



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

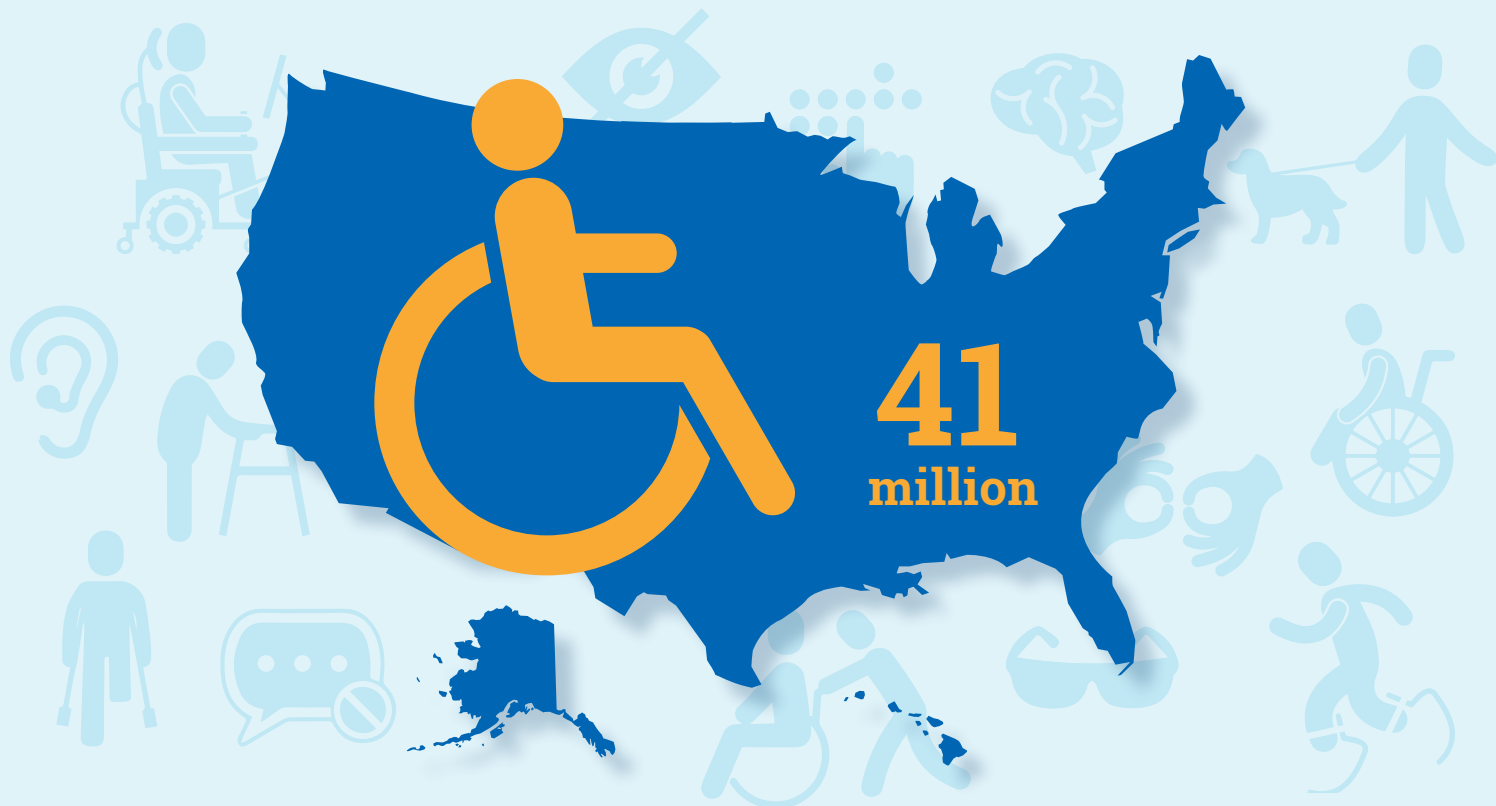
**ADVANCING ECONOMIC JUSTICE**  
for People with Disabilities

**More than 41 million people in the United States (12.6% of the population) have disabilities that affect their ability to work or engage in major life activities. Helping this population achieve economic security, build assets, and achieve economic mobility—by removing systemic barriers, shifting discriminatory attitudes, and providing needed tools—is a core part of an economic justice agenda.**

Disabled people with intersecting racial, ethnic, or gender identities suffer economic injustice more acutely; that compound discrimination warrants special attention, including development of both intentional strategies and focused supports and solutions. Philanthropy has the opportunity—and responsibility—to invest in solutions that eradicate barriers to wealth building and advance economic justice for disabled people.

Those barriers are evident in the economic realities of this population. People with disabilities earn less; they are more likely to be unemployed, less likely to have a bachelor's degree, and more likely to live in poverty. They are also three times more likely to be unbanked, and the majority have little or no emergency savings; many are burdened by medical debt. Most are, or will be, dependent on Social Security income in

retirement, which is often inadequate because of low-wage or intermittent employment. Less than 15% own their homes, and those who rent are more likely to be burdened by rents that consume 50% or more of their income. On any given day across shelters, 25% of the homeless population have a disability. Set against these limitations is the reality that living with a disability is expensive—a household with an adult who has a work-limiting disability requires, on average, 28% more income to reach the same standard of living as a similar household without disability. Because means-tested public assistance programs do not take these additional costs into account, many disabled people are shut out of programs like SNAP and Medicaid even though they are very much in need. When disability intersects with race, gender, or ethnicity, the difficulties are compounded; net wealth for these households plunges in comparison to White households with disability.





# Eliminating Barriers

Grantmakers can work to address key barriers that limit the economic mobility of people with disabilities.

**1** | **Entrepreneurs with disabilities experience barriers to accessing the financial tools they need to build their businesses and achieve financial mobility.**

Nearly 2 million small business owners have one or more disabilities, and people with disabilities start businesses at a higher rate than those who are not disabled. Businesses owned by people with disabilities often have inadequate access to traditional financial channels for credit and capital, lack assets, and face public benefits-related issues. Philanthropy can address these issues by providing intentionally targeted flows of capital, alternative lending risk assessment, public-private startup or expansion funds, or disability-informed legal and technical assistance.

**2** | **Without adequate insurance and income and asset-preservation supports, workers who incur a disability often free fall into financial distress and asset loss.**

One in four persons will become disabled during their working years; one in three can expect to have a disability for 90 days or longer, and one in seven can expect to have a disability for five years or longer. Individuals who experience onset of a disability during midlife are three times more likely to be asset poor than those who have never been work-disabled. Just under half of these individuals reported using all their savings to pay for medical expenses, accessible transportation, and adaptive services. Systemic solutions are needed to enable a person with disability avoid free falling into financial distress.

Important advocacy agenda items include establishing short-term disability benefits to help COVID long-haulers; shortening Social Security disability application processing times; updating SSI benefits to at least 100% of the federal poverty level; reforming outdated policies such as asset limits that create ongoing financial insecurity; removing waiting periods for access to health insurance; and enacting a permanent federal paid family and medical leave law for serious illnesses.

**3 | Key disability benefits limit income, restrict assets, and create unjust debts in the form of overpayments, exacerbating financial precarity.**

Some people with disabilities never interface with disability programs, while others need that support at some point. Still others are supported by one or more publicly funded disability income and service programs, such as SSDI, SSI, or Medicaid HCBS Waivers. However, these programs can inhibit economic advancement, through asset limits that prevent recipients from building wealth or protecting asset values, severe limits on work that force people with disabilities who cannot work full time out of the labor market altogether, and overpayments that the recipients are expected to pay back even if they were completely unaware of the overpayment. Grantmakers can help to catalyze policy changes in the Social Security Administration to limit enforcement of overpayment reimbursements and support the provision of benefits counselors, who have been found to help benefits recipients manage overpayments and maintain employment.

**4 | People with disabilities have acute needs for affordable and accessible housing.**

People with disabilities are acutely impacted by the current housing affordability crisis. People with disabilities are more likely to be burdened by high housing costs, and homeowners with disabilities are twice as likely to have their home foreclosed on. Philanthropy can support experiments with new financing models, land trusts, co-ops, and other models to support homeownership; new models for rental housing; and advocacy for affordable housing development.

**5 | Programs designed to increase the economic security of individuals with low to moderate incomes underserve people with disabilities.**

Like other populations with low incomes, the financial lives of people with disabilities are complicated by limited incomes, high and unpredictable expenses, limited access to safe and affordable credit, and little to no emergency savings. But community-based programs designed to increase the economic security of individuals and families underserve this population, due to a handful of practices that create programmatic barriers to service. For instance, most entities do not ensure their website and other technology tools are accessible. Disability advocates report common accessibility issues for managing student loans, signing up for benefits, and receiving workplace training on federal websites. Funders can help by supporting technical support to make programs and publications accessible; helping organizations establish connections to the disability community, identify and fill service gaps, and rethink limited marketing approaches that leave out individuals with disabilities; and offering disability-focused training for financial coaches and counselors.

# Changing Policy

Grantmakers can also support efforts to change policies that create or reinforce barriers to wealth building, by providing focused support for narrative change and funding for research, advocacy, and testing of new strategies. Philanthropy can help with a range of efforts.

## 1 | Create systems and programs to foster growth of small businesses owned by people with disabilities.

Small business owners with disabilities compete for government contracts in a larger pool of “economically disadvantaged” applicants, with no programs tailored or funds earmarked to support their unique needs and circumstances. Nor do SBA programs specifically include or address disabled business owners. Philanthropic opportunities could bridge gaps for entrepreneurs with disabilities, by improving access to financial education and counseling, mentorship, and other resources; increasing tax credits and other supports to incentivize investment in and contracting with businesses with disabled owners; connecting entrepreneurs to financial products and services that facilitate business growth and expansion; supporting research initiatives that explore issues faced by entrepreneurs with intersectional identities; and testing promising policy and programmatic approaches.

## 2 | Create short- and long-term disability insurance that provides comprehensive support.

Public policy and funding can ensure that everyone has some form of disability insurance coverage, create tax provisions that remove tax liability from short-term or long-term disability benefit payments, and provide better financial cushions through expanded social benefit programs. Philanthropic funding is needed to support advocates for mandatory short-term disability coverage and medical leave rights in every state. Philanthropists, financial institutions, and national insurers could fund or develop the business case for low-interest, short-term loan products, affordable lost-income insurance, and insurance terms that maintain supportive services and provide individuals with liquid resources until they can return to work or become eligible for publicly funded disability benefits.

## 3 | Modify publicly funded programs to account for disability-related expenses and allow recipients to maintain assets.

Many people with disabilities rely on public funding at some point. But public programs do not recognize the additional financial challenges disability brings, and they often impose asset limits that do not allow those receiving the benefit to build a financial cushion. On top of these limits, disability brings with it real costs, increasing income needs for families dealing with disability. Increasing monthly income limits and removing asset limits from eligibility criteria for publicly funded programs improves the wealth-building capabilities and opportunities for long-term financial security of people who receive means-tested benefits—including people with disabilities. Changing tax credit and income support policies to recognize the additional cost of living with a disability would allow more households that have persons with disabilities to be lifted out of poverty and positioned to build economic security. Philanthropy can support the case, help fund financial modeling to prove the impact of such changes, and support studies to demonstrate the impact of adjusting policies to account for the cost of disability.

## 4 | Protect home affordability by working to increase affordable, accessible housing stock.

The affordable housing crisis makes it even more challenging for people with disabilities, who have unique needs around affordability and accessibility, to find and keep quality housing that meets those needs. For homebuyers and homeowners, targeted income support and down payment assistance programs could help with a home purchase or fund renovations to make the home accessible. Adjusting existing homeownership programs to be more inclusive and creating more dedicated assistance programs for the disability community could also help expand homeownership among people with disabilities. Renters would benefit from strengthening housing finance programs, with an eye toward affordable housing that is intentionally accessible, integrated, and inclusive. Increases in the number of HUD housing vouchers available to persons with disabilities and Public Housing Authority preferences for people with disabilities are

needed to serve the full spectrum of renters with disabilities. Opportunities for philanthropy include improving access to education and counseling for renters, homebuyers, and homeowners with disabilities; advocating for increased availability of income supports and tax credits, safe and affordable mortgage products, and flexible capital to support renters, homebuyers, and homeowners with disabilities; supporting the development of affordable, accessible, and inclusive housing; and funding advocacy for changes to tax and housing laws, including HUD and other housing development programs, to make housing more affordable, accessible, and available for people with disabilities.

**5 Intentionally include people with disabilities in guaranteed income design and pilots and expand ABLÉ account programs.**

Guaranteed income programs provide an unrestricted monthly income supplement to a designated group of people. Guaranteed income programs have been found to reduce income volatility, increase levels of full-time employment, improve health and well-being, reduce depression and anxiety, and create opportunities for individuals to build financial security. Program design for guaranteed income programs must intentionally include the disability community to address barriers to participation such as benefit alignment, and messaging across service providers. Grantmakers can advance guaranteed income programs through direct service, system and capacity building, policy and advocacy, and research and innovation. They also can test and invalidate the restrictions on assets and income in benefit programs and support narrative and policy changes that center the economic dignity and equity of people with low incomes. Intentional inclusion of the disability community in design and evaluation of these programs will ensure a broad guaranteed-income agenda to advance equity communitywide.

Savings accounts created by the Achieving a Better Life Experience Act of 2014 (ABLE accounts) provide a wealth-building vehicle for qualified individuals with disabilities, because the nontaxable accounts are exempt from asset-limit criteria for public benefits programs. They can also be used to build retirement savings. Philanthropic funding could seed ABLE accounts for eligible children and adults with disabilities in traditionally marginalized communities defined by the intersection of disability, race, ethnicity, and gender. These payments could be supported by research that

documents the impact of ABLE accounts on quality-of-life measures as well as short-term and longer-term financial stability. Philanthropic funding could also focus on public education and outreach aimed at changing the narrative toward increasing individual agency to foster asset building through the use of ABLE accounts.

## Summary

Grantmakers can accelerate the achievement of financial stability and wealth accumulation for people with disabilities by adding a disability economic justice lens to the ways they **LEARN, PRACTICE, INVEST, OPERATE, and MEASURE.**

Intentional inclusion of the disability population in all economic security and asset-building grantmaking includes engaging individuals with disabilities and disability organizations as design partners, program providers, research team members, and knowledge translators.



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