

## The New Minority

It's no secret that ethnic and racial demographics in the U.S. are changing. What may be less obvious is that another minority is on the rise—one that crosses lines of age, ethnicity, gender, race, sexual orientation and socioeconomic status. Americans with disabilities now number 54 million. That means that 20 percent of the population reports a physical or mental condition that interferes with one or more major life activities.

With nearly 40 percent of working-aged disabled people living in poverty, people with disabilities are the poorest minority group in the country. As a group, they are the least likely to be well-educated and are the most isolated and often least visible segment of the population.

What distinguishes the disability community from other minority groups is that, since anyone might acquire a disability at some point in life—whether through illness, accident or aging—it is the only minority that any one of us can join at any time.

## Funding Disability

Notwithstanding the substantial numbers of people with disabilities in American society, relatively few grantmakers devote a significant amount of funding to this group. A 2001 survey by the Disability Funders Network (DFN) found that only five percent of California foundation funding goes to disability issues. The recognition of the disability community in national funding circles is minimal as well. Only 4 percent of grant funds on the national level in 2001 went to programs serving people with disabilities. People who identify as having disabilities are similarly underrepresented on boards or staffs of foundations.

The Disability Funding in California study also found that when disability funding *is* awarded, it is usually in the health arena, reflecting a common perspective that sees people with disabilities as invalids who need to be “made well.” However, the truth is that most people with disabilities are not sitting around waiting for a cure, but instead want independence and full inclusion in society.

## Disability Funding and Traditional Foundation Priority Areas

The basic needs of people with disabilities are not very different from those of other groups; they include employment, health care, education, family services, housing, transportation, and participation in the arts and communal activities. And while the disability community has some needs that do not fit neatly into most foundations' traditional program areas, it is not necessary to have a designated disability program area to make a difference. Foundations can have a positive impact on this underserved community by the simple act of including people with disabilities in their ongoing grant programs. The examples that follow are grants made by members of the Disability Funders Network (DFN) or to nonprofits who are associate DFN members.

- **Employment:** The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) opened many doors, but few of them have led to work. Only 3 in 10 disabled people aged 16 to 64 work part- or full-time. Providing physical and programmatic access to job training programs gets people into meaningful employment. *Example:* The FISA Foundation in Pittsburgh, PA, funded the replication and dissemination of a program model that promotes employment opportunities for people with disabilities through entrepreneurship and community partnerships.
- **Health Care:** People with disabilities face significant barriers to obtaining basic health and wellness services. Foundations can help patients and providers alike by supporting “culturally competent” training, increasing disability knowledge among practitioners, and addressing the lack of accessible equipment and inadequate means of communication. *Example:* The National Spinal Cord Injury Association (Bethesda, MD) received a grant to develop a hard copy and web-based guide for understanding and accessing health insurance after spinal cord injury.
- **Education:** The passage of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) in 1975 enabled most children with disabilities to finally attend public schools, but battles still rage over the extent to which students with disabilities can actually obtain a “free, appropriate public education,” and disabled students still lag behind their nondisabled peers in high school completion and higher education. Foundation funding can support special education reform and can assist students in making the transi-

tion from school to work and higher education. *Example:* The Manuel D. and Rhoda Mayerson Foundation supported education advocates and attorneys to help insure that the needs of children with disabilities are being addressed appropriately in the education system.

- **Family and Social Services:** Nearly half of single mothers receiving Temporary Assistance for Needy Families have a disability or a disabled child. Supporting health and social service agencies that are physically accessible and provide alternate communication and training options is empowering for disabled parents and children both. *Example:* The Welfare Law Center in New York City received a grant to identify failures of a welfare agency to identify “invisible” psychiatric conditions and developmental, learning and physical disabilities, and to use negotiation, public education and other means to advocate for bringing the agency into compliance with the ADA.
- **Aging:** Aging and disability are closely connected and, in many cases, one and the same. Over 40 percent of seniors aged 65 and older have a disability. Supporting community-based housing, accessible transportation, affordable health care and other services promotes independent living for all. *Example:* The Archstone Foundation in Long Beach, CA, funded the Independent Living Skills Program, which supports visually impaired older adults by providing individualized rehabilitation training to partially-sighted seniors who live independently.
- **Arts & Culture:** People with disabilities face a number of obstacles to participation in arts and cultural events. High ticket costs, physical barriers for patrons and performers, difficulty hearing and seeing and so forth keep potential new participants away. Audience-building efforts like subsidized tickets, large print programs, real-time captioning and other assistive technologies can benefit all audiences. *Example:* American Express Company (New York, NY) supported The Theatre Development Fund's Theatre Access Project, which provides people with physical disabilities access to New York City theaters and performing arts events.
- **Systems Integration:** Much has been said about the negative impact of the “silo mentality,” which segments support systems into separate arenas and does not give full recognition to the integration required to make these systems workable for the

individuals they were intended to serve. For example, many people on Social Security disability benefits want to work, but there is a huge disincentive—they may lose the medical benefits they need to survive when they leave the benefit rolls for a job. Funding efforts to integrate the employment support and health insurance systems for people with disabilities can turn unemployed people into contributing members of the community. *Example:* The Alliance Healthcare Foundation (San Diego, CA) funded the World Institute on Disability to train public agencies and community-based disability organizations in the county on integrating new and existing medical benefit regulations for people with disabilities who are working or planning to return to work.

## Disability-Inclusive Grantmaking

There are other strategic ways to include disability in your foundation's grantmaking. The Disability Funders Network can provide resources and technical assistance to help with these and other strategies:

- Make sure your organization's working definition of "diversity" and your thinking on social issues include disability.
- Use the expertise of local disability organizations and consultants to learn about disability rights, reasonable accommodation and assistive technology – concepts that promote equality of opportunity.
- Learn about accessibility and provide physical access to offices and meetings. Offer materials in alternate formats and make your website usable to people who rely on assistive technology.
- Incorporate questions about disability access to programs and services in your grant review process.
- Expand outreach to the disability community when distributing RFPs and recruiting candidates for board, staff and consultant positions.
- Provide educational and experiential opportunities for current board and staff to help them learn about disability issues.
- Address the communications gap between foundations and disability organizations by expanding outreach to disability groups in the application process and clearly signaling their eligibility, providing feedback on rejected proposals, and making some time for site visits and in-person meetings.

## Disability Funding in California Study

The 2001 DFN study gathered survey information from 108 grantmakers and in-depth interviews of 20 grantseekers in California with a wide range of perspectives and experience with disability issues. The study, funded by The California Endowment, provides a detailed portrait of disability giving in a populous state with active disability communities and is also intended to serve as a model for similar studies in other states and regions. For the executive summary and complete study, go to [www.disabilityfunders.org](http://www.disabilityfunders.org).

The Disability Funders Network is a grantmakers' affinity group whose mission is to promote awareness, support and inclusion of people with disabilities and disability issues in grantmaking programs and organizations. DFN offers:

- "How-to" guides to help funders integrate disability into their grantmaking
- Other tools and resources for effective disability grantmaking
- Reports and research on hot disability topics
- Disability policy and funding updates
- Professional development
- Regional workshops and sessions at the annual Council on Foundations conference
- Active listservs and regular electronic newsletters
- Discounts on selected disability publications such as Disability Funding News, a bi-weekly newsletter from CD-Publications.

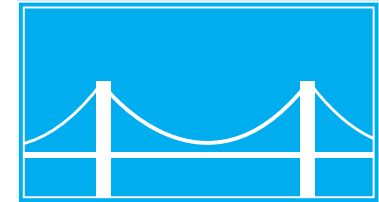
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# Cross-Currents in the Mainstream: Including Disability in Foundation Funding Priorities



## DISABILITY FUNDERS NETWORK

*A bridge between the disability  
community and organized philanthropy*

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