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Disability Unscripted 2020: Samuel Habib Interviews Governor Chris Sununu, Republican candidate for Governor

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Governor Chris Sununu: Hey, Samuel, how are you?

Samuel Habib: Hi, Governor Sununu. Thank you for taking some time for this interview.

CS: Absolutely, anytime I get to get out of the state house, that's a win. That's a good thing.

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.

CS: You bet, you bet.

SH: I'd like to ask you about six issues that are important to people in the disability community, the budget, healthcare, special education, employment, housing and voting.

CS: Okay, great. If there is no additional funding from Congress, how would you address the budgetary cap and its impact on supports and services for people with disabilities? Well, it's a great question. We've been hoping that Congress and Washington would kinda get their act together and provide some of the stimulus support that they have said they would provide, but knowing that they said it was gonna happen in June and then July and now it's October and they still haven't done anything, I'm still hopeful something could get done, probably after the election. But if it doesn't, we're already well underway planning for how to address the budget gaps. Now, there's certain programs I've always said are very sacred, that we're not going to either cut back or find dollars out of. That would be substance use disorder programs, programs for the developmentally disabled, programs dealing with some of the mental health challenges and the community-based mental health programming that we're trying to support and programs around the division of children, youth, and families. So, programs that are providing a lot of our new prevention of child abuse issues and things of that nature. And those four, more than any others, are very sacred. So, whatever comes out of Washington, I don't see any massive wholesale slicing of the budget. Our economy is actually very strong right now, a lot stronger than we originally predicted. And the revenues to the state are actually quite strong. So, the \$500 million gap that I think a lot of us thought was going to come back in May and June was about a \$250 million gap a couple of months ago and may only be one or \$200 million now. So, if we can keep a strong economy moving forward, we'll have the dollars coming in to be able to sustain a lot of these programs that I've mentioned, but a lot of the other ones too. So, the area of health and human services that provides a lot of those critical developmentally disabled

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programming in our area agencies around the state. That's one area where I think I feel very confident we'll be able to support the needs. Always looking for a better way to do it, right? If there's a more innovative way or more efficiencies that we can find in the system, I think that would be great. But at the minimum, I think those programs in itself are gonna be very safe.

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

CS: Absolutely. So, I was very proud, for the first time in many, many, many years, we got the wait list, the developmental disability wait list down to zero. There was literally zero on the wait list for quite awhile. And then, COVID hit and everything just kinda took a different path. Some folks were coming in for services, some weren't, some area agencies were providing services, some didn't have the workforce 'cause people were very concerned about COVID coming forward. So, we worked very hard to provide the funding to get the DD wait list down to zero. On the adult side, one of the things that we always have to keep working for is on the housing side there. We have a lot of adults in the DD community that rely on adult foster care essentially later on in life. And we've been working with them to see what might be a better solution, a better pathway. I think there's a better way to do it and we've seen some models in other States and if this state could provide some of the resources, the money if you will, to build that infrastructure, housing infrastructure or create better incentives for folks for those long-term care services that are required for folks under the DD community as they enter adulthood or even much, much later in life, not just at 21, but at 61, right? So, you have to really have that continuum of care from early on to later on. But again, we really worked hard to get the DD wait list to zero. I think it isn't just about the dollars going in, it's how a lot of those programs are established and maintained and operated. I think we do a very good job with our area agencies, but anything we do to either find those efficiencies or just creating those programming opportunities, remember when the DD wait list gets larger, it isn't that you necessarily have more people coming on. Very often, you'd have a single individual maybe has two programs or three or four. Now, they're gonna enter into five different types of community programs, which is great, right? It's just more opportunity for that individual. So, it's not just about funding those, but finding how those programs kind of making sure they're truly enriching the lives of the individuals that are going after them and that they have the opportunity. The government's job here is to really make sure those doors of opportunity are wide open. I think we've done a great job of making sure the wait list is at zero so far. And obviously, I think making sure it's a priority for us going forward. As we've stated, it has been since I took office, it's going to be in the future. I think that's where we can just make sure we're keeping the messaging and the innovation really at the front level. Don't take it for granted. Just 'cause we got it down to zero once doesn't mean it's necessarily gonna stay zero forever. You have to keep working at it.

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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?

CS: So, great question. So, to your point, we have a guidance document that really establishes what happens in some of those most critical times of need. Now luckily here in New Hampshire, we've kept our COVID numbers very low. We've been very aggressive about testing, very aggressive about allowing folks to quarantine and do it safely, working from home remotely or going to school remotely, whatever it is, to allow the virus to kinda take its course, but take its course in a way so we're not spreading it to one another. Within those documents, what we're making sure is that those who need access to care the most are the first in line, right? It's really that simple, is making sure that those with, whether it's those with medical conditions, the elderly folks in the DD community that have coexisting other medical conditions that can cause or be exacerbated really by the COVID virus, making sure that those are front in line and front and center for the services that might be needed, whether it's a long-term care in a hospital, the ventilators, so making sure we have enough ventilators, things of that nature so that when, God forbid, if someone does get COVID, we need to be there for them. We don't want the healthcare system to become overwhelmed. Another big piece of that is making sure that the hospitals and the physicians have the funding, right? 'Cause during COVID, a lot of folks weren't even going in to see a doctor. Well, those doctors weren't being able to bring home the paycheck or make the revenue that they needed. And so, we don't wanna lose our doctors and nurses. So, two things there. The state has put in about \$100 million dollars to hospitals and long-term care services and physicians and dentists and anyone in the medical field. The federal government has put in about \$300 million here into the state of New Hampshire into our hospitals and our doctors. So, the losses that were originally seen that were really large within the medical community are now about 5%. They're about 5% underwater, if you will. The dollars coming here, their expenses coming here and the state is making up about 95% of the difference. So, there's still a little gap. I think about half the hospitals are in the black, half the hospitals are slightly in the red. So, we're always trying to be very specific about where we can provide extra funding. I've maintained, I was the first state in the country to create a healthcare relief fund, very proud of that, to make sure doctors weren't closing their doors. And that has maintained. That has been the case, no one has shut their doors yet. And by being very targeted about where some of those federal... Where that money can come from, whether it's the federal aid or our own CARES Act aid, we're making sure that no one is shutting their doors to folks. And the good news is we're nowhere near that critical care formula, if you will, where again, they start kinda prioritizing. But those who need the care the most are going to get it. But thank goodness, we've managed COVID very, very well here, better than most states, frankly. And we have so much capacity in our system and we've made sure no one has shut their doors. So, we're in a very healthy position, if you will, in terms of the status of access to the healthcare if and when the COVID numbers do rise and they will

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rise, the COVID numbers are gonna go up unfortunately, we know that. It's just the nature of the virus, but we can manage, we have all these resources available and we have the hospitals and doctors available, ready to go.

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?

CS: Awesome question. So, long before I was Governor, I was an environmental engineer and my wife, Valerie, was a special ed teacher and she specialized, she had a couple of different types of classrooms. One was what they call the sub-separate classroom, where kids with some very severe disabilities were there in school and she would work with them one on one and in small groups to make sure that they were really being built into the regular classroom curriculum. Because you can use technology, you can use all these resources now that maybe you might not have had 20, 30, 40 years ago, but you can actually have those resources available to make sure they're there. All of that sounds great, but it doesn't happen unless there's funding. And I'm very proud that in our last budget, we, for the first time in many, many years, was way before I was Governor, we fully funded special education here in New Hampshire. In fact, we got to the point where we had extra money in special education and we were asking schools to come back and reapply for more money because we had it. We didn't wanna send it back to the federal government. We got a special grant for it because we were getting a lot of really great outcomes in special education. So, a big part of it is the funding on special ed. A big part of it is making sure that you have also the workforce. So, you want the right teachers. You want the teachers with the expertise that the students are going to need to get re-instilled back into that community. The Monarch school, when COVID came and hit, if you know the Monarch School, it's a great school over in Rochester. A lot of folks know who might be watching know the Monarch School. They went through some really tough times, some really tough financial times. And so, Monica, who runs the school, got on the phone with me and we worked through it and she worked with my staff and the folks and we were able to provide very unique CARES Act support, financial support to that organization and to other schools all across the state. I think at the end of the day, I think we only have about 12 schools that do that sort of thing in different levels. And they all were able to apply for funds, receive funds and be financially viable. So, they are there for the community, for those kids and for those school districts. So, that was very, very exciting. We just completed that about three weeks ago. Very, very exciting opportunity that we've been able to create for those kids. So, that combined with the special ed funding, the fully funded special ed education funding, I think I wanna say it's the first time that's happened in about 10 or 12 years. We've gotten all the funds there, but also having the teachers, right? Making sure we have the right classes and the right certifications for those teachers that need those special skill sets, it's a very special skill set, that have those special skill sets and know how that integration needs to wrap in. And so, whether it's in a kind of a separate school, like the Monarch school or a traditional special ed classroom or the sub-separate classrooms where folks

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are really allowing kids to have that opportunity. The last thing I wanna throw in here is I was a big supporter of trying to get funding to the School of Educational Excellence over at UNH. So, this is a school that kinda teaches all the new innovative ways of teaching to teachers, right? And working with special ed students, kids with developmental disabilities is a big part of that school's program. It's a teaching school, if you will. So, we've gotten, through a federal grant of \$26 million, unprecedented amount of money, it was awesome. We brought those funds in working with UNH, the University of New Hampshire Department of Education. Christina Lachance, a good friend of mine, formerly of the Charitable Foundation, now runs that program. And that \$26 million is gonna focus primarily on early childhood education and early childhood opportunities for all students, especially though including kids with developmental disabilities, so that they are walking that same path as everybody else, right? They're really being integrated into that. So, we haven't had that type of financial opportunity ever to be honest and to be able to invest those dollars into that organization, that facility that branches out to all the different cities and towns across the state. Awesome opportunity. It's just getting underway, I wanna say about three months ago, right in the middle of COVID, it was getting underway. And so, that's a huge opportunity as well. So, I'm sorry for the long answers. There's just a lot there that we're doing and I think a lot of opportunity to get these things moving today so we can capitalize on them for tomorrow.

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?

GS: So, in terms of the workforce, great question, we need a lot of workforce here in New Hampshire, right? So, it's nice that we have a lot of families moving into the state, it's great. We have a lot of businesses that are moving into the state. Our unemployment rate is dropping at twice the national rate, which really means we have a lot of people coming back to work, but there's a lot of need and a lot of demand. And so, getting every able-bodied worker who wants to work and every disabled body worker who wants to work an opportunity is just, it's a win-win for everybody, right? And so, if you remember our voc ed programs, they were like a Project Impact and a few others, they were under risk of going completely bankrupt a couple of years ago. But I guess it was about two years ago now, maybe 18 months ago. And those specialized programs that provide the skills, the real basic workforce skills for a lot of these kids to reenter the workforce and these younger adults to enter the workforce that have typical developmental disabilities, they had the opportunity that we have. And the fear was that when they were going bankrupt, because the fund had not been managed very well at the Department of Education, frankly. We found out, we got a new Commissioner of Education, he discovered the problem. And we went right to the federal government and we asked for help. And we said, "Look, we need a bridge here between the two budget cycles." We needed a bridge, they provided about one and a half million dollars to make sure those programs didn't disappear. We made it a priority. And then, we were able to fully fund them as we entered the new budget cycle. So, they were really on the precipice of falling apart and it would have been tragic because I've been to those

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programs. I've seen the opportunities it provides those kids and I've hired those kids myself. In my previous job, when I ran Waterville Valley Resort, we hired a lot of those kids out of Project Impact and those types of programs. It was just really, really successful for us. And the key, if I may, is that it can't just be around Manchester and Concord, it has to be across the whole state, right? Kids, whether you're in Berlin, you should have the same opportunity whether you're a Manchester or Portsmouth or if you're in Keene or you're in Claremont. No matter what town you are in, you should have the same opportunity and access to get those workforce skills with those programs and enter the workforce and we have so many jobs across the state. People are hiring just like crazy right now, it's wonderful, but we have to maximize that opportunity for the workforce. And I think we've done a really good job with it by providing the millions of dollars that had been basically overspent early on. We provided that bridge, we got funded in the budget and we're moving forward. And so, that's just great. I think that the more we can spread those programs, I think that's the opportunity that we have to really harp on.

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

CS: So, aside from getting more federal funding, how do we basically provide more housing for those with disabilities? Well, there's a couple of ways to do it. So, we have a variety of different funds here within the state. Some of those funds often go to operational costs, right? The programmatic costs, the everyday cost of keeping them running. What we have trouble investing in is actually the housing, right? Either buying the house or buying the apartment building or building the facility or whatever it might be or providing rental supports, whatever it might be. When our government does well and by that, I mean, when the economy is doing well and money is coming in and as we discussed earlier, when the budgetary problem isn't like this, but it's only like this and maybe we're even in the black, for the first two budget cycles, we've done very, very well. We don't take the money at the government level and just keep it to ourselves. Well, at least I don't. I mean, that's not my philosophy. We send that money back to cities and towns for infrastructure and that could come in a variety of different ways. So, when we send it back to cities and towns, it could come for roads and bridges, it could come to build schools, it could come for more rural-based and community-based developmental disability housing, right? So, that is the opportunity that we have when we do well as a state, when we focus on businesses and we allow those businesses to grow and we get out of their way with regulation, they wanna come here, they grow, the economy does well. The state brings in more revenue and then we don't just spend it on ourselves, we then go out and quote, share it. And that's usually one-time money 'cause you can't count that it will always be there. Not every year is gonna be a great year. And so, when we have that one-time money, the best way to spend that is on one-time investments like buying a house or an apartment building or whatever it might be in communities. And I go back to that idea, it can't just be in Nashua and Manchester and Concord all the time. It's gotta be a more community-based access to that type of housing. If you're up in Northern Grafton County and you have to find some additional housing, the opportunity that you

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have shouldn't just be down to Manchester where you don't have friends or family or access to the services that you're used to, right? You wanna stay in your group, you wanna stay with those in your support group and your support systems. And so, making sure that those communities have that access to that one-time money is very, very important. We've done very well with it. I think in terms of sharing our revenue back to cities and towns, we've put out over \$150 million, more than any administration in the history of this state, in the history of the state. We've sent more money back to cities and towns for this type of infrastructure development. And I think if we keep doing that, we focus on having a strong economy, strong revenues, and you send all the extra back to the locals. That's really how you can ensure that what you're doing is building a future, not just in a centralized service, but that more of a community-based services where you can stay in your community and have those supports.

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?

CS: Sure, great question. So, I signed, I think it was HB... There's a lot of House Bills, House Bill 531 if I remember correctly, I'm doing this off the top of my head. We signed into law that allowed an expanded voting opportunities for folks with disabilities and it could be a hearing disability, a visual disability, could be a physical disability, could be a variety of different disabilities, but making sure that the technology, the software was there, the machinery and the equipment was there to do that. Now, the point you bring up is a very good one, is that, when we make those investments with the federal dollars, they're often prohibited to be used in the municipal elections. So, we have a couple of ways around that. One is we still have some funds here in the state. It's not that we don't have any money in the state. So, there are funds in the state, what we call HAVA Funds in the Secretary of State's office, which traditionally were not used for this type of equipment, but we're making a petition to the federal government to get the waiver. And that basically means so that we can have an exception to the rule. The money's just kinda sitting there untouched. There's millions of dollars, frankly. So, there's dollars there and we're asking, first, to be able to use those dollars, second, we can make a stipulations out of the budget. You can go do it through a budgetary process. And especially this past election with COVID, I said this past election, that's the primary and then the upcoming general election, we're making a lot of these types of investments. Whether it's folks have better access to absentee ballots, the absentee process is very simple, right? So, folks with a disability can have either a family member or healthcare worker or whatever it is, kinda help them fill out that process and make the delivery for them and all of that. So, we're making a lot of those stipulations available to folks just so they have flexibility, right? Flexibility and the opportunity. We're not fundamentally changing our system, we're just allowing some of the logistic barriers that sometimes prevent folks with disabilities from voting to actually break down those barriers and have that opportunity. So, we can do it from a funding standpoint, we can do it directly from the federal government if they would allow us and right now, it doesn't look like it will. We can use

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what we call these HAVA funds, which are asking for a stipulation. We can do it out of our general budget. And then, we have to make sure that we're making those types of investments in the technology, the software, the hardware, whatever it is, for everybody, right? So, regardless of what your disability might be.

SH: Those are all the questions I have for you. Thank you so much for taking time to do this interview.

CS: Well, thank you and Samuel, always great to chat with you. You know where I am, the big gray building in Concord, right in the middle Concord, gold dome, the State House. If you need something, just ask. We try to stay very accessible and very connected in... What we're dealing with in this state can hit you in a variety of different areas. So, I'm a big believer that connection to some of the decision makers and the leadership is very important. So, whatever you might need in the future, you just let us know. Thank you guys so much for the opportunity.

SH: Thanks.

CS: Bye, guys.