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EMILY HARRIS:

Welcome to the Disability & Philanthropy Forum's Learning Series. My name is Emily Harris. I use she/her pronouns, and I'm proud to be part of the disability community. I'm the executive director of the Disability & Philanthropy Forum and come to you today from the Unseated Land of the Council of Three Fires, the Ottawa, Ojibwe, and Potawatomi Nations, now known as Chicago. As part of our commitment to accessibility, our panelists, and I will each provide a brief audio description of ourselves. I'm a white woman with dark, curly hair wearing glasses, a blue top and a colorful scarf. Behind me is a white and tan screen. My access needs are met today because we have cart captioning. A few housekeeping items. There are two ways to access our live captions today. Use the CC button at the bottom of your screen, or to access the captions in a separate window, see the link to the external captioner in the chat today only our moderators and panelists will be on camera.

You will be muted throughout the event. The webinar is being recorded, and you will receive a link to the recording in the next few weeks. Although we will be using the chat to share links with you, it will not be available for you to communicate out. Instead, please use the Q&A button at the bottom of your screen to share your questions anytime during this session. We will try to integrate them into the discussion as they come in, and we will also make time for questions at the end. If the Q&A is not accessible to you, feel free to send your questions via email to communications@disabilityphilanthropy.org.

We'll be live posting on X, formerly known as Twitter today, and hope that you will join us on social media using the hashtag DisabilityPhilanthropy. You can also follow along by connecting with us on X @DisPhilanthropy. Before we start today's conversation, just a short reminder that disability is a natural part of the human experience, one in four US adults, 61 million people have disabilities, and our community continues to grow as the population ages and its people contract long COVID, other chronic illnesses, mental health, and other conditions where society creates barriers to full participation. Today, we will engage the perspectives of five advocates working at the intersection of disability and labor. As we begin this webinar, we honor disabled workers like Janika Perry, a black disabled woman who lost her life on the job due to systemic ableism. We have a poll question to help set the context for our conversation today. Please answer it now via the box that just popped up on your screen if you don't mind multitasking a bit while I talk.

If the poll is not accessible to you, please feel free to email communications@disabilityphilanthropy.org or note in the Q&A. I will read the question and choices now. On average, disabled workers earn approximately what percent less than workers without a disability? 20%, 52%, 9% or 30%? To moderate our panel, I'm delighted to introduce Rebecca Vallas, distinguished fellow and senior advisor at the National Academy of Social Insurance and a true thought leader in disability inclusion rights and economic justice. Rebecca is joined on the panel by four advocates working at the intersection of disability and labor rights. You can learn more about the panelists from their bios that are linked in the chat Before we start, the correct poll answer, please. The correct answer is D. Disabled workers earn approximately 30% less than workers without a disability. You'll hear more from our panelists

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about the many barriers facing workers with disabilities. So I see that 30% of you identified the correct answer. No, sorry about that. 39% identified the correct answer of 30%. Rebecca, please take it away.

REBECCA VALLAS:

Thank you so much, Emily. And hi everyone. It's a real pleasure to be with everyone today and to be with the Disability & Philanthropy Forum fam. My name is Rebecca Vallas. I use she/her pronouns. And I am a white woman with increasingly long, dark, curly hair. It's brownish. I'm wearing dark purple lipstick. I've got on gold earrings that look kind of like angel wings. And I'm wearing a black shirt and black jacket, and I have a whole bunch of books behind me because I'm sitting in a library. And I'm a former legal aid lawyer who turned into a policy advocate after witnessing so many of the structural and policy barriers that people face who are low income, and particularly folks who are low income and disabled. And I've spent most of my career working to help policymakers, as well as philanthropy, understand that when one in four Americans live with disabilities, as Emily said. Every policy issue is a disability issue. And that's why I've so appreciated and so enjoyed the Forum's learning series, and it's a lot of fun to get to be part of some of these conversations.

I'm Zooming in from Washington DC from the National Academy of Social Insurances Library. That's why you could see all these books behind me. And the building that I'm in today in Washington DC is on land that was taken many, many years ago from the Piscataway tribe. I am particularly honored to have the privilege of moderating today's conversation and have honestly really been looking forward to this conversation ever since the forum reached out to ask me to moderate it, because while there has been some real progress in recent years when it comes to awareness among the public, among policymakers, and in particular among philanthropy, that every issue is a disability issue, an area that still too rarely gets discussed with a disability lens is workers' rights and labor organizing. And we have just a phenomenal panel with us today to help us understand that intersection between disability justice and the labor movement.

So as Emily noted, bios are being linked in the chat so that we can get right into today's discussion, but I'm going to go ahead and welcome each of our panelists today, Marisa Torelli-Pedevska, Monica Lucas, Joan Morris, and Mona Abhari. And I'm going to welcome all of them to the virtual stage with me today. Thank you so much to all of you for being with us for this conversation. And to kick us off, I'm going to ask each of you to share a brief self-introduction that includes your pronouns and also a visual description. So Marisa, let's start with you, and then we'll turn next to Monica, Joan, and then Mona. Marisa.

MARISA TORELLI-PEDEVSKA:

Thanks so much, Rebecca. My name's Marisa Torelli-Pedevska. I use she/her pronouns. I'm a white woman with mid length brown straight hair, wearing a green turtleneck in front of a white wall with three framed photographs.

REBECCA VALLAS:

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And we'll go next to Monica.

MONICA LUCAS:

Thank you. Hi, I'm Monica. It's so great to be here. I'm a Puerto Rican woman with shoulder length brown hair, glasses, a black shirt, and my Zoom background is the densest greenest jungle you've ever imagined.

REBECCA VALLAS:

It truly is. I love it. Joan, we'll go next to you. Oh, and Joan, I think you're on mute. Can you come off mute for us? There you go.

JOAN MORRIS:

Am I off mute now?

REBECCA VALLAS:

You are.

JOAN MORRIS:

Okay. Hi, I'm Joan Morris. My pronouns are she/her. I'm wearing black glasses, a white and black scarf. My shirt is white, and I'm an African American woman.

REBECCA VALLAS:

Wonderful. And then last but certainly not least, Mona.

MONA ABHARI:

Hi everyone. My name's Mona, she/her. I am a Palestinian woman. I am wearing a cheetah print shirt, some gold jewelry, gold earrings, soft pink makeup, and I am in my bedroom. And I'm really happy to be here. Back to you, Rebecca.

REBECCA VALLAS:

Well, thank you so much to all of you for joining for this. And we're going to start by grounding the conversation and giving each of you the chance to talk a little bit about how your personal story and your lived experience have shaped how you see and navigate society, and then we'll get to turn into areas that all of you have significant expertise in at this intersection, but I appreciate the forums wanting to start the conversation really with grounding and lived experience. So Joan, we're going to start with you. How has your personal story and your lived experience shaped how you see and navigate society in the US?

JOAN MORRIS:

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As an African American woman, I look at my experience as I've had to learn every lesson the hard way. With disabilities especially, one of the hardest things I've had to learn is that you have to be your own advocate. For example, I saw my mother not being able to speak for herself and work very long hours as a housekeeper. And when her body finally gave out and broke down, they fired her instead of giving her a better alternative, and she struggled to make ends meet until she died in April of 2023. So I've had to learn you have to be your own advocate and you have to speak up for yourself because if you do not, you will be taken advantage of.

REBECCA VALLAS:

I appreciate so much you sharing that, and I'm so sorry for your loss. And I know we're going to get a lot more into some of the issues underlying that very personal story that you've just shared, but thank you, Joan, for starting us off with that. Monica, I'm going to hand it over to you next with the same question.

MONICA LUCAS:

Yeah, so I'm a Puerto Rican woman on the autism spectrum, so I think one of the challenges is that having learned to sort of hide the things that are different about me. And I think growing up as a kid with autism, masking is a big part of that, especially as a girl. And so to me, my journey in my adulthood is trying to re-accept those parts of myself that I felt like I wasn't supposed to. And I think that is broadly true of folks in the disability community because we are expected to perform at the same physical standards, or whatever our limitations might be, we're expected to pretend like they don't exist and to push through and try and meet the expectations regardless of what we're capable of. And so I think for me, my experience has taught me to try and respect what I'm capable of and allow myself to have some grace, and to also give that grace to other people when they need it.

REBECCA VALLAS:

I love that. And Mona, you'll get the next chance. Same question to you.

MONA ABHARI:

So I am a Palestinian woman and I grew up in a Muslim family. I tried to uplift the struggle of my people in everything that I do. We grew up in a small town outside of St. Louis, and at a young age, I quickly learned the impacts of prejudice on myself and my family after 9/11 and the rise of Islamophobia. I had to learn how to navigate the world as an Arab, as a Palestinian, as a woman of color. Fast forward to college, I was struggling to keep up with school for disabilities of mine and other life instances, and I also was just struggling to juggle three jobs while going to school. And at one point, I even experienced homelessness because I couldn't afford housing. And my parents are also low wage workers and I see how they navigate the world in an economy that doesn't support working people.

So all that really changed just how I see the world and the world that I want to live in. My parents shouldn't have to break their back for a paycheck, and I shouldn't have to be facing

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extra hurdles just because I'm a woman of color. I think it's extremely important to ground myself in my lived experiences so I know what kind of world that I want to fight for, where myself, my family, and everyone is treated with dignity and respect.

REBECCA VALLAS:

I feel like a through line that's already developing through what everyone's sharing, is that it doesn't have to be this way, and yet these are the structural barriers and sources of policy violence that so many people face. And Marisa, you'll get the last crack at that opening question before we get a little bit more into some of the thrust of today's conversation.

MARISA TORELLI-PEDEVSKA:

Yeah, thank you, Monica, for bringing up the needing to re-accept yourself experience. As someone with the disability, I relate to that. I have chronic illnesses and a number of invisible physical disabilities that have really changed and progressed throughout my life. So for most of my life I didn't identify as disabled, I didn't identify as chronically ill. And then as I got older and I started to meet other people like me for the first time or... Social media was actually a huge thing for me, getting to see other chronically ill people on social media for the first time was like, oh wow, there are other people like me out there sharing their story. But I think having an invisible physical disability for me has really reshaped the way that I think about everyone's individual needs. I kind of go into every situation assuming that there are people in the room with disabilities that I can't see. And I think so often, we assume that if we can't see it, that the person doesn't have a disability.

And just because of the way that I've experienced the world, I kind of always assume the opposite, and I like to think it's really helped me think about people's individual needs, honestly, whether they have a disability or not because we've all got needs.

REBECCA VALLAS:

I really appreciate you bringing that up, Marisa, and obviously that intersects with some of what Monica was sharing about masking, right? So I also just on a personal level, appreciate you bringing up invisible disabilities. That's part of my story as well, and it's not something that people generally know about me unless I bring it into a conversation. And that's the story for so many people with chronic illness and other disabilities that might not be readily apparent to the eye. Mona, I'm going to bring you in next. And really to sort of lay a little more scaffolding for this conversation, it feels like you're the right person to take us to that next level of bricks. So given your perspective and your experience as an organizer, and in particular as someone who's got some real experience organizing disabled workers, would you help us set the table a little bit for today's conversation with the bird's eye view?

And I'm going to ask you to do that recognizing that many people who are listening in today might be new or newer to thinking about the intersection of disability justice and labor organizing. So maybe the right place to start, and the way I'll pose this question to you is, can

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you give us a high level view of what disabled workers in the US are experiencing and how you approach the intersection of workers' rights and disability justice?

MONA ABHARI:

Yeah, absolutely. I'm going to try my best to kind of have a higher bird's eye view of the intersection, but I think I'm also going to refer to examples of my personal work just to give an idea of what I've come across and what disabled workers at companies face historically and across the world. So the labor movement is about workers essentially having a voice and demanding respect and justice, right? And that manifests in multiple, multiple ways. Disabled workers have been ignored and disrespected and kept from thriving on the job forever, right? Workers want to be seen as people and have realized by doing this work that companies, especially multi-billion dollar companies, like Amazon for example, do not treat their workers like people. In fact, they just see them as numbers and as expendable, right? In fact, they may even see them as not useful because they can't "produce" enough in order to make profit. So it's putting profits over people.

Their processes and their systems are dehumanizing for all workers, and often, disabled workers aren't really given a chance to succeed in these workplaces. As a field organizer at United for Respect, which is a national nonprofit organization that supports retail workers organizing for better pay and working conditions, I've come to realize that there really is no labor movement without disability justice. So for example, on our Amazon campaign, we've worked with warehouse workers like Joan here across the country over the past several years, helping them fight for higher wages and improve safety on the job and better benefits. Time and time again while speaking to these workers, we just kept coming across employees who were struggling to have their disabilities honored in the workplace, accommodations met and respected at work, which is really insulting, because at a place like Amazon, and it's not just Amazon, multiple companies do this, Amazon's PR machine touts the company's inclusion of disability workers, right? They pride themselves in being a workplace that advocates for disability justice and disabled workers, when we know that on the ground, that couldn't be further from the truth, unfortunately.

So many of these impacted workers had to quit in frustration. Some were on indefinite leaves of absence lasting months while the company assessed their request for accommodations, and others were working without accommodations as best as they could, which is not okay. We at United for Respect decided that we needed to organize a campaign around this issue to respond to the repeated concerns we were hearing from current and former employees. Given the astronomical turnover rate at Amazon, we wanted to include former Amazon employees in our campaign as well, since we know their voices, and then since they were pushed out of the workplace because their accommodations were met, are especially important.

Usually labor campaigns are organizing workers within a workplace, but many of our leaders that had been forced out due to their disability or lack of meeting accommodations for their disability wasn't actually a really new approach to organizing, and really hard too. When you can't organize workers that are in the workplace and have been pushed out of a company, it's

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really hard to get them to connect to other workers as well. So in a traditional worker organizing model, you help workers speak to their coworkers on the job. And again, that was just extremely difficult, navigating that at Amazon. And I know others in other labor secs have also experienced the same thing. So it's a call for a new strategy when it comes to organizing, especially when you really want to make sure you have a disability justice lens to your organizing.

And I'll just wrap up by saying disabled workers are workers that make these companies their billions, and more importantly, they are people. When we talk about building people power in the labor movement, we can't ignore the fact that we have disabled workers all across the workforce, and they deserve to live in a world where disabled workers thrive. I wholeheartedly believe that you cannot talk about the success of the labor movement without disability justice,

REBECCA VALLAS:

A new strategy, but also just a more inclusive strategy, that's what you're describing. And I think that's going to be the call to action throughout this conversation, right? There's no labor movement without disability justice. Joan, I want to turn to you next. Now that we've heard some of that bigger picture landscape, which, of course, includes but is far from limited to just Amazon, and I had like to have you help us ground our conversation just a little bit further in lived experience. You've worked at Amazon, you've also worked at other employers, and the experiences you've had at those places led you to become an organizer, particularly of disabled workers. Talk a little bit about your experience and share how it led you to organizing.

JOAN MORRIS:

Thank you. What led me to organizing was... I think what led me in large part to organize was January... It started in around January to March. I went to an Amazon plant in East Point because due to my accommodations, it was the only option that I had at the time because no other site would take me because of my accommodations, even though it would be a two hour bus ride from my house to the job site by bus. I went to my doctor and gave them the accommodations stuff. But I was supposed to get my accommodations approved in March. It took them 10 months. It took them till October, 2023 to approve the accommodations. And during that time, I had to do a lot of heavy lifting, I had to move a lot of boxes, and it got extremely painful, so much so that I would have to sit at the job site, wait 20 to 30 minutes before I walked to the bus stop so my muscles can rest.

I have osteoarthritis. It's a degenerative disease and it's a genetic disease of the bones where the bones start rubbing together and the muscles start to tear. I think the hardest part for me was after all I've been through and the loyal... I always thought that if I was loyal to the company, did my job, always showed up on time, and did good, that they would treat me with the least respect and return the loyalty back and try to be helpful, but that wasn't the case. I had to fight every ounce of the way to get help, to get accommodations.

REBECCA VALLAS:

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And of course, we're talking about reasonable accommodations, which are actually required by law to be provided, right? And we're talking about a 33-year-old civil rights law here, the Americans with Disabilities Act. That's the context here for the accommodations that you were requesting. Is there more you want to share about the path then into organizing and your experience becoming an organizer because of the experience you had as a worker?

JOAN MORRIS:

Well, the path that led me to organizing was at first, I attended a meeting with the UFR. I was scared at first. I was like, let's see how they're working. And it turns out, along with my fellow coworkers and organizers, that they really knew their stuff, that they had... We would organize, have meetings about how we would get changes fixed at the warehouse and everything like that. And for the most part, we've successfully done some accommodations and got them approved. For example, we were able to get fans in the facility where there weren't any. We were able to get representatives to come in to see what we were going through on a daily basis. And basically, we held management to task. We still have more work to do, but we held management to task that year. Those small victories motivated me to further stay in it and work on my advocacy and everything like that.

REBECCA VALLAS:

Thank you so much for sharing that. And like you said, small victories, that is what it might sound like, right? But often, the accommodations that people need are actually fairly small from the employer's perspective, and yet can mean the difference between whether someone is able to do their job or is not because of denial of what can be very basic accommodations. I know we'll hear more about that as this conversation continues. But Marisa, I want to turn to you next to bring in the perspective of a leader in philanthropy who's been doing a lot of work at this intersection of disability justice and work or organizing. You're at the Inevitable Foundation, and Inevitable has a pretty amazing story of supporting disabled screenwriters through the 2023 Writer's Guild of America strike that people probably remember very well from last year. Would you tell that story for us? And the context that I'll imbue that question with is, what can philanthropy learn from Inevitable model of supporting disabled workers in this way?

MARISA TORELLI-PEDEVSKA:

Absolutely. Thank you for that question. So when we knew the strike was probably going to happen, the first thing we did before the strike was even happening was trying to figure out what people needed. So we surveyed disabled writers working in the industry just to get a sense of the demand for funding, for grants, for support, trying to get a sense of if these people had savings, if they would be able to stay working in the industry if the strike lasted many, many months. And it turned out the demand was really high. People didn't have much savings. People had healthcare costs, which was a huge part of it because their healthcare was going to eventually run out during the course of the strike. And so we really got a sense of people's needs very quickly. And then the second thing or the next thing we did was once the strike

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started, we started the Emergency Relief Fund where we distributed individual grants to people who applied and who needed them.

And those were really life-changing for people. It kept people working in the industry and working in the industry, people who may have had to leave and go found another job. It helped people pay for healthcare from medical costs, all these things that disabled writers have that a lot of other writers don't really think about. When it came to the picket lines, we worked hard to try and make those more accessible too. So much of picketing as walking and long hours and heat. It was also very, very hot during those months. And so one thing we did was we brought chairs. It sounds very simple, but we brought chairs to the picket lines, and it was pretty amazing to see how many people gravitated towards the chairs, even people who maybe didn't have a disability. It was just something that everybody needed. People just need rest.

And so it was a simple thing, but it made a big impact. We brought an accessible bathroom to the picket line so that people could use the bathroom, basic human need. We brought water, cooling towels for people that had heat sensitivity, or just people that were hot, right? These accommodations, these things that help disabled people just also help everybody. We had cooling fans. And so it also was a great way to build community during the strike and just see a lot of people with different needs come together. And then the last big thing we did was we had this billboard campaign. And before the strike started, the Billboard campaign was focused on hire disabled writers, not a disability consultant. And once there was a strike and no one was hiring anybody, that messaging didn't really make much sense, so we very quickly pivoted, and that's something I'm really proud of, and changed the messaging to the future, which was the future of disabled writers is non-negotiable as a way to tie it into the strike.

And so I think something that philanthropy could learn from our approach to the strike and to the way that we acted fast is just ask people what they need and get it to them. I think we acted faster than maybe we typically would've. We distributed grants faster than maybe we typically would've or would've previously felt comfortable doing so, but people needed it now and they needed it fast, and so we kind of had to change with the changing demand and pivot our messaging as the need changed. So just acting fast, I think analyzing less and just giving people what they need.

REBECCA VALLAS:

And in this case, providing direct assistance, right? This wasn't sending a report that might look at the issue and decide what to do next year, right?

MARISA TORELLI-PEDEVSKA:

Right.

REBECCA VALLAS:

It was actually providing assistance because that's what people needed. Monica, I want to bring you back into continue that story because you've got the perspective of a disabled person

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working in the film industry. We've been hearing from Marisa a little bit about how Inevitable came to support Disabled screenwriters during the strikes, but talk a little bit about your experience in the industry, and not just within the context of these strikes, but the workplace barriers that you and other disabled folks face in the film industry.

MONICA LUCAS:

Yeah. And just to say, I was on the picket line with Inevitable during that time, and it really did make a difference, not just physically, but spiritually. People were really glad to have that kind of support, and it gave people the opportunity to go and be there who would otherwise not have been there. So really, really big help that Inevitable did during that time. Yes, so I am a screenwriter. I've worked as a writer's assistant on a couple of shows, and I've also worked as a production assistant on some movies. And I think sort of keeping with the theme that we've had so far, which is that the accommodations that things that we need as disabled folks are not too unlike what people need to survive in normal life, so I'll talk about my experience on these film sets because I think that it's the most salient way of talking about it. Working as a production assistant, really anybody on a crew, but production assistants get the worst of it, you're working. You're there before anyone else gets there. You leave after everyone else leaves.

On a film set, a standard day is 12 hours. If you have overtime, the crew can be there for 14, 16, 18 hours. And then as a PA, you're there for an extra two and a half or three hours on top of that. So there's a matter of what are you physically capable of handling? And if you have a physical disability or the kind of limitation that simply doesn't allow you to be on your feet working for 15, 16, 17 hours a day, you just simply cannot do that job. They do not have accommodations set up for you to take that job in the first place. So it's an immediate siphoning off of folks who would want to be there who just literally are not welcome. If you can make that happen and you can show up and do that work, you are the lowest person on the totem pole, so you do not have power to negotiate for your needs.

Of the few PAs that I worked with on my most recent film, they did not say this to me upfront, but through the course of working with them, I recognized they have disabilities. They have chronic illness, they have chronic pain. They had things that were getting in the way of them doing their job that they wouldn't even talk about, but being in their presence for that long, I started to see. And there were simple things that could have helped. One of the women I worked with had been doing this job for so long that she had developed chronic back pain and needed to sit down regularly. And that was a big ask to be able, to just go take a five minute break and sit down. That was not really allowed. One of my other colleagues had chronic pain in the form of severe migraines that cause photo and audio sensitivities. When you're on a set with those big lights and all the noises in the walkie-talkies in your ear, that's very painful experience.

And she needed to be able to go to a dark room for five minutes and decompress and relax and do her stretches and exercises. And that was also... There was no room in the schedule for that. There was no room in the schedule to take a lunch break, to take a bathroom break. It was so intense. And these are just normal human things. These are not even things that folks with disabilities need. These are things that everybody needs. So it was really eyeopening

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experience to see how ignored these things are. So first of all, like I said, people who have severe enough physical disabilities are not even welcome on set. The ones who can get there are not allowed to advocate for themselves. And then the ones who can suffer through it suffer long-term health and pain. So it's a horrible... I want to be careful how I talk about this because obviously that side of it's horrible. It's a fun environment, right? People want to do this work. They like working on sets.

They want to make film and TV. It's exciting. It's fun. But the cost of that is your long-term health and your wellbeing, and I don't think that that should be the trade-off. I think you should be able to make a movie and also get a full night's sleep. The way that we do this, I think, is we genuinely just have to reimagine what it means to have a film set and what it means to be a crew member and just come to accept that we're asking people to do things that are frankly, in my opinion, inappropriate. We should not be asking people to sacrifice their sleep and their physical wellbeing to make a movie. I don't think a movie is important enough for people to take years off of their life.

So my perspective is, as someone who's worked in these spaces and genuinely loves doing this work, I want it to be better so that I could do more of it. I want to do this work, but I can't. And that to me is the real tragedy here. There are a lot of people like me who would love to do this and are just not able to physically or for other reasons.

REBECCA VALLAS:

Monica, thank you so much for sharing all of that. And again, I feel like the two through lines emerging, that there is no labor movement without disability justice, and also it doesn't have to be this way, right? So many of the things you guys are talking about are things that we have been normalized within the status quo, but it doesn't have to be this way. These are choices that our industries and our employers make. And Marisa, I'm going to throw one other question back to you just because I feel like it's come up so many times now in the conversation that it's worth just digging into it just a little bit more, and that is the cost of accommodations. And this feels like probably one of the biggest myths and misunderstandings when it comes to disabled workers and what it means to treat people with disabilities in the workplace adequately and appropriately. And you've actually dug into this, Inevitable wrote a hole report on this subject. Talk a little bit about what you think philanthropy could benefit from knowing about the cost of workplace accommodations and what you found.

MARISA TORELLI-PEDEVSKA:

Yeah, absolutely. A lot of the research that we've done, specifically through our cost of accommodations report, that's through entertainment lens, but it applies to every industry and applies to philanthropy. And I think there's this misconception that accommodations are tricky or they're expensive, or they take a lot to make happen. And what we found from our research is that's really not true. It's not that hard. And in entertainment specifically, it's actually a very accommodating space, if you think about it, but if you think about who's getting accommodated, right? Someone will get their private jet and their specific brand of water that they need, but someone else doesn't have a ramp or a bathroom, or this thing that costs a fraction of the price,

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but it's just not valued in the same way. And so it's not really can we make accommodations happen, it's like who is getting to benefit from those accommodations?

But I do think that the simplest answer is that we found it's just really not that hard. Asking people what they need in every situation, in every industry, it's just not that hard. And making those conversations normal just really allows for an environment for people to feel safe and feel like they can ask for what they need. I think we need to normalize those conversations across every industry. When someone starts a new job, you ask, "What can I do to make this job the best experience for you? What do you need to do your job well?" And so I know it sounds very basic, but that is really what we found. And I think we at Inevitable have built... We've built a majority disabled team, and we've built and retained such an incredible team by making accommodations such a normal part of our culture.

People need something, they get something. People need to work from home, they work from home. We're a remote organization, but if people need a day off, they get a day off. People have a doctor's appointment, they go to the doctor. I think these things are quite simple. And so I think we've only built a stronger team and created a more fun environment for everybody because of it.

REBECCA VALLAS:

I appreciate so much you sharing some of those learnings, but also some of it really is very basic, right? It's just as basic as centering the humanity of workers as opposed to treating people like they're widgets, right? It really actually, a lot of it is that basic. I want to bring Mona and Joan back in one more time before we turn to some audience Q&A. So reminder, go ahead and keep putting in your questions because we are going to have a little bit of time at the end for audience questions.

But Mona, I want to turn back to you for a moment. And one of the things that really came up when we were having our preliminary conversation about what we wanted to bring into this webinar today was how you have learned to, and how in your work, you follow the leadership of disabled workers and what that looks like at United for Respect. Talk a little bit about how that shows up in your work and in United for Respect's model of working with and helping to organize disabled workers.

MONA ABHARI:

Yeah, absolutely. So as an organizer, I've learned that I have to be willing to step back and actively listen to disabled workers, to Amazon workers, to... Just in organizing in general, active listening is such an essential part of really understanding the story and understanding how you can show up as an organizer as well, to really understand the stories of the workers that they're sharing with me and where they're coming from. It's really important to understand the person as a whole too. And then something else I've learned too is just as disabled workers anywhere, but especially at Amazon, they've really been supporting and helping each other for a long time out of necessity almost because these companies don't create a workplace that is safe for them, that is acceptable of them. For example, there are Facebook groups with hundreds of members

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where people, I'm talking about Amazon specifically, but I'm sure it's probably replicated itself in other work sectors, but where people post their issues getting accommodations, they share their stories, and it helps them feel a little less alone.

So I've just seen workers take initiative on creating community, creating a group, creating a support system that they should already have in their workplace and they should have in their lives, but they don't because the systems don't work for them. It's very ableist. And so they've had to, I think Joan puts it beautifully, advocate for yourself in multiple ways that you don't have to, but you have to survive. And another thing I've learned too is especially at Amazon, the hurdles that Amazon throws at disabled workers over and over and over again, puts them through hell honestly. And it's enough to make any person really just give up and lose hope and walk away and say that it's not worth fighting to keep this job, but a lot of workers, despite all that, decide to say, "No, I'm fighting back. I'm staying here and you can't push me out of this company. I deserve to work here and get a paycheck. I put my all in this company and you can't push me out the way that you're trying to push me out."

And that is just incredibly inspiring when all the... Again, the company's against them, it's hurdle after hurdle, and they're still there, not even just there showing up, making sure that they get their job done, but actively play a role in making change at the workplace to make sure that the injustices don't happen to anyone else again. So Amazon wants them to walk away and they want them to be frustrated, but they don't give into that. And that's just incredibly... That speaks volumes in and of itself. I've seen associates have to become their own lawyer, their own advocate. And with Amazon's deep pockets that fund an army of HR specialists and lawyers, workers still prevail. And it's been absolutely just an honor to be able to play a supportive role in the people that know the problem the best and the solutions the best.

REBECCA VALLAS:

There's so much we can learn from that, and really within every component of folks who are working on social change. Joan, I want to bring you in one more time. And then we've got some really amazing questions coming in from the audience, so I want to make sure we've got time to bring several of those in. We're probably not going to have time to get into all of them, although I wish we'd had more time than we have because some of these are really terrific questions. Joan, we have an audience watching today who is primarily leaders across philanthropy, folks who are funding all kinds of social change work. And I'm curious if you have a message to them about how philanthropy can best support disabled workers and... As my lights keep going out, so I have to dramatically wave my arms. There we go. Let there be light. Thank you. So how philanthropy can best support disabled workers, but also maybe how non-disabled people who are looking to be part of disability justice can best support disabled workers? Anywhere you want to take that.

JOAN MORRIS:

Thank you. First and foremost, the important thing to remember is that people with disabilities are first and foremost human beings. They have rights. They have the right to make a living. They have rights. They're not people that you sweep under the rug and pretend that they don't

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exist because they do, or you take advantage of. For those that are non-disabled, I encourage them to read. I encourage them to actively listen, first and foremost, to the disabled people and let them be the center of the conversation and believe their stories. Also reading compilations reading and also watching documentaries about disabled folks. I recommend two. For book-wise, I have here, it might show up in reverse, Disability Visibility. It's edited by Alice Wong and it has stories from people that are disabled across the country and their experiences with dealing with disabled life. And a documentary I would recommend is Crip Camp. It is a beautiful story about the campers at Camp Jened, who before there was the passage of the ADA Act in 1990, there was another disability law called Section 504. That's what led to the...

And what happened at Camp Jened led to the passing of Section 504, which led to the passing of ADA, and it tells a beautiful story about the activists who were a part of that movement during that time. So those are the two I would recommend.

REBECCA VALLAS:

I appreciate that so much, Joan. And I have to say, when you were saying, "Believe disabled people," I was thinking, yes, Alice Wong, right? Because Alice so often says believe disabled people, and I love your recommending her wonderful book, and also Crip Camp. So we're going to turn to audience Q&A. And again, we're not going to have time to get through all the questions being submitted, but there's some really terrific questions in here. So I'm going to go first to a question asking, if I am a funder of labor rights groups, what do I need to do to make sure my grantees are as educated as the Inevitable Foundation and United for Respect when it comes to the rights of disabled workers? And where can my grantees find resources? I love that question. I feel like that's a great place to start. And I'm going to see if anyone on the panel wants to kick off with that.

MARISA TORELLI-PEDEVSKA:

I can jump in.

REBECCA VALLAS:

Please do.

MARISA TORELLI-PEDEVSKA:

When I read this question or when I hear this question, the first thing that I think of is just the importance of building initiatives with the community itself because we are majority disabled team, we work with the community, but we also are the community. And so so much of what we've learned is from hiring people within the community itself. It's not so much finding external resources as it is bringing people into the conversation into leadership positions who are actually a part of the community. So something I'd really encourage is putting disabled people in positions of leadership, hiring disabled people, making sure that they're part of the conversations. And we're not just talking about how to best serve the disability community, but those conversations are being facilitated by someone in the community, and they're including

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people in the community because I think that's where we've really learned how to do the work. Yeah.

REBECCA VALLAS:

Beautiful. And Mona, I don't know if you have anything to add to that or any resources you want to put on the table either.

MONA ABHARI:

No specifics that come to mind. I just want to back second what Marisa said. The best resource is the community itself. And I'll also just say with UFR's work, we have been doing this for a bit, but we also know that we are newer to the disability justice space. So we actually did outreach to people that have been doing this work much, much longer than us. And a big takeaway for me was just the difference between disability justice versus disability rights. And they helped us just walk through, how can we really make sure we have a disability justice lens with all that we do? So again, it was just seeking experts in the community, reaching out to those that have been doing this work for a long, long time. And as this work is growing, as the labor movement's changing, we are going to have to adapt. But looking to the past and looking to those before us and all that you've done is really helpful too.

REBECCA VALLAS:

I love those answers. And I'll also say probably talking directly to Inevitable and United for Respect, who I'm sure would also love to be resources to folks looking to learn. So here I am offering you guys up, but I assume that's okay with you. The next question, Joan, might be one that you want to speak to, and Mona, you might have thoughts on this too, but Joan, how can we better educate workers about their rights to accommodations? And how can we help them find support and mentors in the labor movement when they hit a wall with their employers? Do you have any thoughts on that question?

JOAN MORRIS:

Yes. I think the first and foremost importance is when you've hit a wall with your employer, you may have to look at other resources like Legal Aid. Legal Aid not only provides legal representation, but also provides legal advice on what to do and what your rights are in regards to accommodations with the ADA because, again, it is the law, but it's a complicated law, and the folks at Legal Aid will be able to break that down. Also, reach out to disability rights organizations to also figure out what to do in regards to your rights in regards if you hit a wall with your employer.

REBECCA VALLAS:

I love that. And Mona, anything you want to add, how we can better educate disabled workers about their rights to accommodations and help them find mentors when they hit a wall with their employers?

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MONA ABHARI:

Yeah, I think I'll just kind of quickly highlight the example of a worker that I came across that I brought up earlier, who started a Facebook group solely focused on disability, on accommodations at Amazon, and slowly and surely, that they were able to build a community that were able to help workers navigate the really broken system of accommodations at multiple employers as well, and people that can bring that expertise into. So just encouraging workers to self-organize. And just second everything Joan said as well. It is difficult because we know that the system itself is so broken that... Especially at Amazon, for example, the problem isn't just with one department, for example. There's so many different... The process is so convoluted in and of itself that the solutions might be even a little blurry too because workers are sent everywhere. So second Joan's suggestions, but also the importance of workers self-organizing and providing a support system for themselves as well.

REBECCA VALLAS:

Yeah, I love that. And we've got another question. I think we've got time maybe for me to ask one more, and then we're going to run out of time, which breaks my heart because I'm loving this conversation, but I love this question. Monica, you spoke about being a screenwriter. Would you talk a little bit about how art and how screenwriting can be a form of activism? And I'll add activism when it comes to labor rights, but also activism when it comes to disability justice.

MONICA LUCAS:

Yeah. I'll start by saying I actually got my start working in Washington DC as a political activist, and I still do want to make the world a better place. I found that political activism didn't fit quite for me, and I wanted to move to Hollywood and tell stories because I think that stories are an incredibly beautiful element of the human experience that teach us how to be better people. We watch stories, we watch movies, read books, tell stories to each other because they're morals and they help us define our values, and they help us understand other perspectives. And that to me is the quintessential beauty of being a human. So I'm so glad that I get to be a part of storytelling because I think there are a few things in this world that make me feel more proud of humanity. Now, one of the best things about stories is that you can put yourself in the subjective experience of someone who's very, very different than you.

So if you have no idea what it's like to be a person with a disability, or a person of color, or a person of a different socioeconomic class, you can read a book or watch a movie or a TV show, and the magical thing happens where you become the person for a little while. You really experience the emotions that they're going through and the feelings that they're having. And that, to me, is one of the most powerful tools of social change, of political activism and social activism. Because when we tell stories about people with disabilities, or people of color, or any of the marginalized groups that often do get left out of stories, when we tell these stories, what we're doing is we're opening people's minds, we're giving them an experience that they've never had before, and we're making them more empathetic. And that is so great because we can't solve these problems unless we have empathy for each other. We can't convince the Amazon

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management to do these things that they need to do unless they feel like they have to do them, right?

To me, story is one of the most powerful tools of activism. Like I said, I did start in DC. I believe in political activism. I believe in policy and good governance. I think that's also very important. From the storytelling perspective, I think that's another tool that we need to use. And I'll just say one last thing. It's hard to know that there are problems to solve unless you don't see the problems. And folks with disabilities often aren't seen, whether because they're kept out of spaces physically or because their disabilities aren't visible. So you don't necessarily know that these problems need to be solved, and that's why we need to tell stories about them, so that we can know that these people are out there and they deserve to be seen and heard.

REBECCA VALLAS:

Which brings us right back around to what Joan was saying before, with disability visibility being people telling their own stories, Crip Camp, of course, being a film that tells these stories, right? This is why these are the ways that we connect with the heart as opposed to the head, and we get to that place of empathy. So thank you so much for sharing all of that, Monica. And I hate having to... I feel like the only bad part of today's conversation is having to end it, but thank you so much to Monica, to Mona, to Marisa, to Joan for joining us for this today, and thanks to everyone who's been out there in cyberspace watching. And it's been a privilege getting to be part of this conversation and to moderate it. And thanks to the Forum for putting it together. This was a really important discussion for philanthropy to hear. And with that, I will turn things back to Emily Harris to close us out.

EMILY HARRIS:

Thank you so much, Rebecca and all of you. This has really been amazing, and I'm ready to go out and support the labor movement. This was such a rich conversation. We couldn't address all the questions, but you know that they will inform our programs and resources. You'll receive a short survey as soon as you sign off. Please help us learn from your experience by taking a few minutes to fill it out. A link is also available in the chat. And we hope you'll join us for our next webinar on April 11th, which centers disability rights, activism, and organizing, continuing this theme. Thank you again for joining us, and have a great rest of your day.