

NARRATOR:

The Disability & Philanthropy Forum presents Dessa Cosma, Executive Director of Detroit Disability Power.

DESSA COSMA:

I'm so tired of everything about us being thought of through this very narrow tunnel of compliance. I mean not only is it fear-based, it also makes us a pain in the butt and we're not a pain in the butt. We're just trying to get our needs met like everybody else and frankly, to be called a pain in the butt for trying to exist in a world that was built to exclude you is pretty offensive.

So this compliance thing gets real annoying really fast, but shows up in housing all the time. So when there's this misunderstanding, to put it generously, that disability is bad — which it's not, it's normal — and when there's this misunderstanding that "there's only a few of us, so this is a lot of work to meet the code for a handful of people," that's where you get kind of in this spinning cycle of developers, or politicians, or other decision makers thinking of this as a pain in the butt, as opposed to a real opportunity to create housing that's more flexible and usable by more people.

So not only are there 61 million disabled people in this country at a minimum, it's probably an under count. We all have a family. All of us are going to age. So with aging or in other points in life, we can become disabled and need housing even if we don't think we need accessible housing right now, and so it really just is a very logical decision to make housing more flexible and more user-friendly for the benefit of everyone, and so there's an attitude shift that needs to happen, a culture shift, and a resource shift that needs to happen.

And part of that is debunking some of this misunderstanding about how many of us there are and who we are and really kind of shifting away from a compliance mindset. I think one other thing in terms of what kind of progress we're making though is we are as a community of disabled folks inching towards being understood more as a constituency and that's really important. It's one of the things that drives the work of my organization a lot is we look at other movements and how they've built power, and it's by banding together as a community and saying, "We have common needs and common interests and we are going to organize based on that." And so I look at the Black power movement, I look at the LGBTQ movements and I say these folks with these lived experiences, these shared experiences, these identities have said, "We have a common interest, we're going to do something about it."

And I see the disability community doing that more and more, and kind of moving the cultural understanding of who we are away from this notion that we are individuals with individual health problems and therefore on our own and starting to better understand us as a constituency of people with shared needs, and when we are an organized force of people with shared demands, we can actually do something about housing in a way that we can't do if we're just trying to fend for ourselves as individuals and this requires organizing, and this requires a real intentionality around building power.

NARRATOR:

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