DISABILITY 101

A natural part of the human experience

What is disability?

According to the legal definition set forth by the Americans with Disabilities Act, a person with a disability is someone who has a physical or mental impairment that substantially limits one or more major life activities.

However, this definition doesn't really offer a full picture of disability. It's important to recognize the diversity of disability. Disabilities can be apparent or non-apparent, something a person is born with or acquired at any point in life. Many people simply envision a wheelchair when thinking about disability, but there are so many types of disabilities beyond mobility disabilities. When we talk about disability, we must remember that this also includes, but is in no way limited to, mental health disabilities, chronic illnesses, intellectual disabilities, and hearing and vision disabilities.

Who is part of the disability community?

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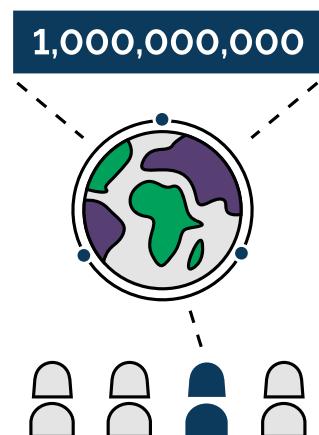
More than **1 billion people** around the world have some type of disability, and that number is growing, especially in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) estimates that in the United States, **1 in 4 adults** have a disability. Disability cuts across class, gender, race, and ethnicity, and disproportionately affects people living in poverty, women, and people of color.

How is our understanding of disability evolving?

Philanthropy has a complicated history to reckon with regarding disability. Many of the earliest philanthropists in the U.S. were direct ideological and financial supporters of eugenics, which sought to eradicate disability from society. Over time, philanthropy shifted largely in the direction of charity toward disabled people, perceiving them as pitiable, in need of help or "fixing." The philanthropic sector as a whole must now engage in the work of shifting away from this mindset, towards an understanding of disability as a natural part of the human experience.

Terms to Know

Models of Disability

There are many models of disability, which are concepts that inform how people think about and understand what disability means. These concepts can often overlap, creating nuanced frameworks of disability.

Charity Model: The perception of people with disabilities as tragic victims of their circumstances who are in need of help from non-disabled people who presume to know what's best to fix the "problem" of disability,

Medical Model: The perception of disability as a problem within a person that deviates from arbitrary ideas of normalcy, meaning it must be cured.

Social Model: The perception of disability as being caused by external factors, including environmental barriers and discriminatory attitudes.

Models of Disability
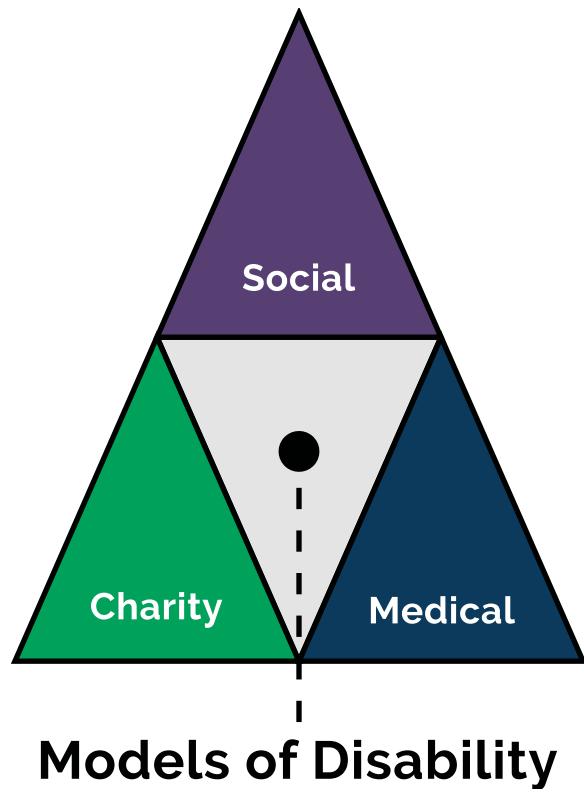
Advancing the Social Model: Disability Rights and Justice

Disability Rights: A movement that seeks equal rights and protections under the law for people with disabilities.

Disability Justice: A movement that originated as a response from the many marginalized groups that are often excluded from disability rights-focused work. It centers the needs and lived experiences of disabled people who are part of historically oppressed groups, including disabled people of color, immigrants, and LGBTQIA+ disabled people.

Key Concepts

Ableism: Stereotypes and practices that devalue or discriminate against disabled people by assuming non-disabled bodies and minds are the "norm."

Accessibility: Ensuring products, services, and environments are fully usable by and available to all.

Accommodations: Modifications to products, services, locations, and opportunities that ensure accessibility.

Join us on the journey to disability inclusion!

The Disability & Philanthropy Forum is committed to expanding philanthropic commitment to disability rights and justice by centering the leadership of the disability community. Visit our website, and if you're eligible, sign up for a free membership.

Disability & Philanthropy Forum