



EXPLAINER

Race and Disability: A New Reckoning

Grant makers are awakening to the role that disability have in equity campaigns.

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“We know disability inclusion is most effective when it engages people with disabilities as experts and leaders.

By being intentional in having a disability inclusive approach, we can foster equity and justice for all marginalized communities.”

- Ryan Easterly, Executive Director
WITH Foundation

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Introduction

Dozens of grant makers are examining the intersection of race and disability and coming to a significant conclusion: Racial-equity efforts, including those launched in the wake of George Floyd's murder last year, will fall short if they don't address challenges facing the nation's nearly 13 million people of color with disabilities.

At the same time, advocates in the disability movement are awakening to the role that disability has in its commitment to equity.*

"Any attempt to rid the nation of racism without doing away with ableism yields practically nothing," writes [Talila Lewis](#), a lawyer and advocate for racial and disability justice. "The same is true in reverse. Disabled communities attempting to rid the nation of ableism find themselves having made very little headway because they are still practicing racism."

'Trapped Below the Bottom Rung'

One fifth of the nation's 61 million individuals with disabilities are people of color. Data suggest they are among the most marginalized in America, often living "below the bottom rung of the economic ladder," as a National Disability Institute [report](#) concluded. The report's findings illustrate that racial disparities — in education, employment, and financial security — grow deeper when disability is an added factor.

The combination of race and disability most affects Black and Indigenous people. They are more likely than white individuals to have a disability, and that disability is more likely to magnify the discrimination and hurdles that they already face in housing, employment, and health care. Just [one quarter](#) of Black Americans with

disabilities, for instance, have jobs — an employment rate at least 10 percentage points lower than that for white, Latinx, and Asian American disabled people.

Research also indicates that race and disability lie at the crux of issues relating to mass incarceration, the school-to-prison pipeline, and police violence against Black people. Black and Latino individuals with disabilities [are significantly more likely](#) to have been arrested by age 28 than their white counterparts. Also, [one third to one half](#) of police killings involve people with disabilities, many of them Black men.

Race and disability, Lewis writes, are "the most dangerous intersection history has ever held."

Racial Equity and Disability

Dr. Angel Miles, a policy expert at Access Living in Chicago, works to expand home and community-based care options for disabled people. With funding from the Chicago Community Trust, she is championing the idea that health disparities can't be solved without a focus on the intersections of race and disability. People of color with disabilities often can't access affordable home care and are more likely to wind up in poorly financed nursing homes.

"Disability rights initiatives have often taken a colorblind approach," she notes. "And then diversity initiatives do not tend to think of disability as an aspect of diversity. Disabled people of color are stuck in the middle because our needs cannot be met through a single-issue lens. Rather an intersectional focus is needed to understand how our multiple identities impact our lives."

California offers a clear example of how a racial-equity effort can miss its goals if it ignores issues related to disabilities. The Stanford Justice

Advocacy Project found that heralded criminal-justice changes in the state had achieved much, cutting the prison population by 25 percent in a decade. But over the same time, the number of prisoners with mental illness increased by a quarter. What seemed promising, the report [concluded](#), failed because individuals with disabilities hadn't been considered.

By neglecting disability, racial-equity advocates also are leaving powerful allies on the sidelines — veterans at

KEY DATA

20%

Share of Americans with disabilities who are people of color. Some estimates indicate that 30 percent of Native Americans live with disabilities

mobilization whose experiences with discrimination could strengthen equity arguments on issues such as immigration and housing.

Lawyer Katherine Pérez, co-founder of the National Coalition for Latinxs With Disabilities and director of the Coelho Center for Disability Law, Policy, and Innovation at Loyola Marymount University, says the Americans With Disabilities Act, because it codifies principles of inclusion, is an effective legal tool to counter the exclusion proposed by immigration laws.

Immigration lawyers have been “banging their heads against the wall fighting these restrictive immigration laws and trying to get people out of

[U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement] detention centers,” Pérez says. “Generally speaking, the ADA could shut down ICE detention centers because they fail to provide appropriate medical and mental healthcare and create other unsafe conditions.” One case that is testing this legal theory is the [Fraihat](#) case.

Holly O'Donnell, CEO of the Bazelon Center for Mental Health Law, sees a similar dynamic in cases its legal team takes on with racial-justice groups. “A disability-law strategy is a lot easier to win,” she says.

‘We Don’t Do Disability Work’

In the early 2000s, just a decade after passage of the ADA, disability advocates began to attest that the disability movement was led by and centered on the experiences of its white leaders. Patty Berne, Mia Mingus, Eli Clare, Leroy Moore, and the late Stacy Milbern, promoted a “second wave” disability rights movement based on a [“disability justice” framework](#). The original movement, they said, “invisibilized the lives of peoples who lived at intersecting junctures of oppression” — including disabled people of color.

Grant makers have been slow to recognize the race-disability dynamic. “We get a lot of pleasant nods when we talk about it,” says the leader of one nonprofit. “People say, ‘We don’t do disability work.’”

Surveys show that less than [1 percent](#) of full-time foundation staff nationally are individuals with disabilities. Also, foundations and donors frequently view funding for disabled people narrowly, with grants allocated for health or social-service work. “Stigma is alive and well,” says Laurie Garduque, criminal-

justice director at the MacArthur Foundation, “and we’re going to have to confront that in the same way we’ve had our reckoning with race.”

The Pittsburgh-based FISA Foundation, which supports women, girls, and individuals with disabilities, began to home in on racial equity and

KEY DATA

40%

Share of Black Americans with disabilities who live in poverty, compared with 24 percent of white Americans with disabilities.

disability when grantees and partners working with girls of color pushed to disaggregate school-to-prison data. The data showed disparities rooted in race but also in disability. “That was very powerful,” says Kristy Trautmann, executive director. “We owe a debt to the women of color leading these efforts. They were bringing it to us.”

Similarly, the Pittsburgh Foundation found that qualitative and quantitative data from grantees and its work on housing, juvenile justice, and other initiatives demonstrated that disability had to be a focus of its racial-equity efforts. “Light bulbs went off for us,” says Michelle McMurray, vice president for program and community engagement, regarding reports that residents with disabilities were having difficulties finding new housing as their largely Black and Latino neighborhood was being gentrified.

The Ford Foundation had a public reckoning with its failure to consider disability in its work. President Darren Walker was widely hailed when he announced in 2015 that the grant maker would focus on inequality, but disability advocates quickly noted Ford’s plans didn’t even include the word “disability.”

Since then, Ford has embedded disability across all its lines of work. Last year, upon the 30th anniversary of the passage of the ADA, Walker announced that over two years, Ford had spent [more than \\$20 million](#) on projects and organizations focused on disability and another \$60 million on social-justice organizations working toward disability inclusion.

With the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, Ford created the Presidents’ Council on Disability Inclusion in Philanthropy, which has 17 grant makers. The council has launched the [Disability Inclusion Pledge](#), which more than 50 foundations and philanthropy-serving groups [have signed](#). Each commits to reshaping programs, policies, and practices to be more inclusive of people with disabilities.

Early Grant Making

Here are a few select examples of initial work by grant makers. They aim to:

- **Strengthen disability groups.**

The \$13 million, five-year [Disability Inclusion Fund](#) — which is hosted at Borealis Philanthropy, was created and supported by the Presidents’ Council — works to bolster the network of groups focused on disability justice. In its first grants, awarded last year, the fund partnered exclusively with organizations led by disabled individuals; nearly two-thirds of those leaders are people of color. Ford grantee Detroit Disability

Power is building the organizing and political power of the city's disability community. The city this summer released its first [strategic plan](#) to improve housing, health care, employment opportunities, and more for people with disabilities.

- **Target resources to people of color with disabilities.**

The Bank of America Charitable Foundation recently announced grants to expand mental health resources for communities of color and support mental health efforts for young people of color. “Young people of color have disproportionately been affected by stressors related to the economic and health-related impacts” of the pandemic, said Kerry Sullivan, the foundation's president.

- **Make the connection between racial equity and disability.**

The FISA Foundation, the Pittsburgh Foundation, and the Heinz Endowments have a [comprehensive series of virtual programs](#) to educate their grantees about the connections between racial and disability equity. The [National Black Justice Coalition](#), the largest Black LGBT/SGL organization, receives Ford funding to scale up their long-standing work of explicitly including disability in their day-to-day operations.

- **Focus ongoing disability advocacy and inclusion work on race.**

The WITH Foundation, a family foundation that provides comprehensive and accessible health care for adults with intellectual and developmental disabilities, narrowed its grant making in recent years to efforts directed at those “most marginalized and most impacted” by virtue of their race, ethnicity,

and gender or sexual identity, says executive director Ryan Easterly. “We specifically ask all of our applicants and grantees how they are addressing disability justice.”

- **Bring together disability and racial-equity advocates.**

KEY DATA

36%

Share of Latino adults with disabilities who don't have a high school degree, compared with 16 percent of white adults with disabilities

With general operating support from the Chicago Community Trust, Disability Lead is creating a “community of practice” so that advocates from racial-equity movements can connect with their counterparts in the disability rights and justice movements to collaborate, share resources and best practices, and coordinate efforts and events. “We're making the argument that disability is inextricably linked to racial equity,” says Disability Lead executive director Emily Blum.

- **Bring a disability lens to racial-equity work.**

The Bazelon Center for Mental Health Law joined with the Disability Rights Education and Defense Fund and others to argue in a legal case that prison inmates with intellectual and developmental disabilities — including a disproportionate number

of people of color — were cycling in and out of prison in Alameda County, Calif., because they lacked appropriate community-based mental-health treatment and housing. The U.S. Department of Justice found that the county was in violation of the ADA and instructed it to change its approach in a “fundamental way,” the [Bazelon Center](#) said, “reflecting a changed federal approach to criminal-justice reform.”

As part of a \$1.25 billion, five-year commitment to advance racial equality and economic opportunity, the Bank of America Charitable Foundation is targeting funds to disability groups as well as organizations that support disabled people with housing, employment, and economic mobility issues. The grantee SE Works in Portland, Ore., is addressing housing insecurity for people of color and people with disabilities.

Access Living in Chicago is partnering with racial-equity advocates as well as other disability organizations on housing, immigration, health, and police violence. Following a 2019 summit of immigrant and disability organizations, it helped put together a coalition that now dives into policy battles and works with immigrants who have disabilities to help them protect their rights and get access to health care. The group also took a leading role in a movement for state legislation passed this year to establish an emergency response to mental-health emergencies that does not involve police.

Early Lessons In Creating Inclusive Grantmaking Organizations

At the report’s close, we share resources from grant makers that outline what they’ve learned and their

recommendations. Here are a few takeaways:

- **Focus internally.**

Ford has changed its hiring practices, communications, coding of grants, grant applications, and more. Even small items have received attention: Business cards are now printed with Braille.

Open Society Foundations, one of the first grant makers involved in the disability-rights movement, has pursued similar changes, prompted in part by the hiring of Sarah Napoli, a disability-inclusion expert who is now the acting director of diversity, equity, and inclusion. Napoli has rolled out training across all departments, and Open Society’s operations management group — a cross-department team of leaders — has made disability inclusion its focus for the past two years, leading to changes in communications, hiring, events, and more.

- **Make everything you do — programs, events, communications, and grant applications — accessible.**

The Maryland Philanthropy Network, which signed the Disability Inclusion Pledge, has holistically reviewed its operations, from the font size in its PowerPoint presentations to the design of its new building. Charlotte Haase, the group’s communication and data manager, says it deployed a universal design-like approach to go beyond ADA requirements and make the building accessible and inviting for as many people as possible.” How do we get to universal design as the standard rather than a paid add-on?” Haase says. “Why do you have to pay extra to be thoughtful to all humans?”

- **Seek out members of the disability community for staff, leadership, and board positions.**

Disability advocates praise the selection of Nikki Brown-Booker, a Filipino American Black woman with an autoimmune disorder, as the program officer of the Disability Inclusion Fund. “It really matters who’s at the table,” says Rebecca Cokley, a Ford program officer hired to develop its first U.S. disability-rights program strategy.

- **Bring on individuals with disabilities as advisers and partners.**

Many foundations, citing the “nothing

KEY DATA

35%

Share of working adults of color with disabilities who lost their jobs in the pandemic’s first months, compared with 20% of all workers with disabilities.

for us without us” credo of disability advocates, have adopted participatory grant making. The WITH Foundation decides its grants with a committee of individuals with disabilities who are paid to help make the selections. They have direct access to executive director Easley and other foundation leaders, and each has a vote on grant applications. Also, WITH provides training to help them prepare to join other advisory groups and nonprofit boards, expanding their influence.

- **Evaluate grant-proposal requests to ensure they are inclusive of those with disabilities.**

During its [100&Change](#) competition to identify a single proposal to back with a \$100 million grant, MacArthur

[commissioned](#) Access Living and Mobility International USA to, among other things, assess the impact of semifinalist proposals on people with disabilities as well as their measures to ensure accommodation and accessibility for those individuals.

- **Recognize that the field is new.**

In its [first year of grant making](#), the Disability Inclusion Fund awarded grants to groups whose average budget was \$365,000; 60 percent of the organizations have fewer than five staff members. Brown-Booker did considerable outreach to recruit potential grant partners, some of whom were unfamiliar with the traditional grant-making process. The fund accepted applications in a variety of alternative formats, even accepting them via video and phone. “We really wanted to lift up the new, grassroots organizations that are really doing good work but may not get recognized as much for that work,” Brown-Booker says.

- **Don’t let traditional grant-making processes dictate your approach.**

Rachele Tardi and Zack Turk, who sought out disabled activists for the Open Society Foundations’ Community Youth Fellowships program, say leadership gave them freedom to experiment and make mistakes. “We could let go of perfectionism in the grant-making process and change timelines to build in buffers and plan for the unexpected,” Turk says.

Grant makers must recognize how ableism intersects with all systems of oppression to create major barriers to equity. Achieving racial equity will only succeed if disability inclusion is seen as a key strategic element.

Resources

The Intersection of Race and Disability

- [Annual Disability Statistics Compendium](#), University of New Hampshire's Institute on Disability. It includes national and state-level data.
- [Disability Statistics](#), Cornell University's Yang-Tan Institute.
- [“Adults With Disabilities: Ethnicity and Race”](#), Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.
- [“Race, Ethnicity, and Disability: The Financial Impact of Systemic Inequality and Intersectionality”](#), National Disability Institute.
- [“Financial Inequality: Disability, Race and Poverty in America”](#), National Disability Institute.
- [“Racial Equity and Disability”](#), a webinar by the Disability & Philanthropy Forum.

Information for Disability Inclusion Grant Making

Several grant makers and philanthropic organizations have created guides and checklists for foundations and others to change their operations, organizational cultures, and grant making to embrace disability inclusion.

- [Disability Access and Inclusion Checklist](#), created by Access Living and Mobility International USA for the MacArthur Foundation's 100&Change competition.
- [Disability Inclusion Menu](#), Disability & Philanthropy Forum.
- [Disability Inclusion Toolkit](#), created by the Ford Foundation for its grant partners and other organizations.
- [“The Time Is Now: Funding Diverse, Equitable, and Inclusive Youth Fellowships.”](#) Rachele Tardi and Zack Turk, Open Society Foundations.

Grant-Making Overviews

- [“Disability Inclusion in Philanthropy”](#), National Network of Consultants to Grantmakers.
- [Landscape Analysis](#), by Sandy Ho for the Disability Inclusion Fund.