

Disability Inclusion & Philanthropy: A message to funders

For too long, philanthropy has relegated disability-related issues to a niche grant-making area or, worse, disregarded people with disabilities entirely. In this series of video interviews, disability justice advocates offer guidance on how grant makers can promote disability inclusion in their work.

Transcript begins.

[affecting piano music]

[A series of individuals appear in silhouette against a window in a sparsely lit studio.]

KERI GRAY: Disability is a normal, positive part of human diversity.

MADDY RUVOLO: Disability is diverse, and people with disabilities have other important identities.

JANE AKINYI: Disabled people come from different cultures.

RUVOLO: These parts of our lives also affect what we are able to do and how people treat us.

GRAY: Nothing about us without us.

REBECCA COKLEY: We want to have a say in everything that affects us.

SARA MINKARA: We are people with disabilities building power and inclusive social justice movements.

DESSA COSMA: Funders should serve people with diverse disabilities.

[The interviewees, now in an airy industrial studio, expand on their messages.]

MINKARA: My name is Sara Minkara. I'm blind, I'm a Muslim, and I'm a woman. I have a nonprofit organization—ETI, Empowerment Through Integration—that focuses on changing the narrative surrounding disability.

There's a huge inequality between the reality of persons with disabilities and what support is going towards that. Only two percent of international funding is going to persons with disabilities.

COSMA: My name is Dessa Cosma. I am a white, disabled woman. I'm a little person who often uses a wheelchair.

I have started a disability organization called Detroit Disability Power, and we are organizing people with disabilities and collaborating with other social justice movements around our issues that intersect with their issues.

People with disabilities are some of the most impoverished people in the United States. We typically live below the poverty line, and because of lack of access to education and jobs, we will remain there unless we do something about it. And so to work on anti-poverty or economic justice without a focus, at least in some way, on disability means that you're leaving out the most marginalized people in that marginalized category.

RUVOLO: My name is Maddy Ruvolo. I am a young, white woman with brown curly hair, wearing a bright-green shirt. I'm a transportation planner.

About five years ago, I discovered that there was a disability community and got really involved in the community. The key issues to focus on are things like health care, employment, education, deinstitutionalization, where people are not getting their very basic needs met.

RABIA BELT: My name is Rabia Belt. I'm a black woman with short curly hair, wearing a green shirt. I'm an assistant professor of law at Stanford Law School. I'm also a professor of history, by courtesy, at Stanford. And I'm a council member of the National Council on Disability.

Forty to 60 percent of people in prisons or jails are people with disabilities. And it's not just people with disabilities going into the prison system but also that prison itself exacerbates and causes disabilities, as well, both in terms of disabilities such as tuberculosis, HIV ... but then also the trauma of incarceration itself.

ALICE WONG: My name is Alice Wong. I'm an Asian American woman in a wheelchair, wearing bright-red lipstick. And I'm wearing a mask attached to a tube that's used to help me breathe. I'm the founder and director of the Disability Visibility Project.

Every community needs to have the right to have a part in civil society, to vote, to be part of our city councils. There are still a lot of barriers people with disabilities face in political participation. For example, in 2012, over 30 percent of people with disabilities reported difficulty voting, compared to 8 percent of nondisabled people.

RYAN EASTERLY: My name is Ryan Easterly. I am a black man with a teal-and-white striped shirt, wearing glasses. I currently serve as executive director of the WITH Foundation. It's a private foundation that promotes comprehensive and accessible health care for adults with developmental disabilities.

The Council on Foundations estimates that only one percent of those working in philanthropy identify as individuals with disabilities. Part of grant making and part of philanthropy is strengthened when you have people with lived experience in various aspects, including disability, involved in the process, actually on staff.

GRAY: My name is Keri Gray. I am a young-adult black woman, sitting in a chair. On my right leg is a prosthetic limb, and I am wearing a red romper with a black head wrap. My current job is at the US Business Leadership Network.

What's different about the disability narrative is that it's this added layer of accommodations. So, insuring that when you're hiring people with disabilities that your buildings are accessible, that people with wheelchairs are actually able to get into the building, that if you want to hire folks who are deaf and hard of hearing that there's some type of communication channel that allows for them to be implemented throughout the organization.

COKLEY: My name is Rebecca Cokley. I am wearing a Prince-purple dress because I'm a huge Prince fan. I am a second-generation little person. I am the senior fellow for disability policy at the Center for American Progress in Washington DC.

There is not a civil rights issue today impacting marginalized communities that does not have a disproportionate impact on people with disabilities.

Come, sit with us, talk to us. We are already there, but the tables that you have created are fundamentally inaccessible to us. So we're asking you, join us and apply the disability lens across your funding strategy.

[Again in silhouette, the interviewees deliver final thoughts.]

RUVOLO: We ask for disability access because when we evolve our institutions to be fully inclusive, we can build a world where all are free.

MINKARA, GRAY, AND COSMA [speaking together]: True inclusion is revolutionary.

VOICE-OVER: Where are you in your Journey to Inclusion? For more information, go to DisabilityPhilanthropy.org, and promote using the hashtag DisabilityInclusion. Brought to you by the Presidents' Council on Disability Inclusion in Philanthropy.

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