabilities in that requirement. And so we need to follow up on that and make sure that that's working. Not just working, see how it could work better and to help people even more. So those are just a few ideas, Samuel, on that front.

**SH:** Do you think that the IDEA and New Hampshire special education rules are being followed in every school district? And if not, what will you do to make sure that these laws and rules are actually followed and enforced?

**DF:** Well, I think what we hear is that it's uneven application, no doubt about it. And we need to make sure that they are fully enforced, and we need to make sure that the state steps up to the plate to make sure to fund schools more appropriately with respect to that. Again, the federal government has never accepted the full responsibility and the full promise of doing that, but that doesn't mean the state of New Hampshire should be funding special education services at the rate that it does. So, I think the state needs to step up and continue to support, excuse me, to better support those services and hold schools accountable. Again, just like I talked about in the context of community college or higher ed, state spending should be linked to accountability and making sure that opportunity exists and that opportunity is promoted, not just access, but inclusionary practices and policies. And so same thing here.
SH: One in five Americans, including 19% of likely voters, experience a disability. What will you do to help more people with disabilities get jobs?

DF: Well, thank you for the question, Samuel. There's a wide array of things to do, no doubt about it. But one thing that we need to make sure, that we prioritize our workforce and prioritize advancement for everybody, including persons living and experiencing disabilities, is finally going forward with paid family medical leave insurance, to make sure that everybody has an equal opportunity to participate in our labor market and our economy. And in addition to that, any family member who needs to spend time with a child or a loved one, that they don't have to choose between work and family. That's key to making sure that we treat persons living with or experiencing disabilities with respect. And it's key to advancing workforce initiatives with respect to persons with disabilities. That paid family medical leave insurance has been vetoed twice by Sununu. I've been leading on it. It's important in this context, it's important in many contexts, especially now under COVID-19. So, we've got to get that done. It's not going to happen unless there's a change in the governor's office. Second, obviously a lot of the job training programs that we talked about, making sure that those are fully available and accessible and include persons with disability. To make sure that these certificate programs, the apprenticeship programs, actually not just are there, but actively reach out to the disability community and include people in the process and then adapt to make sure that they work for persons with disabilities. So those programming, there's a whole bunch of jobs that don't require even community college or four-year degree that we could fill right now. And we need to make sure that persons with disabilities, Granite Staters with disabilities have access. Transportation, obviously, is a big deal, too, and to the extent that the work requires physical placement in an office or otherwise. So, making sure that our transportation services and those public-private partnerships are really working is important. And then obviously, even though there may be some income coming in, we've got to take a hard look at the in-home supports and the income qualifications and that kind of thing, to make sure that they don't just dis-incentivize people from working who may end up losing in-home supports. And that's kind of the same thing with respect to paid family medical leave insurance. If you value work and you value family, you value opportunity for everybody and economic opportunity and employment opportunity for everybody, we need to make some changes on that front, too.

SH: What efforts are you making to reach out and employ people with disabilities in your campaign? And what efforts will you make to employ people with disabilities on your staff?
DF: On the campaign front, we're inclusionary. We've been reaching out to folks and honestly, I'm not aware of anyone on our campaign that is living with or experiencing a disability. And I don't, unless asked in compliance with law, we don't engage in those discussions unless asked. There have been some asked on different fronts and accommodations made. And I'll just leave it at that. In terms of future administration, I'll certainly work with groups, get folks included. We're going to work with the Office of Disability Commission on Disability in the governor's office. I think that's important to work with them and work through this process, but certainly reach out to folks and continue to have conversations and continue to talk with advocates. And that's what you gotta do. I think that's my approach. Always talk to people and listen and accept recommendations and go from there.

SH: Aside from seeking additional federal funding, what steps would you take to increase the availability of accessible housing for people with disabilities?

DF: Thank you, Samuel. We've made some strides on this. In a prior life as a legal aid lawyer, served as the Housing Justice Project director at New Hampshire Legal Assistance for about four years, including working to expand the available supply of accessible housing and doing a lot of reasonable accommodation, reasonable modification litigation, and work on behalf of persons with disabilities and those interests. So, there's a lot of work to do on this front. No doubt about it. We have a housing crisis in the state of New Hampshire. We had it prior to COVID-19, it's even worse during COVID-19. The vacancy rate in rental housing is less than 2%, nationwide it's about 5%. And in some communities it's 0%, which means that folks can't find rental housing to begin with let alone accessible rental housing. And to the extent that they can, the prices, no pun intended, are through the roof. And so it's a big issue, generally. It's a big issue, specifically, for persons with disabilities. And so what we did, a couple of things that we can build off of, one is we passed legislation requiring the availability of accessory dwelling units so caretakers and other folks that may need to live on the premises have an ability to do that. Prior to that piece of legislation, accessory dwelling units, AKA in-law apartments, that kind of thing, a lot of communities were banning them. And some communities were effectively banning them by the regulations that they put in place, unfortunately. So, working with the disability community and working with AARP and others we had bipartisan legislation that we got through, and I know that that's making some progress in the community. We need inclusionary zoning. We need to make sure that we have that promoted at the state level. There are some good laws on this at the state level, but they can be promoted better. Third, we funded the Workforce Affordable Housing Fund, capitalized it at an ongoing on an annual basis, taking the first five million from the real
estate transfer tax revenue to capitalize that for the first time in New Hampshire history. We did that in the budget. It's something that other states do. And we did for the first time in this budget we crafted, which means that Affordable Housing Fund, which leverages federal dollars and private dollars, Samuel, to the tune of anywhere from $5-10 to $1 that we put in at the state level, that promotes the additional supply that we need. Part of the prioritization will be, and is, persons with disabilities, housing for folks with disabilities. Now we need to protect that and build off of it. It was something that we did in this budget that the current governor disagreed with, and we need to protect it and build off of it. We also need to make sure that our enforcement mechanisms at the state level, including the New Hampshire Commission for Human Rights, actively and aggressively investigates and enforces our housing laws with respect to how folks are treated who are living with and experiencing disabilities. And certainly you have great organizations like New Hampshire Legal Assistance, where I worked, and other organizations, Disability Rights Center. But you also not just want them fully funded, but you want the Human Rights Commission fully funded, as well, to be able to do their job. Right now, they have a backlog of cases, including cases with respect to folks with disabilities. So those are just some of what we need to do, some of the tools and steps that we need to take to make sure that people can live full and inclusive lives in their communities, in their communities and housing in their community.

**SH:** If accessible voting equipment was purchased with federal funding, it cannot be used in local or municipal elections. What steps would you take so that accessible voting equipment is available in every New Hampshire election, including local elections?

**DF:** We gotta work with local election officials, and we also need to make sure that the HAVA money, the so-called Help America Vote Act money, which can and should be used for this purpose, but isn't being used by Secretary Gardner for this purpose. And efforts in the legislature to try to promote this had been stymieing and also not supported by Chris Sununu. We gotta make sure that the Help America Vote Act money actually helps all Granite Staters vote. And that's something I'm committed to doing. And obviously, there's some obstacles right now with respect to that but I'm confident that after this election, we can move forward on that.

**SH:** Those are all the questions I have for you. Thank you so much for taking time to do this interview.
DF: Well, thank you, Samuel, for your questions and thoughtful questions and all of your activism and advocacy and all that you do. I really appreciate it and take good care and keep up the fight. We'll talk to you soon. Take care, everybody.

SH: Thanks again.