

TO: American News Networks
FROM: The American Association of People with Disabilities (AAPD)
RE: Disabled Voters Are Ready for an Accessible Campaign Cycle
DATE: January 30, 2024

BACKGROUND

People with disabilities make up almost a [quarter](#) of the American public and are a vital voting bloc in every election. There are nearly 40 million eligible voters with disabilities whose lived experiences as disabled people inform their needs and priorities as voters in a variety of ways. In 2020, [17.7 million people with disabilities](#) voted in the United States presidential election, a [six percentage point increase](#) from 2016.

We are the [American Association of People with Disabilities \(AAPD\)](#), a national, nonpartisan, and disability-led organization that advocates for full civil rights for more than 60 million Americans with disabilities, and we are counting on major news networks like yours to ensure that campaign coverage, interviews with candidates, and candidate forums or debates are accessible to all people, including those with disabilities.

As part of our efforts to ensure disabled voters are included in candidate engagement activities and election-related media at a scale appropriate for the size of our community and voting bloc, AAPD recently sent a nonpartisan Disability Presidential Candidate Questionnaire to all declared candidates for President. You can find [more information about the Disability Presidential Candidate Questionnaire here](#).

During the 2024 presidential election cycle, media will play a vital role in helping voters make informed decisions. This memorandum seeks to provide recommendations to news networks to ensure that election information is accessible and relevant to disabled voters. Within it, we provide recommendations for disability-related topics at upcoming Presidential debates and other candidate forums your network or outlet may facilitate. We also have helpful accessibility checklists.

These recommendations include the following:

- 1) Ensure Disabled Voters Can Make Informed Decisions
- 2) Ensure Disabled Voters Can Access Your Information
- 3) Follow Inclusive and Respectful Best Practices

ENSURE DISABLED VOTERS CAN MAKE INFORMED DECISIONS

Most disability advocates and organizations will agree: every issue is a disability issue. The disability community is incredibly diverse and is represented in every single community across the United States. Yet, coverage of various issues – from the economy to climate change – often does not include the impact on or perspective of disabled people.

We recommend and respectfully request all news networks, outlets, and reporters consider doing the following:

- I. Include disabled voters in profiles you are writing of American voters this cycle
- II. Ensure representation of disabled voters in candidate forums and town halls.

- III. Cover and ask candidates questions about issues relevant to the disability community that are on the ballot in 2024. These include, but are not limited to:
- A. Healthcare for People with Disabilities** – Disabled people are one of the most medically underserved populations in the country. Widespread stigmas and systemic ableism are prevalent within our nation’s healthcare systems. Access to quality, affordable healthcare is crucial for people with disabilities who tend to rely more on health services and pay [5-6 times more for healthcare services than nondisabled people](#).
 - B. Home- and Community-based Services** – [Home- and Community-Based Services](#) (HCBS), funded by Medicaid, provide support for tasks of daily living, like eating and dressing, and are essential to preventing the segregation and institutionalization of people with disabilities. These services, used by everyone from young children to elderly adults, help older adults age in place, help families stay together, and help people with disabilities thrive in our communities. There is a dire shortage of care workers and direct support personnel to assist individuals with disabilities and [long waiting lists for services](#), leaving many who could otherwise live at home if their HCBS was funded with no choice but to go into a nursing home.
 - C. Voting Rights** – In 2020, people with disabilities voted at a [7% lower rate](#) than people without disabilities of the same age. This lower turnout gap is influenced by many factors, but especially a high [rate of inaccessible polling places](#) – a 2016 GAO study found [83% of U.S. polling places had one or more impediments to voting](#). In 2024, disabled voters could face even greater inaccessibility, as many states have enacted restrictions on absentee voting, mail-in voting, and who is eligible to assist disabled voters in filling out their ballots, based on false and disproven claims about the 2020 election.
 - D. Reproductive Rights and Bodily Autonomy** – [Bodily autonomy is a core principle of the disability rights movement](#). Policies that restrict access to abortion can drastically exacerbate previously existing threats to the autonomy, health, and overall well-being of disabled people. Nationwide, about [55 percent of low-income disabled women of reproductive age](#) live in states with restrictive abortion law.
 - E. COVID-19** – Despite the end of the Public Health Emergency, the pandemic continues. Disabled people who face greater health risks from COVID-19 must make a difficult choice of taking on risks to access care in settings where others are not masking, or reducing their COVID risk by forgoing important care. Meanwhile, [1 in 13 adults](#) in the U.S. is experiencing disabling symptoms from Long COVID, and at least [18% of people with Long COVID are unable to return](#) to the labor workforce after one year.
 - F. Criminal Justice** – People who are incarcerated at state and federal facilities are [2.5 times more likely](#) to report a disability than non-incarcerated Americans, and many are [denied their rights to basic accommodations](#). Additionally, encounters with law enforcement can be disproportionately dangerous for people with disabilities: Despite representing only 20% of the population, [people with disabilities make up 30-50% of individuals subject to police use of force](#). An estimated [one-third to one-half of people killed by police](#) are people with disabilities.
 - G. Employment and Financial Security of People with Disabilities** – The disability community faces disproportionately high rates of unemployment and under-employment. [According to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics](#), in 2022, the unemployment rate for people with disabilities was 7.6%, more than two times higher than the 3.5% unemployment rate for people without disabilities.

Additionally, it remains legal for people with disabilities to be paid subminimum wages solely on the basis of their disability status. Recent data found many disabled employees who worked under 14(c) certificates earned [an average of \\$3.34 an hour](#), with many disabled workers earning far less. Many vital programs that disabled people rely on, such as Supplemental Security Income (SSI), Social Security Disability Income (SSDI), and Medicaid have [outdated restrictions that discourage and penalize work and saving for beneficiaries](#), forcing many disabled people to live in poverty. People with disabilities want and need to work without jeopardizing their SSI or Medicaid, which pays for disability-related expenses that private insurance does not.

- H. Education for Youth with Disabilities** – The [Individuals with Disabilities Education Act \(IDEA\)](#), passed in 1975, was intended to cover up to 40% of the costs needed to make education accessible for students with disabilities. As of 2017, the federal government is only covering [14.6% of the cost](#), leading to students with disabilities not having equal access to education. While Vocational Rehabilitation programs, local education agencies, and students with disabilities and their families should be planning together for postsecondary transition to employment or higher education, this often does not happen due to gaps in coordination, leading to less than ideal outcomes for students.
- I. Affordable, Integrated, and Accessible Housing** – Rising housing costs have impacted both homeowners and renters, and there is currently a housing shortage. In addition to affordability, many with disabilities also struggle to find housing units that meet their accessibility needs.
- J. Accessible Transportation** – [25 million Americans](#) with disabilities reported difficulty accessing the transportation they need, and over 3 million were housebound as a result. Our nation's dependency on vehicles and highways as well as a lack of affordable, accessible, and reliable public transportation impacts people with disabilities' education, employment, and quality of life. 34 years after the ADA, when mass transit does even exist for communities, an estimated [25% of mass transit stations are not accessible](#). The Inflation Reduction Act made a historic investment in accessible transportation with money for localities to make accessibility upgrades to their transit systems, and continued improvements are desperately needed.
- K. Accessible Technology** – Digital access is a key requirement of full participation in the modern world. People with disabilities must have equal access to websites and web applications, broadband internet, and assistive technologies that connect them to the digital world. The advent of artificial intelligence platforms presents the risk of disabled people being discriminated against by AI platforms that could be used to make hiring or benefit decisions. Additionally, autonomous vehicles are becoming more feasible. These emerging technologies must keep accessibility at the forefront of every stage of their development.
- L. Climate change and emergency preparedness** – People with disabilities are disproportionately impacted by disasters, during which they are [two to four times more likely to die or be injured](#). Additionally, many disabled people have complex, [additional needs related to emergency evacuations and forced displacement](#).

For additional information about the above topics, [AAPD's Disability Presidential Candidate Questionnaire](#) may also be useful. Our team is available to meet to discuss or provide additional information about any section of this memo.

ENSURE DISABLED VOTERS CAN ACCESS YOUR INFORMATION

I. Content Accessibility

- A. Ensure effective communication by including visible qualified American Sign Language interpreters (preferably certified Deaf interpreters), either through on-stage visibility or Picture-in-Picture ratio of at least 16:9, as well as accurate live captioning on all livestreams.
 1. This includes ensuring that interpreters and captions are displayed on the main screen view and are integrated so as not to block other important information, such as name cards of candidates speaking, timer display, or other critical on-screen text.
- B. Ensure that reissued clips on social media include “open captions” (captions that remain visible on the screen for all). Open captions remain with content no matter which platform it is shared on. You can also have your digital media staff add captions to a video before it is uploaded.
- C. Ensure that online written coverage has high quality alternative text on all images and that web pages are accessible to people using screen readers and other assistive devices. [Click here to read AAPD's guide to writing alternative text.](#)

II. In-Person Accessibility at Debates and Candidate Town Halls/Forums

- A. This includes assessing the physical accessibility of your venue prior to selection, ensuring attendees have arrival instructions with accessibility directions, creating appropriate signage, and ensuring that all staff and volunteers are adequately trained and aware of accessibility services for the event. Assign a point of contact for accessibility, to whom disabled attendees can reach out if they have any difficulties.
 1. **For a more complete list of accessibility recommendations, please see the accessibility checklist at the end of this document. We encourage you to adopt your own version of this checklist.**

FOLLOW INCLUSIVE AND RESPECTFUL BEST PRACTICES

In addition to your own newsroom's guidelines for covering disability, we recommend the following resources:

- [Center for Journalism and Disability](#)
- [Center for Disability Rights Media Guide](#)
- [Americans with Disabilities Act National Network Guidelines for Writing About People With Disabilities](#)

AAPD is always creating new resources for external partners, and always excited to hear about disability-specific resources that would be useful to our partners. If specific guidance on a topic would be helpful to your outlet or colleagues, please do not hesitate to let us know.

Contact

If you have questions or wish to discuss any of the recommendations in this document, AAPD is available to you. Please contact AAPD President and CEO Maria Town at mtown@aapd.com and Communications Director Jess Davidson at jdavidson@aapd.com.

We want to provide you with some accessibility guidance to ensure that people with disabilities, people with chronic illnesses, Deaf people, blind people, seniors, and pregnant individuals are able to participate in your event. While you might not be able to check all the boxes, we encourage you to make every effort to follow these guidelines.

1) CHECK YOUR EVENT SPACE IN ADVANCE:

- Are there barrier free pathways to the event space (no stairs, no ramps rising more than 1 in. for every 12 in. in length, thresholds no taller than ½ in, doorways approximately 32 in. wide, elevators being at least 51 in. x 68 in.)?
- Is there at least one accessible bathroom? (min. width is 60 in. w/grab bars behind the toilet and at least one side)
- Are there several electrical outlets for laptops, assistive devices, voice amplifiers, captioning devices, etc.?
- To reduce trip hazards and allow for visual communication, such as sign language, are the routes to and the meeting area itself well lit? Is it free of flashing lights which can be hazardous to those with epilepsy?
- If there is a stage, is there a ramp or lift to get on it?
- Is there a separate 'quiet room' nearby to allow people to cool off?

2) PREPARE FOR YOUR EVENT:

- Ensure you provide event details as early as possible. Include accessibility details and ask participants if they have additional accessibility requests. Assign an accessibility point-of-contact.
- If protestors could appear, consider what access issues may arise if so, and plan accordingly.
- Request participants avoid wearing artificial smells and bringing snacks that include peanuts.
- Communicate the event's COVID policies in advance. Request that attendees mask, or at least mask if they are feeling sick. Consider providing a section where COVID-cautious attendees could sit together, masked, to reduce risk. Place high-quality air purifiers in high-traffic areas.
- If providing food, ask participants if they have food allergies or if they need alternatives.
- Hire sign language interpreting team if requested for small events (up to 15 people). If event is larger, proactively hire a sign language interpreting team and advertise this accommodation. Check out [Registry of Interpreters for the Deaf](#) for suggestions.
- Create signage for accessible walkways, entrances, bathrooms, etc.
- Train all volunteers: 1) On how to interact with people with disabilities. A good sample video for disability sensitivity training can be found on [YouTube](#). 2) Train them on accessibility services for event. Have designated volunteers in charge of accessibility issues at the event.

3) AT YOUR EVENT:

- Walk all routes to check for possible new barriers, including misplaced items or cords. Check to see if automatic door openers work. Make sure the accessible entrance is unlocked.
- Ensure signage to accessibility features are up, including for accessible entrances and pathways.
- Have reserved accessible seating near the front with clear pathways to get to it. Accessible seating can be provided to people who use wheelchairs or other assistive devices, Deaf people, blind people, individuals with chronic illnesses, people who are injured, seniors, and pregnant folks.
- Set up an amplification system and make sure those who are speaking to the crowd (including the speakers and those asking questions) use the amplification system.
- If live streaming or taping, make sure your videographer includes the Sign Language interpreter in the shot. Also, try to caption the videos. Captioning live streams currently requires an outside company like [VITAC](#). Captioning regular videos can easily be done using downloadable apps like [Apple Clips](#) or by uploading the video on [Youtube](#) and editing and downloading the SubRip Subtitle file.