

Towards A More Accessible and Economically Just Chicago



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Table of Contents

Introduction	3
Support Structure for People with Disabilities	4
Economic Development	5
Education	6
Government	7
Housing	8
Transportation	9
National Best Practices and Innovative Policies	10
Vision for a More Accessible and Economically Just Chicago	11
References	12

Introduction

Access Living is a cross-disability nonprofit organization in Chicago, IL that is governed and staffed by majority of people with disabilities. AL is a leader in advocating for a more inclusive society through programs and services that address barriers and equip people with disabilities with the tools to advocate for themselves. The Empowered Fe Fes is an AL advocacy group that is led by women with disabilities to develop campaigns around issues facing women such as reproductive rights and economic justice. This report centers on the Fe Fes' Economic Justice Campaign- specifically, the film illuminating barriers to employment for women with disabilities.

This film focuses on illuminating the existing support structure for women with disabilities to navigate through employment by focusing on five major sectors: economic development, education, government services, housing, and transportation. The film features interviews with 6 women with disabilities discussing their experiences navigating through employment opportunities. It also includes interviews with representatives of 5 key stakeholders and institutions that redress or create barriers to employment for women with disabilities. In addition to interviews, the film documents community events that provide context as to key developments across the aforementioned five major sectors. This provides a holistic picture from a multitude of perspectives of the existing support structure and gaps in the support structure for women with disabilities.

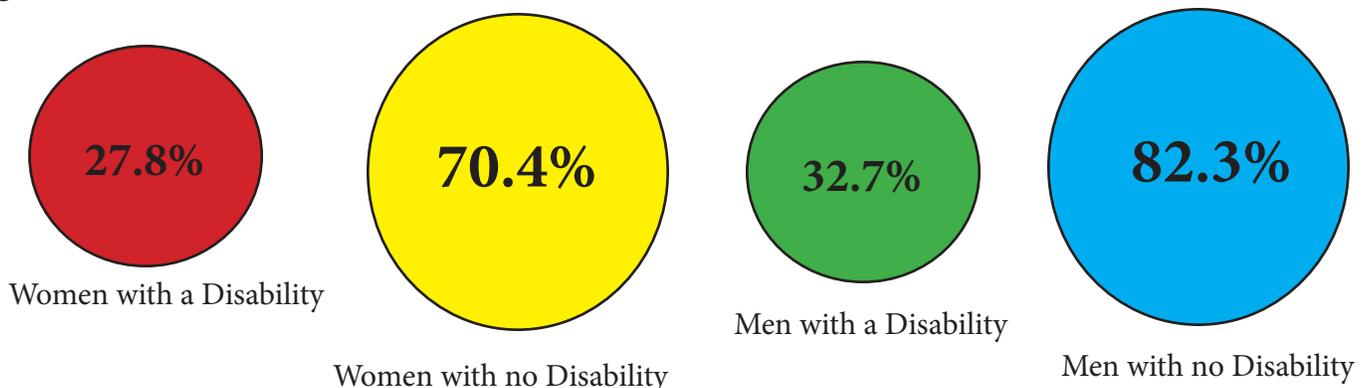
My vision is for women with disabilities to know that just because you have a disability doesn't mean that you can't do anything you want to do. You can be anything you want to be and a lot of people with disabilities don't see that and that's what I want them to see. Don't let nobody put you in a box." - Karen

Beyond the structural framework of both policies and institutions, it is integral to make the voices and lived experiences of women with disabilities central in both identifying the gaps within the support structure and envisioning a more economically just and accessible Chicago. Within this report, interviews and focus groups with 20 women with disabilities as well as 10 different stakeholders are cross-analyzed in order to illuminate the barriers within each of the five sectors and recommendations from women with disabilities. This qualitative analysis of interviews throughout the film reveal first-hand accounts of the successes and drawbacks of the current system in place for women with disabilities.

These personal stories coupled with institutional knowledge integrate experience with research to provide a holistic understanding of the support structure in place. This report uses these stories to inform research around case studies and best practices for innovative economic development for people with disabilities. Ultimately, a vision for a more economically just and accessible Chicago is proposed based on recommendations found through interviews and focus groups. Raising awareness about barriers to employment for a marginalized people in society is critical in order to move forward in creating a more inclusive society that enables people to thrive.

Labor Force Participation Rate, 2014 Annual Average¹

Age 16-64



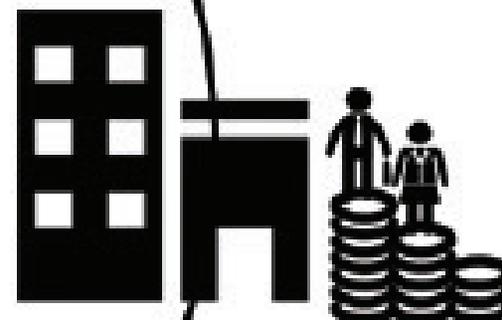
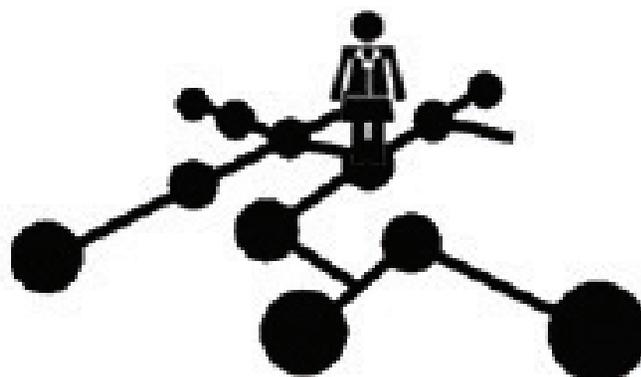
¹ Women's Bureau U.S. Department of Labor, 2015, Women with Disability Issue Brief, p. 1

Support Structure for People with Disabilities

30% of CTA trains are inaccessible



55% of students with disabilities drop out of high school



Average Median Rent for 1br in Chicago

\$ 1,670

Average Median Income for People with Disabilities

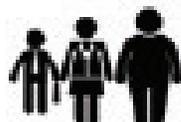
\$ 21,000



Illinois residents receiving benefits on basis of disability

41,000

20% are Young Adults



% People with Disabilities Unemployed (72%)
% People with out Disabilities Unemployed (25%)

Economic Development

Getting a job is necessary to ensure one can be financially independent and have the power of choice in one's life. In Illinois, 2 out of 3 people with disabilities are unemployed, whereas only 3 out of 10 able-bodied people are unemployed¹. For people with disabilities, there are countless barriers to employment that keep them from getting a job:

- Many businesses are physically inaccessible for people with disabilities, which prevents them from being able to enter into businesses and access businesses' services, programs and resources, and also makes working for businesses inaccessible.
- Accommodations may need to be made upon hiring a person with a disability, which some companies view as a burden due to the perception that accommodations are expensive.
- Women with disabilities also face additional barriers in the workplace such as sexual harassment, childcare, maternity leave, and receive lower wages than men.
- The lack of transition services to support youth with disabilities as they transition from school to work leaves them without the guidance needed to successfully navigate through job opportunities.
- Even when hired, people with disabilities also face able-ism in the workplace on a daily basis with employers and coworkers questioning their ability to complete tasks.



¹ ADA25 Chicago, 2015, Disability Statistics

With it being 2016, all companies should be accessible, and if they're not, then shame on the companies. This shouldn't be the case because discrimination is not acceptable at all."

- Alexis

Recommendations from Women with Disabilities

- Make all businesses and buildings accessible.
- Provide comprehensive professional development and transition services for youth with disabilities to ensure they receive professional experiences while in school so they are competitive for job opportunities upon graduating.
- Ensure equity in the workplace in terms of gender, race, class, ability and sexual orientation.
- Provide workshops and counseling on job skills, computer skills, and job application processes to support people with disabilities in applying for and getting jobs.
- Employers and employees must attend trainings on able-ism, disability justice, how to interact with people with disabilities, and how to adapt to situations when you have an employee with a disability. Rather than telling employees with disabilities what they are and are not able to do, employers should ask employees with disabilities what they are able to do and if necessary to demonstrate their capabilities. If a person with a disability is unable to perform a task, employers should provide them with alternate tasks to complete or provide them with the necessary accommodations to complete the work.

Education



“When I’m in a big class, I always fall behind due to certain things teachers would give as assignments that would be easy for others but hard for me. I felt like I needed more one-on-one support and did better when I got that” - Marrcalya



The Chicago Public Schools system is one of the largest in the nation with 400,000 students. Over 80 percent of the student population are students of color from low-income backgrounds and 13 percent of students are in special education. Students with disabilities are more likely to drop out of high school with 1 in 2 students dropping out¹. This dropout rate is what makes education a critical piece in the support structure for people with disabilities to access job opportunities. Below are some obstacles to completing school and accessing job opportunities afterwards:

- Chicago Public Schools budget cuts have left classrooms overcrowded with a high student to teacher/ teacher aides ratio. Students with disabilities are unable to get the in-classroom support they need to thrive.
- Counselors who guide students for transition from school to careers have low expectations for students with disabilities post- high school, often suggesting they stock shelves at grocery stores or work in retail and other low-wage jobs.
- There is a lack of professional development and transition services to provide students with work experience before graduating and connect students with jobs that offer competitive wages upon graduation.
- Students who continue on to pursue higher education are not well-supported by college’s Disability Access Centers to ensure students with disabilities receive the necessary accommodations they need.

¹ Chicago Public Schools, 2015, School Data,

Recommendations from Women with Disabilities

- Increase the special education teachers and teacher aides in classrooms to ensure students receive the one-on-one support they need.
- Provide counselors with trainings on creating a career path or guideline for students based on students’ goals as opposed to imposing limitations on what students with disabilities can achieve professionally.
- Provide comprehensive professional development and transition services for youth with disabilities to ensure they receive professional experiences while in school so they are competitive for job opportunities upon graduating.
- Create pathways for students with disabilities to evaluate services and resources provided to them whether it is from the Disability Access Center or high school counselors. Use these evaluations to guide improvement of services.

Government

The Department of Human Services, Department of Rehabilitation Services and Mayor's Office for People with Disabilities are some of the government departments most visited by people with disabilities. These departments offer services to attempt to address a variety of needs such as: accommodations, supported employment, Social Security Income (SSI), housing services, among others.

However, there is a high demand for resources for people with disabilities and a limited amount of both staff and funding. Since reliance upon government services is significant in the disability community, with nearly 60 percent receiving financial support from state government, government acts as a critical aspect in the support structure for people with disabilities. The gaps in the support services offered by the government are listed below:

- The needs of people with disabilities are often segregated into a certain department or a subsection of a department across multiple departments. This forces people with disabilities' needs to constantly be siloed and they must navigate across multiple departments and referral processes to get their needs met.
- Offices are often under-staffed with counselors to handle the cases of people with disabilities to connect them to the resources they need to thrive.
- Federal subsidy programs such as SSI, SSDI, TANF, SNAP, etc. often operate on a standard guideline like the federal poverty line, which fails to meet the needs of individuals with disabilities who often have a diversity of needs that able-bodied people do not, yet the same resources are provided to recipients across the board.
- There is a lack of people with disabilities in leadership roles across government departments working to meet the needs of residents with disabilities, which often creates a lack of understanding between service-providers and people seeking help.

“The most important thing government services can improve on is meeting individuals’ needs, because right now, pretty much everybody gets the same amount. I think it should be based on individual’s needs, not some numbers line or what they think you should have.”- Karen



Recommendations from Women with Disabilities

- Streamline the support services for people with disabilities to make them more easily accessible.
- Increase number of staff members in government departments to help people with disabilities and increase number of accessible offices to access resources and services.
- Develop a system for individualizing the government subsidies for people with disabilities to meet their needs including a cost of living adjustment that takes into account medical needs, needs for children, among other specific necessities.
- Increase the amount of money provided through subsidized programs like SSI, SSDI, TANF, SNAP, etc.
- Create a transition program from government support services so that people with disabilities are able to support themselves financially when they get a job and their subsidies are cut as a result of having a higher income.
- Hire people with disabilities in leading positions in government departments and organizations and as staff members to ensure their perspective informs programs and services in Chicago and Illinois.
- Have more intentional support system for people with disabilities searching for jobs by preparing them for interviews, helping the search for jobs, and potentially attending interviews with them to ensure they feel supported.

Housing

The state of affordable, accessible housing in Chicago is in critical condition for people with disabilities. There is a significant lack of high quality support services in terms of guiding people with disabilities to find housing in Chicago. Although there are services offered by nonprofits and various government departments, the lack of housing coupled with the high demand from people with disabilities also makes it difficult to provide viable options.

As a result there are programs to make home modifications to housing that is inaccessible to people with disabilities, however this means people with disabilities must move into a house that does not meet their needs and wait months to have their home meet their needs. Below are additional challenges in housing:



“As a black woman with a disability who has a child, I have experienced discrimination from landlords who do not know how to interact with people with disabilities. There needs to be more support for people with disabilities looking for housing, especially if they have kids.”- Laura

- Majority of accessible housing for people with disabilities are single-bedroom apartments, meaning that families that have people with disabilities are often left cramped living in apartments that lack enough space for all members.
- When housing complexes for people with disabilities are built, they are often located in low-income neighborhoods, which often have inaccessible sidewalks, low-quality schools, lack of access to healthy food, among other factors that impact residents' quality of life.
- Landlords often discriminate against people with disabilities, especially women of color who are wheelchair users and have children¹.
- Homeless shelters provide little to no support in transitioning people who are homeless. Homeless shelters are also largely inaccessible physically and programmatically as the coordinators in shelters often lack training around how to support people with physical and/or mental disabilities.

¹ Levy, D.K. et al., 2015, Housing Discrimination, HUD

Recommendations from Women with Disabilities

- Mandate and enforce that all housing developers must include a set number of units for people with disabilities that have 1-4 bedrooms included.
- Place new housing developments for people with disabilities in neighborhoods that have accessible sidewalks, access to healthy food, access to high quality schools, access to accessible transit options, among other accessible amenities.
- Ensure landlords, housing managers, coordinators in homeless shelters and other housing stakeholders attend trainings on how to support people with disabilities in finding housing, going through the application process, providing necessary accommodations, etc.
- Provide more targeted, intentional, and comprehensive support for people with disabilities and maintaining housing.
- Create an emergency fund for people with disabilities to ensure they are not evicted from housing and to ensure that they have the support they need to transition from shelters to housing.
- Provide funds so that people with disabilities are not left unable to support themselves financially when they get a job and their subsidies are cut as a result of having a higher income.

Transportation

The Chicago Department of Transportation's (CDT) train and bus lines as well as the largest paratransit provider in the nation, Pace are two main forms of transportation for people with disabilities. All CDT bus routes are accessible and 69% of train stations are accessible. However, there are obstacles to utilizing these transportation methods:

- Not all routes are physically accessible for people with disabilities. Even the 69% of train stops that have elevators often experience technical difficulties that cause the elevators to stop working, leaving people with disabilities without access to those stops¹.
- The boards for paratransit services such as Pace and the broader CDT do not have representation of people with disabilities.
- PACE offers shared-rides services so multiple riders are being picked up and dropped off across the city of Chicago. Lack of appropriate planning for rides means that majority of riders are picked up and dropped off later than expected which impacts their ability to make appointments on time ranging from medical to professional.
- PACE and paratransit is the largest network of shared-rides for people with disabilities and is largely understaffed without enough vans to meet the demand for rides for people with disabilities.
- Although a discounted fare is offered to people with disabilities who use CDT services and paratransit experience fare increases annually which increasingly makes these rides inaccessible to more people.

¹ Chicago Transit Authority, 2016, Accessibility FAQ,



“You can’t raise fares for CDT when you are serving people with fixed incomes, disabled people and elderly people who are choosing not to pick up their medication so they can pay for fare instead. We shouldn’t have to make those types of choices” -Karen



Recommendations from Women with Disabilities

- Make all CDT transit routes accessible to people with disabilities so they can access resources, services, programs and job opportunities across the city.
- People with disabilities must be represented on the boards of CDT, paratransit, PACE and all services of transportation that people with disabilities use to ensure that their needs are met.
- Para Transit and PACE should create an application that alerts riders when they will arrive, when they are delayed, and can calculate routes to ensure all riders arrive on time and are picked up on time.
- PACE and paratransit should increase the number of vans and staff members working on coordinating rides in order to ensure people with disabilities are provided the most efficient transportation service. People with disabilities should be hired on staff as well to ensure these services are as efficient and accessible as possible.
- Fares should be paid on a sliding scale by riders according to their income and needs on an individual basis.

National Best Practices and Innovative Policies

Two major toolkits regarding national best practices for supporting people with disabilities in securing and maintaining employment have been published by the White House¹ as well as RespectAbility². These toolkits examined states with the highest rates of employment for people with disabilities. Below are two columns detailing the major recommendations made according to national best practices and the status of Chicago, Illinois in applying these practices:

National Best Practices

1. Banning the practice of providing people with disabilities sub-minimum wages for their work.
2. Promoting the Readiness of Minors in Supplemental Security Income (PROMISE) Grant, works with youth who are beneficiaries of Social Security Insurance by providing them with the tools they need to thrive in the workforce.
3. Financial incentives for hiring vocational rehabilitation referrals such as the Work Opportunity Tax Credit, Disability Access Credit in order to support businesses in financing accommodations for people with disabilities in the workplace.
4. Employment First Task Force that fosters collaborations between public and private sectors to redress barriers to employment for people with disabilities.
5. Project SEARCH provides internship opportunities for students with disabilities transitioning from school to work.
6. Business Leadership Network providing best practices to the state, educating supervisors, businesses and the general public about benefits of hiring individuals with disabilities.
7. ABLE Act at the state level enabling individuals with disabilities to save money while maintaining federal benefits and other forms of assistance.
8. Coalition for Integrated Employment to transition people with disabilities into a competitive workforce.

1 Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, 2015, Recruiting, Hiring, and Promoting People with Disabilities: A Resource Guide for Employers

2 Respectability, 2015, Disability Employment First Planning Tool

Legend

-  Not Yet Started or Considered
-  Developing Steadily Toward Goal
-  Meets or Exceeds Goal and is Exemplar for Other States

Status of Best Practices in Chicago, Illinois

-  1. Illinois has not outlawed the practice of providing people with disabilities sub-minimum wages for their employment.
-  2. Although 20 percent¹ of beneficiaries of SSI/SSDI are youth with disabilities in Illinois, there is no PROMISE Grant to specifically support youth with disabilities.
-  3. These tax credits are available in Chicago, Illinois, however few businesses apply for them. In fact, the Department of Commerce and Economic Opportunity's Illinois Corporate Accountability Project does not even list the tax credits relate to accessibility and employing people with disabilities in corporations' reports².
-  4. There is an Employment First Task Force in Chicago called the Economic and Employment Opportunity Task Force for People with Disabilities that is tasked with overseeing the implementation of the Employment First Act. This Act was passed in 2013 in Illinois to ensure that competitive, integrated employment is the first option for people with disabilities. However, there has been a lack of implementation of this Act.
-  5. Project SEARCH is not implemented in Chicago, however there are programs that support youth with disabilities into transitioning into employment.
-  6. The Business Leadership Network in Chicago was active in 2012, however has not been active in recent years.
-  7. The ABLE Act has been passed in Illinois and is in the process of being implemented.
-  8. There is a coalition for competitive, integrated employment as mandated by WIOA.

1 Social Security Administration, 2014, Recipients of Social Security, SSI, or Both

2 State of Illinois Corporate Accountability, 2016, Illinois Corporate Accountability Progress Reports

Vision for a More Accessible and Economically Just Chicago

When looking at national best practices, there is still a lack of economic security within the states used as case studies for people with disabilities to navigate employment opportunities. For example, 1 of 2 people with disabilities are unemployed in the states with top 10 highest employment rates for people with disabilities¹. These best practices also focus specifically on employment and finding jobs, conducting trainings for employers and recruitment efforts to employ people with disabilities. However they do not attempt to apply an economic justice lens to the issue of unemployment among people with disabilities. For example, these best practice recommendations do not redress the additional external factors across sectors such as education, housing, government, transportation, childcare, healthcare, etc. that are critical to people with disabilities' ability to thrive in the workplace and in their personal lives. Even the approach to equipping people with disabilities for employment is viewed with a bare minimum standard that any job is acceptable, without considering the career goals of people. When asking the experts themselves, as women with disabilities, for a more comprehensive support structure to achieve economic security, this is what they have recommended:

1 Respectability, 2015, Disability Employment First Planning Tool

- People with disabilities - and especially women of color with disabilities who are experiencing poverty- must be at the table, making decisions about what is best for them according to their needs to thrive and live a life above the poverty line.
- Women with disabilities and people with disabilities must also be organized and know their rights and create organizations and campaigns together.
- People with disabilities need to be included in economic justice and workers' rights campaigning, reproductive rights, trans-liberation, housing, etc. movements.
- People with disabilities should be provided with pathways to be the employer and create their own businesses and co-operatives.
- There should be professional development programs that align with people with disabilities' career goals, including entrepreneurship, rather than solely setting the expectation for people with disabilities to access employment opportunities in service and retail sectors.
- Supported employment should be made a top priority. Of the 16,945 people in Illinois who received Vocational Rehabilitation services in 2012, only 715 cases, or 4.3 percent, had a goal of supported employment¹.
- People with disabilities should be intentionally represented in every sector in a critical mass in leadership roles and staff positions.
- The work of people with disabilities should be valued. Rather than paying people with disabilities sub-minimum wages, people with disabilities should be provided competitive wages.



“My vision is having jobs that would give me a sense of purpose and independence. I would have more power over my life and be able to contribute more to my community. I would have choice.”- Empowered Fe Fes Focus Group



¹ Equip for Equality, 2014, Illinois Employment First Blueprint

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