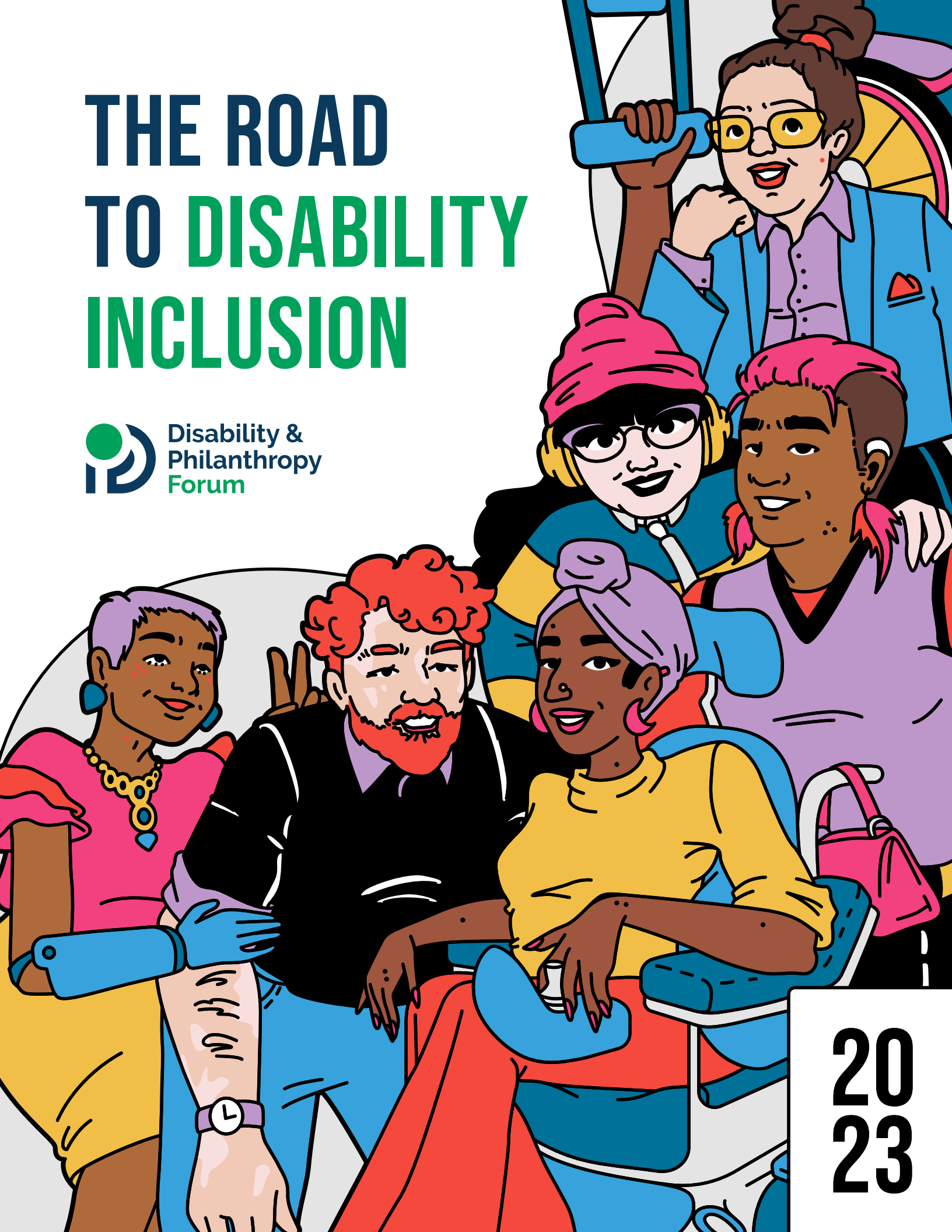
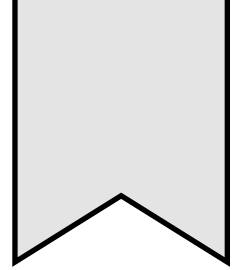


# THE ROAD TO DISABILITY INCLUSION

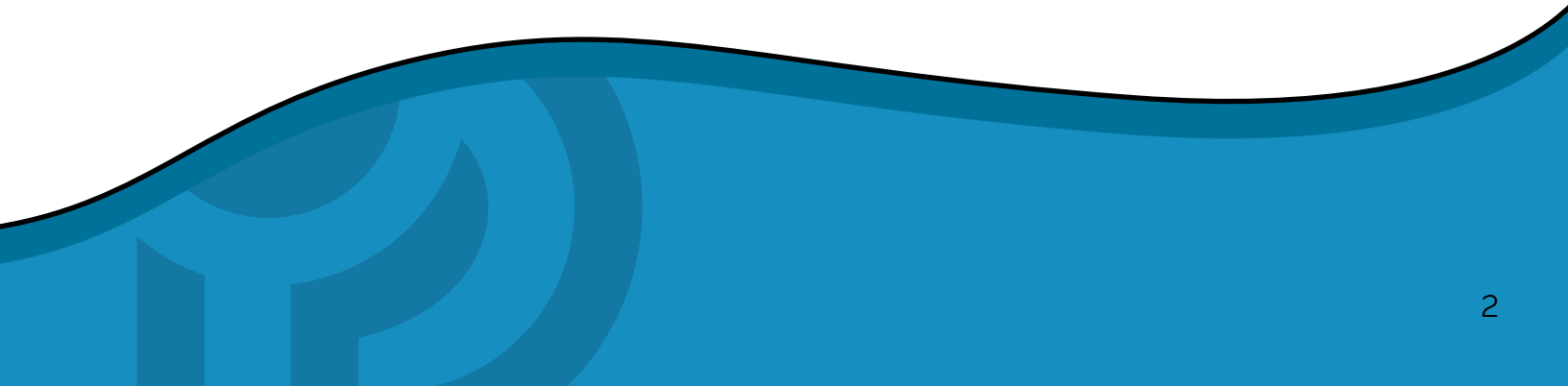


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# 2023 ANNUAL REPORT: A MESSAGE FROM THE PRESIDENTS' COUNCIL CO-CHAIRS

An illustration in a light blue color showing four diverse individuals (two men and two women) sitting around a table, engaged in a discussion. The illustration is positioned behind the main title text.

Each journey tells a story. In **The Road to Disability Inclusion**, we highlight three stories. “How Do We Create an Accessible, Tech-Forward World?” reflects the impact of philanthropic organizations providing funding for innovative accessible technology that serves to bridge gaps in a world not designed with disabled people in mind. “The Benefits of Disability Disclosure in Philanthropic Workplaces” is a call to action for philanthropy to recognize the transformational power of creating safe spaces for disabled employees to self-disclose. “Fostering a Culture of Inclusion: A Road Paved with Progress, Not Perfection” offers an honest look at what it takes to shift toward and sustain a disability-inclusive culture within and surrounding a philanthropic organization. Collectively, each story is reflective of the journey we have been on and where the disability community is moving forward.

But let's start with our own journey, which began in 2019. A group of foundation leaders came together and made a commitment to elevating disability inclusion within philanthropy, leading to the formation of the Disability & Philanthropy Forum. Under the leadership of executive director Emily Harris and a planning committee, this year we finalized our strategic plan. Our mission is threefold: mobilize philanthropy to dismantle ableism by increasing funding for disability inclusion, rights, and justice; amplify the leadership of disabled people in the philanthropic sector; and educate philanthropy to build a culture of inclusion. The three featured articles illustrate the Forum's strategic goals and reflect the course we are traveling to a disability-inclusive philanthropic sector.

In the past year, the Forum continued to navigate a path toward inclusion in the philanthropic space. In 2023, the Forum team grew from a staff of three to seven members, all of whom have lived experience as individuals with disabilities. In December, we launched our advisory committee to bring invaluable perspectives from the philanthropic and disability communities into our work. For more 2023 highlights, see [page 5](#). We look forward to what's to come in 2024 as we continue on to our 5th anniversary. We will be formally launching our learning services, which includes fee-based training, member workshops, and self-paced learning. We are also working to provide new organizational membership opportunities and benefits to support our growing community.

We could not close this message without thanking Darren Walker, President of the Ford Foundation and former co-chair of the [Presidents' Council](#). Darren began the disability inclusion journey in 2016 — [openly addressing](#) the vital need for philanthropy to recognize disability rights and justice as essential tenets of achieving a more equitable, inclusive future for all. In keeping with his intention for the Council to be led by presidents with lived experience of disability, Ryan succeeded Darren. We are grateful to Darren for his unwavering commitment as we collaborate with our colleagues in the philanthropic sector on a journey that embraces disability inclusion, rights, and justice.

We want to thank Emily Harris for her guidance and leadership of the Forum. We wish her a wonderful adventure following her retirement on July 1, 2024.

We also wish to express our deep appreciation for the Forum's funders, members, and [Disability Inclusion Pledge](#) signatories for their continued support. Thank you for moving us ahead on the road to disability inclusion in 2023. We look forward to the next chapter in our collective journey.

**Richard Besser**

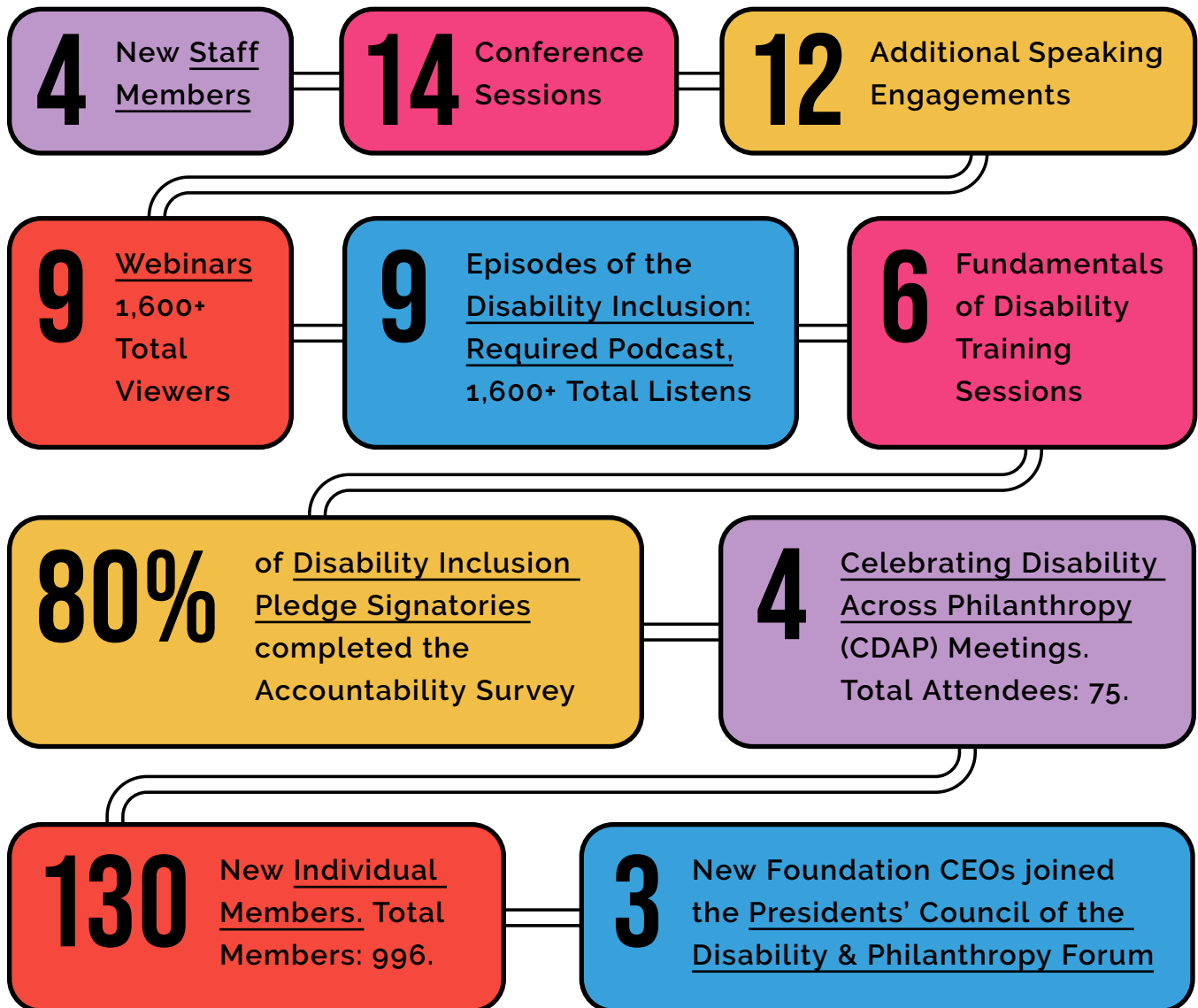
President & CEO  
Robert Wood Johnson Foundation

**Ryan Easterly**

Executive Director  
WITH Foundation

# 2023 Highlights

In 2023, the Forum team grew from a staff of three to seven members, all of whom are disabled. We also launched our advisory committee to bring invaluable perspectives from the philanthropic and disability communities into our work. The Forum published the [first-ever report on disability grantmaking](#), which found that only 1 penny for every 10 foundation dollars goes to disability rights and social justice. While this is an eye-opening number for the field, the report is a major accomplishment. Below are a few highlights from 2023:





## Story 1

# How Do We Create an Accessible, Tech-Forward World?

WRITTEN BY: SARAH KATZ

**Cover Illustration:** Interconnected map with circuits and lines. The main hub is a light bulb. Assistive tech, prosthetics, devices with large scale mouse, keyboard, check boxes, and video captions, headset, power button, wheelchair joystick, hearing aid, and braille symbol for D to the left. As well as two gears, one with the world in the center. A clock, road, code, message bubbles, emails, home, like button, and signature field to the right.

**Tim Jin** speaks with his toes. He has cerebral palsy and uses his feet to control his augmentative and alternative communication devices (AAC). He believes that everyone should have the opportunity to communicate through technology. "I see my devices as expression to my body and my personality," Jin explained to me over Zoom.

As the board director of Ability Central, an organization that awards grants to nonprofits serving disabled Californians' communication needs, Jin knows firsthand the crucial impact that philanthropic efforts can make in creating a more just and accessible world, and how many of these efforts focus on exciting and innovative technological solutions.

But realizing the accessible, tech-forward future that many of us strive to build is not without its challenges. To help achieve this, philanthropists must ask the right questions and consider the right contexts. Affordability, Jin told me, is one important and often overlooked consideration.

Despite all the advancements made, people with disabilities still struggle to access technologies like the ones he uses to communicate.



**Back in the 90s or early 2000s, everyone was talking about the digital divide and how we wanted to get the internet to everyone. I strongly believe there has always been a communication divide within the disabled community. One that still exists. — TIM JIN**

The digital divide Jin refers to has persisted since the internet was invented 40 years ago. People with disabilities use the internet at significantly lower rates than people without disabilities, often citing cost as a barrier. According to a [2022 report by the U.S. Department of Labor](#), in November 2019, 83.4% of nondisabled Americans over the age of 15 used the internet, while only 63.8% of disabled Americans did. And, according to the [National Disability Institute](#), 27% of Americans with disabilities live in poverty, compared with 12% of nondisabled Americans. [People with intersecting marginalized identities fare worse](#): 51% of Black people with disabilities with a high school education are in poverty, compared to 39% of white people with the same level of education.

Dr. Joshua Miele, a blind scientist, designer, and disability activist who received a 2021 MacArthur Genius Grant, hopes to create a foundation whose mission would be to support disability inclusion and accessibility in the open-source world, making technologies that are normally very expensive, such as hearing aids, free and available for anyone to build. An open-source notetaker is one of the projects he has in mind. This small, specialized piece of technology with a Braille keyboard typically goes for thousands of dollars. “Through this potential foundation, the cost for these could be under a hundred dollars,” he said.

Affordability is not the only barrier to consider. Philanthropists should also be mindful of ableism, unconscious bias, and other lurking dangers when considering whether a particular technology would benefit disabled people. For example, does the invention come from a technoableist mindset? Dr. Ashley Shew, an associate professor of science, technology, and society at Virginia Tech, defines technoableism in her book, *Against Technoableism: Rethinking Who Needs Improvement* (W.W. Norton & Company, September 2023), as “a belief in the power of technology that considers the elimination of disability a good thing, something we should strive for.” As a hard-of-hearing chemobrainied amputee with Crohn’s disease and tinnitus, she understands firsthand the technological salvation promised to people with disabilities, whether through cochlear implants or bionic limbs.

“When I became an amputee, people kept reassuring me (actually, reassuring themselves) that with advanced and wonderful prosthetic technologies, I would be back even better than ever: superhuman, enhanced, a ten-million-dollar bionic woman,” she wrote.



**Other types of disabled people aren't always subject to this kind of narrative. They are supposed to wait in hope for the day when technology advances enough to help their 'broken' bodies or minds, which are depicted as less worthy of love, care, pride, and positivity. In contrast, the amputee 'problem'—the problem of being an amputee, particularly a leg amputee—is often depicted as 'solved'.**

**— DR. ASHLEY SHEW**



In other words, by trying to cure disabled people through technology—rather than creating technology that undoes societal barriers such as curb cuts for wheelchair users and closed captioning for deaf and hard-of-hearing individuals—inventors are perpetuating this particular strain of ableism.

Another important consideration for philanthropy is whether the technology-related efforts they're funding are ethical. Dr. Shew is concerned, for example, about the promotion of artificial intelligence (AI) as a potential therapy tool for autistic individuals. "A classic description for algorithms is garbage goes in, garbage comes out," she said, "and we know that the information about autism that exists in the world includes things like the myth of the 'refrigerator mother,' which states that autistic people are autistic because their mothers were too cold to them when they were growing up. That's since been debunked. The worry now is that instead of helping people out psychologically, you're actually feeding them the worst stereotypes about their type of disability."

Here are key questions to consider when assessing whether technology will serve to benefit or harm the disability community: Is the inventor disabled and were a diverse subset of people with disabilities consulted? Dr. Miele said his lived experience has inspired many of the inventions he has developed, which include Tactile-Braille maps of every station in the Bay Area Rapid Transit system, computer-assisted maps, and YouDescribe, a descriptive video exchange that enables anyone to narrate any video or movie, among others. For each invention, "I understood in a particular way not only what the real-life requirements were for it, what need it was solving, what the context of the solution would be, and how to leverage inexpensive, readily available materials and resources to achieve it," he said. "But also, I was reasonably well-connected with a blind community with whom to collaborate, to get feedback, to get insights above and beyond my own."

Once affordable and ethical technology projects have been identified, there's still the problem of ensuring large-scale adoption.

Jin believes that if more philanthropists funded technology projects that aren't necessarily disability-specific but are otherwise accessible, they would benefit everyone, disabled and nondisabled individuals, alike.



The perfect example is already in our homes with smart thermostats. I'm sure when they were developing this technology, they didn't have the customers in mind who have disabilities. But over time, as more and more homes installed these units, the customer base grew to reach the disabled community. — **TIM JIN**

He added, “assistive technologies should not be their own separate category. In order for any of these technologies to work, they should be implemented within the general public for everyone to use, whether or not they have a disability.”

On the other hand, even technologies that were initially thought of as disability-specific—or at least were inspired by disabled people—have been widely adopted. Text messaging is an example. The late Finnish engineer Matti Makonen originally created texting for deaf and hard-of-hearing individuals-- then it became mainstream. And the touchscreen on your phone was created by engineer Dr. Wayne C. Westerman to ease his symptoms of repetitive stress syndrome. This phenomenon is called the “curb-cut effect,” a concept coined by civil rights advocate and attorney Angela Glover Blackwell and states that by eliminating barriers for people with disabilities through technology, everyone benefits.

It's important to note that non-disability-specific technologies also have been invented by or inspired by disabled people, though they are rarely recognized. You can thank deaf and hard-of-hearing people for the phone. Its inventor, Alexander Graham Bell, studied sound because his mother, Eliza Bell, and wife, Mabel Gardiner Hubbard, were deaf. You can also thank disabled people for the internet and email. Vinton Cerf, who is hard of hearing, was a designer of the internet's architecture in the early 1970s and, about a decade later, helped invent the first commercial email system.

Individual technology solutions are ultimately only one piece of the equity equation, Dr. Shew explained. “I think we so [heavily] prize individual technological solutions that we don't often see infrastructure problems as

important. I think about how long it takes to get an elevator repair. An elevator serves everybody. An elevator outage should be treated as the emergency it is. I'd love to see more systemic work on infrastructure as disability access."

Dr. Shew added that in some cases, it's important for funders to consider why access to basic technologies should be prioritized over innovative technologies. "When it comes to disability-related technologies, a lot of times, they really want to play up the innovative nature of whatever they're doing. What I hear is it's going to be hard to maintain it," she said. "A lot of the technologies that are long-lasting are rarely given the praise they deserve."

Nikki Brown-Booker, program officer for the Disability Inclusion Fund at Borealis Philanthropy, and a wheelchair user due to Juvenile Rheumatoid Arthritis, believes strongly that philanthropy can shape an accessible future by expanding its focus on increased funding of technology. "I'm on the side of philanthropy that's more progressive, and really talking about how to support multiply marginalized people to get the things that they need...I think there's a lot happening in that space," she said. "There's a whole sector of philanthropy that's really trying to think about how we transform society to make it better."

The future, after all, is not less disabled—it's more disabled, Dr. Shew says in her book. We have already seen many mass disabling events, including COVID-19, and environmental disasters, pollution, and climate change are also increasing rates of disability. We simply cannot afford *not* to fund accessible technology if we are to truly shift toward a world that's more welcoming and inclusive of us all.



## Story 2

# The Benefits of Disability Disclosure in Philanthropic Workplaces

WRITTEN BY: **JOHN LOEPPKY**

**Cover Illustration:** A group of disabled people on a platform, raised up by rainbow columns, above clouds. A blind person, someone in a wheelchair with a service dog, an amputated person in a suit, and a little person in business attire. Colorful background buildings with different abstract shapes.

**“I feel afraid** to talk about it in any kind of professional setting, even though I now regularly do,” says Jennifer Cunningham, senior donor services associate at Proteus Fund, about identifying as disabled. In the philanthropic sector, she says she feels like she's finally found a place to grow into her identity.

“[It's] a lot of administrative housekeeping that I really enjoy because that's where my neurodiversity shines. And it's like I finally found my place in the revolution—filing payments properly.”

For Charlotte Haase, communication and data manager at the Maryland Philanthropy Network, her job has empowered her to be proudly open about her disability.



**I feel like I've stepped into my identity through this position. My employment allowed me to see health care professionals who I had been financially priced out of, and that helped me go from a very invisible disability, focusing deeply on what people were saying, to having a hearing aid attached to my head. — CHARLOTTE HAASE**

Haase and Cunningham are part of a broader community of disabled people working within the philanthropic sector. In 2022, [CHANGE Philanthropy's Diversity Among Philanthropic Professionals Report](#), which included questions on disability identity with support from the Disability & Philanthropy Forum, found that 23.1% of respondents identified with disability—nearly double the respondents of the previous report released in 2020. But, if you're looking to break out the celebratory balloons over this statistic, consider this: of those respondents, only 7.7% feel comfortable being open about their disabilities at work.

**Why is that?** Haase says a major issue is that ableism and a lack of understanding about disability is still pervasive in every sector, including philanthropy. “I think, as a global society, we're afraid of disability. It makes us acknowledge our own mortality in a lot of ways, and people do not like that. If you are not disabled, and you do not have to regularly interact with your own limitations, it can be really startling to acknowledge that one in four U.S. adults has a disability.”

This kind of ableism is all too often compounded by other forms of discrimination. For disabled people of color, for instance, there can be a hesitancy to identify as disabled in the workplace that stems from concerns about experiencing additional layers of prejudice. The Disability & Philanthropy Forum's senior program and communications director, Gail Fuller, reflects:



As a Black woman in the workplace, I was already facing challenges and hurdles, so the thought of disclosing my disability earlier in life made me fearful. When I finally did acknowledge my disability, the response I received caused me to shut down again. I was perceived as 'less than.'  
— GAIL FULLER

To change this, to shift toward a culture that supports disability disclosure, Fuller urges employers “to truly commit to creating inclusive environments where employees can bring their whole selves to work.” It’s a sentiment shared by Amy Dinofrio, vice president and chief human resources officer of the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation (RWJF). While there are [boundaries to encouraging self-disclosure](#), Dinofrio believes it’s essential to learn how to ask disabled employees what support they need to thrive in the workplace.

“I think sometimes people are afraid to ask. We need training on how to approach that and who should begin that conversation.” But when asked what she’d tell her younger self about the journey of being open in the workplace, Dinofrio reflects: “It will get better and people will start to ask more questions; they’ll try to understand versus being nosy.”

Notably, the CHANGE Philanthropy report found that those in the sector for five or fewer years were significantly more likely to identify as disabled. Prior to beginning work with Proteus in 2020, Cunningham had a truly positive experience working at Access Living, an Independent Living Center. “I moved to Chicago in 2010, started climbing the nonprofit ladder, and worked at some really high-pressure institutions, large and small. And I’m so proud of the work I did there, but so sad that I had to mask my disability for years. That pressure created this cycle where I was pushing, pushing, pushing myself, not honoring my limits, and working myself into such a state of anxiety that I couldn’t function anymore.”

The top disabilities that people identified with in CHANGE Philanthropy's report were chronic illness and mental health-related conditions. As Dinofrio reminds us, it's essential for employers to be cognizant of non-apparent disabilities, especially because people may not be ready to disclose.



**I think our culture in the United States is very aware of things they can see. But things they cannot see, they don't necessarily believe. It's kind of like the whole thing with Santa Claus, right? If you don't see him, you don't believe in him. — AMY DINOFRIO**

And it is what might seem like little things to some that make the biggest difference in giving people space to identify as disabled. For Cunningham, for instance, it was permission to log out and recalibrate occasionally, and a working environment where she knew—even if the COVID-19 pandemic hadn't come calling— she could ask to work from home as an accommodation.

Dinofrio, who is a little person, benefitted from a janitor at RWJF who noticed her apparent disability and suggested that a shelf around her desk could make things more accessible. But she actively chooses to tell her team that she's dyslexic in order to make sure everyone's on the same page about her accessibility needs.

This all raises the question: How can the philanthropic sector become more accessible and inclusive so everyone will feel more comfortable self-identifying? One key practice is including disability in any efforts connected to diversity, equity, inclusion, and accessibility (DEIA) work. Fuller thinks back to the diversity efforts she encountered in her earlier years in the workplace. "I found them to be perfunctory," she says. "It felt like checking off a box." Now, these efforts must be more robust, focusing meaningfully on all levels of an organization.

For instance, a survey that Maryland Philanthropy Network sends to their board didn't previously include a question about disability status. Haase rectified this. "I just added that question, using language from the Disability & Philanthropy

Forum, and then I said, 'Hey, here's the drafted survey, let me know if you have any questions.' And nobody asked about the question, but everybody filled it out...I was kind of nervous about slipping the question in there, but I'm really glad I did. Because now when we update the survey, we just continue to ask that question."

CHANGE Philanthropy's report uncovered that of the roles surveyed, foundation board members were among the least likely to disclose their disability status, second only to independent contractors. This may reflect one of the main challenges for disabled leaders, not just in the philanthropic sector but in the workplace in general: a pressure to feel as if you have to be the hyper-visible advocate all the time. But Cunningham reminds us that even the slightest indicators from organizational leaders that accessibility and disability are things they regularly consider or identify can be transformative.

"It's okay to not know everything," she says. "Your comfort level varies on a case-by-case basis. But if there are people at the tippy-top of the leadership hierarchy who feel comfortable disclosing, then they should."

Overall, the current data points to positive developments—more people willing to identify as disabled chief among them—but this momentum has to be sustained in order for it to make a difference across the sector. As Dinofrio urges, "advocating for others, or advocating for ourselves, we have to keep doing that. We can't take our foot off the gas."

"It's exciting and it's also crunch time," Cunningham says, "Because we have to make sure this isn't a flash in the pan, we have to make sure this isn't just a trend, we have to make sure this sticks."

In continuing to move forward in fostering inclusive cultures, we can create workplaces where people can thrive exactly as they are. "I truly became who I am when I finally disclosed once and for all that I am a proud Black woman with a non-apparent disability," Fuller says. "And I am now proud to be authentically part of a beautiful, diverse community focused on achieving disability rights and justice."



A stylized illustration showing several people of diverse ages and ethnicities sitting around circular tables. The tables are decorated with horizontal rainbow stripes. The background features large, curved shapes in shades of blue and purple, suggesting a modern, open-plan office or meeting space. The overall style is clean and colorful.

## Story 3

# Fostering a Culture of Inclusion: A Road Paved with Progress, Not Perfection

WRITTEN BY: **KATHERINE C. GILYARD**

**Cover Illustration:** Tracings of the Presidents' Council members in discussion, around tables. They wear bright colored clothing. Round tables rise with stacks of rainbow columns. Surrounded by ribbons of dark and light blue, to represent disability.

**In 2020**, our country and our world were brought to a halt as the devastating ripples of the COVID-19 pandemic and societal reckonings with racialized and systemic oppression came into the spotlight. For the one in four Americans with disabilities in particular, the experiences of navigating an unwelcoming, inaccessible world had already been normalized. But across industries, from healthcare to education, throughlines of inequities encountered by marginalized communities ran deeper, amplifying the urgent need for inclusive solutions.

For the philanthropic sector, this led to an essential question: What does it actually mean to be inclusive? In January 2021, the Disability & Philanthropy Forum sought to answer this in the form of a call to action for the philanthropic community: the [Disability Inclusion Pledge](#).

According to Ana Oliveira, president and CEO of The New York Women's Foundation (NYWF) and a member of the [Presidents' Council of the Disability & Philanthropy Forum](#), "the Disability Inclusion Pledge offers a new framework to create effective change. Signing this Pledge, coupled with creating clear directives and actionable agendas, is the start of a path toward a more inclusive and equitable future."

In 2023, as part of their continued dedication to bringing disability justice to the center of intersectional funding discussions, NYWF released a report, "The State of Women and Girls with Disabilities in New York." As Oliveira shares, "Building the social and economic power of women and gender expansive people with disabilities continues to be a priority across our grantmaking, and the report emphasized the opportunities to build on this work. Our findings elevated that there is no economic justice without disability justice and highlighted the urgent need to support programming by and for people with disabilities."

Similarly guided by a commitment to take action that improves the lives of disabled people, Presidents' Council member Kym Eisner, executive director of the Craig H. Neilsen Foundation (CHNF) — also a Pledge signatory — reflects that the foundation's central beliefs around human rights, social justice, and health equity led them to sign the Pledge. As Eisner shared, CHNF, which serves people living with spinal cord injuries, was ready to advance their work by asking, "What else can we do to support the disability community?"

As the largest private funder of spinal cord injury (SCI) research, and programming in the U.S. and Canada, CHNF is no stranger to disability. Committing to inclusion, however, meant introspection, and acknowledging deficits and opportunities for growth. For example, when they signed the Pledge, they did not have any staff who identified as people with SCI.



**In full candor, I thought we were fairly inclusive because our focus is constantly on including people with spinal cord injury – that's not enough. How we looked at supporting the field, how we looked at supporting individuals with disabilities as a whole needed to evolve.**  
**– KYM EISNER**

CHNF continues to make progress. “Can we do more?” Eisner asks. “Sure. I think taking the Pledge drew attention to how our best can be better. And the concrete steps that we agreed to as a signatory raise the level of responsibility because we’re accountable.”

Similarly to CHNF, FISA Foundation, another Pledge signatory, already had a strong disability focus in their grantmaking. “Disability is a core part of our work and has been since our inception, so we didn’t really have to think about it,” said FISA executive director Kristy Trautmann. “We are so excited that the Forum is making progress in enlisting other funders to include disability in their work.”

FISA took a targeted approach toward adopting the action items in the Pledge, focusing on staff and board learning as well as board demographics. “We have a very small team, only four people, and our staff is in constant learning mode. We spend an enormous amount of our time in conversation with disabled people, disability service providers, learning and teaching others about access practices, researching and sharing disability rights/justice/inclusion news,” said Trautmann.

Trautmann acknowledges there's always room to deepen understanding. “FISA had always been intentional in recruiting people with lived experience of disability onto our board. We knew that about 1/3 of our board members

identify as disabled. But after we signed the Pledge, we adopted a more detailed demographic survey that asks about disability in a more nuanced way (per the best practices recommended by the Forum). About 70% of our board answered the new questions affirmatively. That provided an important opportunity for discussion about the gap between experiencing disability and embracing the identity of disability.”

Thinking about disability and how to talk about it has been a key step for many signatories. Betsy Reid, chief strategy officer of PEAK Grantmaking, which supports a network of over 7,000 grant managers and philanthropy professionals across the country, reflected on how her organization chose to reckon with the harm resulting from problematic practices like using ableist language.

“PEAK signed on to the Pledge knowing that we had much work to do,” said Reid. “That initial commitment has been transformative for our team, proving a powerful impetus to making tangible progress in advancing accessibility and in actively advocating disability inclusion, justice, and rights.”



**An early ‘a-ha’ moment for our team learning was a heightened awareness and sensitivity around language – recognizing the use of ableist language (by ourselves and others) and preferences for how people with disabilities self-identify. — BETSY REID**

Reid said that PEAK’s journey has been an enriching breakthrough toward helping them show up for the mission of inclusivity. “While we’d been instituting accessibility practices previously,” she shared, “we recognized that taking this pledge would bring us the focus, resources, and connections to support both the learning and implementation needed to take our efforts to the next level.” They have connected with the disability community and like-minded allies through experiences like exploring Disability & Philanthropy Forum team member Emily Ladau’s book, *Demystifying Disability*, and holding disability-focused watch parties.

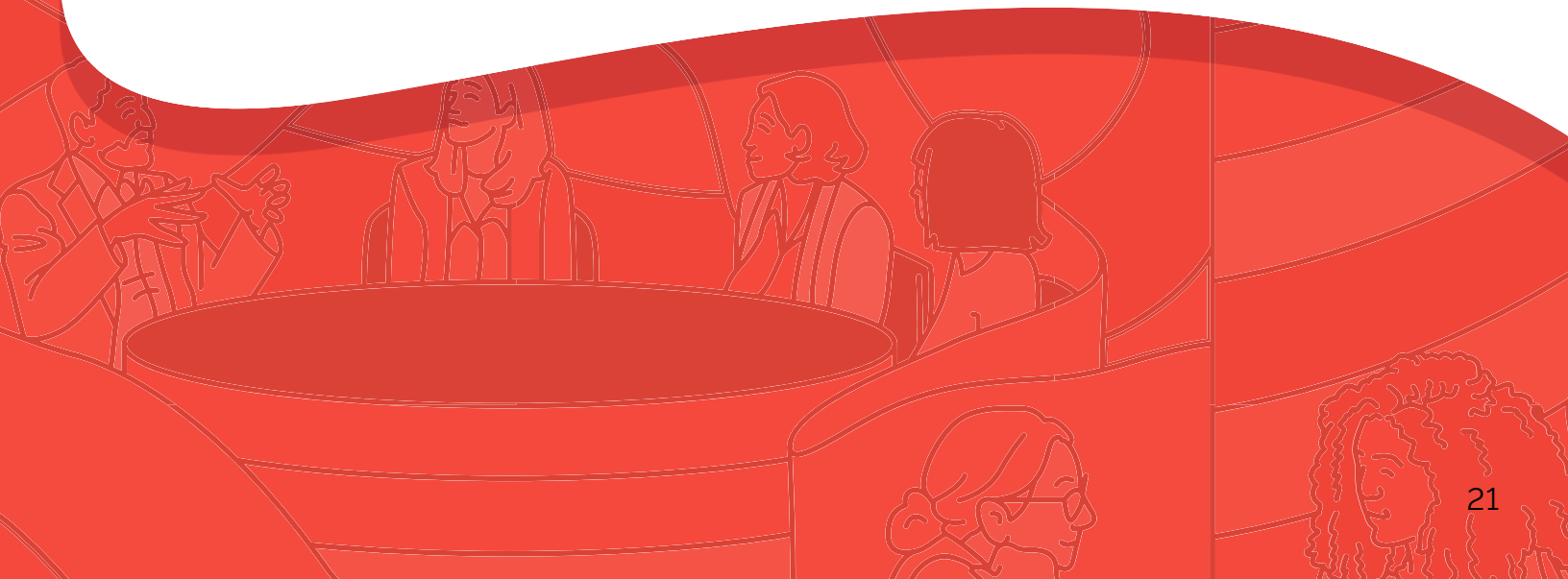
“We want PEAK to be a place of belonging for all. To truly live our values means ensuring that everyone in our community feels welcomed. The Pledge was an opportunity to help us more effectively advance our commitment with action.”

Reid acknowledges that the first step of taking the Pledge can be daunting and nerve-wracking, as no one wants to “get it wrong.” But in an effort to meet current and future pledge signatories on their journeys and reinforce the value of progress for all foundations and philanthropy-serving organizations, regardless of size, the Disability & Philanthropy Forum (DPF) introduced a series of accessible training sessions.

In addition to the trainings, which are led by DPF’s Learning Services Director, Sarah Napoli, signatories are able to tap into a peer support network so they know they’re not alone.

“What would I tell organizations that are hesitant about taking the pledge for fear of getting it wrong? Make mistakes. Make ‘glorious, amazing mistakes,’ as author Neil Gaiman says,” said Napoli.

“When it comes to disability, people think, ‘Ooh, that’s scary’ or ‘I’m going to say the wrong thing, so I better not even go near that.’ And the word ‘pledge’ and the word ‘disability’ together is even more scary, right? So I just say, you have to start the journey and keep learning. And the idea of the Disability Inclusion Pledge is to start that journey. It’s not about just getting it right. It’s actually about messing up, too. Because if you’re not making mistakes, how are you moving forward?”



# STRATEGIC PLAN

The Forum set specific and ambitious five-year benchmarks for sector-wide change to measure progress toward its overarching programmatic and operating goals. Working with Ben Francisco Maulbeck (they/them), former executive director of Funders for LGBTQ Issues, the Forum undertook a strategic planning process that included research on similar philanthropic networks, qualitative interviews, focus groups with movement leaders and CDAP members, a virtual staff retreat, and meetings with a strategic planning committee composed of a diverse group of seven funders engaged in a wide range of the Forum's work. Through these strategic planning efforts, the Forum developed a set of long-term goals and strategies with the intent to infuse disability into funder learning and foster sector-wide transformational change. Our three strategies are:

- 01** Build a learning ladder of programs and resources that help funders to increase disability inclusion and deepen their commitment to disability rights and justice.
- 02** Advocate for disability rights and justice within philanthropy while building systems of accountability to monitor progress.
- 03** Sustain peer networks at all levels in philanthropy — from program and support staff to CEOs.

For more insights into the Forum's goals and approach, [click to read a one-page summary of our strategic plan.](#)

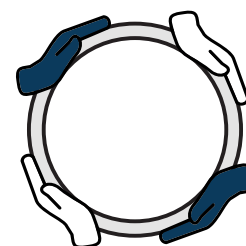
# ABOUT THE FORUM

The Disability & Philanthropy Forum is a philanthropic network created in response to calls to action by the disability community to address gaps in disability representation and funding. In 2019, the Ford and Robert Wood Johnson Foundations convened a group of foundation CEOs, who in turn established the Forum, and at the same time began to move money and resources to disability communities through the [Disability Inclusion Fund at Borealis Philanthropy](#).

Now fiscally sponsored by [Proteus Fund](#), the Forum has evolved into a philanthropy-mobilizing organization to fill a void in the sector. With the Forum's support, philanthropic leaders and staff are embarking on a journey to incorporate disability inclusion into their operations and grantmaking, and are transforming philanthropy through their collective commitment. We encourage you to join us in our vital efforts to achieve a more equitable, inclusive future for all.

## Peer Networks

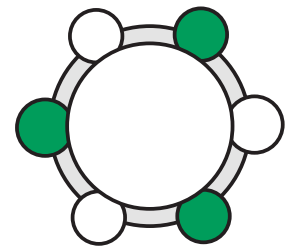
### Celebrating Disability Across Philanthropy



Celebrating Disability Across Philanthropy (CDAP), a cross-philanthropy employee resource group for members of the Disability & Philanthropy Forum, aims to foster a safe space for shared learning, engagement, and support among colleagues in philanthropy. Collective insights from CDAP members help to shape and inform the work of the Disability & Philanthropy Forum. CDAP welcomed two new co-chairs in 2023: [Jane Paccione](#) from the San Antonio Area Foundation and [Aida Akim-Escriva](#) from the Global Fund for Women.

We held four quarterly meetings, including one in February on self-advocacy, one in May on building our disabled community and honoring our disabled ancestors, one in September on belonging to the disability community, and one in December which celebrated and reflected on disability advocacy in 2023.

[Learn more about CDAP on the Forum's website.](#)



## Presidents' Council

The Presidents' Council of the Disability & Philanthropy Forum is a peer community of foundation presidents who recognize that disability inclusion is essential to solving society's most critical human rights, social justice, and health equity challenges. They seek to address the inequity and injustice experienced by more than 61 million disabled Americans (25% of US adults) and one billion disabled people worldwide by disrupting ableism in philanthropy and supporting disabled-led movements.

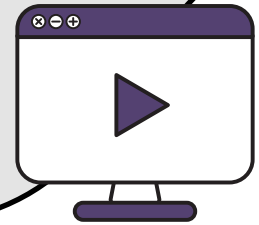
Members of the Council are committed to engaging in a shared learning journey on advancing disability inclusion within their foundations and the philanthropic sector, and deepening relationships among peer CEOs and disabled leaders. All Council foundations must sign and take action to implement the [Disability Inclusion Pledge](#). In addition, they must make significant funding commitments to both the [Disability Inclusion Fund at Borealis Philanthropy](#) and the Disability & Philanthropy Forum. The Council is co-chaired by Dr. Richard Besser, President and CEO of the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation and Ryan Easterly, Executive Director of WITH Foundation.

[Learn more about joining the Presidents' Council in this PDF.](#)



# PEAK'S DISABILITY INCLUSION PLEDGE JOURNEY

Betsy Reid, Chief Strategy Officer, PEAK Grantmaking



In early 2022, PEAK Grantmaking signed the Disability & Philanthropy Forum's [Disability Inclusion Pledge](#), a call to the entire philanthropic sector "to recognize that ableism—the systemic stigma and discrimination against people with disabilities—is a core barrier to equity and inclusion," asking organizations to "commit to a continuing learning and implementation process that will advance systemic change... and serve as models for disability inclusion in the philanthropic sector."

While taking the Pledge was a meaningful action on our own equity journey—and we urge more of our sector peers to do the same—moving from commitment to action is where the true work begins. At a staff learning event last year, PEAK President and CEO Satonya Fair lifted up these words by advocate and activist Corrinne Gray: "If you embrace diversity, but ignore disability, you're doing it wrong."

We took this call to action to heart, and we are two years into our own learning journey as a team and as individuals. Over that time, we have implemented a series of changes that have improved accessibility across our platforms, policies, and practices. We've also shared our progress with members and peers through our programs and a [progress report](#) to advocate for broader and deeper sector commitment to advancing disability equity and inclusion.

The Forum's support has been instrumental in making this possible. We have tapped their action-planning framework, self-assessment and benchmarking tools, best-practice recommendations, and in-depth resources to support the organization-wide adoption of accessibility practices. And we've deeply appreciated the support

of the Forum team, which has generously provided advice and facilitated staff learning experiences that center the perspectives of disabled people. While our journey continues, here are some highlights from what we've learned along the way thus far. We hope they will support colleagues who are eager to join in making this commitment and taking action.

Start with learning. Creating a staff learning plan is essential to building understanding, alignment, and team-wide ownership in implementing accessibility inclusion. Dedicate time and space for both self-directed and group learning experiences to better understand the perspectives and experiences of people with disabilities and the scope of disability-inclusive practices.



PEAK is trying to do better every day to live this Pledge. We signed on knowing that we had much work to do and that we would be emergent learners on this journey. This commitment has been transformative for our team, and as our work continues, we will remain committed to sharing our learnings with the PEAK community. Our hope is that the story of our journey will serve as a call to action that gives more institutions a powerful impetus to make tangible progress in advancing accessibility and in actively advocating for disability inclusion and justice.

# GOVERNANCE COMMITTEE

- **Richard Besser, MD**, Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, Co-Chair
- **Ryan Easterly**, WITH Foundation, Co-Chair
- Sarita Gupta, Ford Foundation
- Ana L. Oliveira, New York Women's Foundation
- John Palfrey, John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation

## Senior Staff Deputies:

- Rebecca Cokley, Ford Foundation
- Patrick Cokley, Robert Wood Johnson Foundation
- Camille Emeagwali, New York Women's Foundation
- Ada Gomero, John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation
- Fiona Kanagasingam, Robert Wood Johnson Foundation

# ADVISORY COMMITTEE

- **Ryan Easterly**, WITH Foundation, Co-Chair
- **Patrick Cokley**, Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, Co-Chair
- Topher González Ávila, Deaf Spotlight
- Jen Bokoff, Disability Rights Fund
- Rebecca Cokley, Ford Foundation
- Camille Emeagwali, New York Women's Foundation
- Ada Gomero, John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation
- Sandy Ho, Disability Inclusion Fund, Borealis Philanthropy
- Mareeha Niaz, GEO
- Morénike Giwa Onaiwu, Autistic Women & Nonbinary Network
- Myroslava Tataryn, Wellspring Philanthropic Fund
- Kristy Trautmann, FISA Foundation
- Cynthia Yongvang, United Hmong with Disabilities

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