



# Intro to Disability Justice

**Ableism is a system of oppression that privileges certain bodies, minds, and abilities, resulting in unfair and unjust treatment of people with disabilities. Like all systems of oppression, ableism is baked into every aspect of society, and those of us with privilege must commit to being in solidarity with disabled people. Disability touches all areas of society, and we at GLSEN know that LGBTQ+ organizing and advocacy must include a clear understanding of ableism and disability justice. Join a GSA or other identity-based affinity group.**

## What is disability justice?

According to **Project Lets**, a disability justice organization, the term disability justice was coined out of conversations between disabled queer women of color activists in 2005, including Patty Berne of Sins Invalid (and Mia Mingus & Stacy Milbern, who eventually united with Leroy Moore, Eli Clare, and Sebastian Margaret) seeking to challenge radical and progressive movements to more fully address ableism.

Disability justice recognizes the intersecting legacies of white supremacy, colonial capitalism, gendered oppression and ableism in understanding how people's bodies and minds are labeled 'deviant', 'unproductive', 'disposable' and/or 'invalid'.

## What does a commitment to disability justice look like?

Committing to disability justice requires us to distance ourselves from ableist practices and to prioritize the voices and needs of disabled people. Due to ableist perceptions of dis/ability, often, disabled people are perceived as being unable to advocate for themselves, but this is a false assumption. Disabled people have been leading disability justice organizing and advocacy for generations, and should be at the center of this work. Prioritizing accessibility, both online and in person, is also an essential part of disability justice, because it can help ensure equitable access to content, programming, and activities.

## Stop using ableist language.

There may be terms in your vocabulary that have roots in ableism or saneism. It is important to stop using these terms in order to avoid ostracizing the people in whose oppression these terms are rooted. Lydia Brown, a disability justice advocate, has a **list of commonly used ableist phrases** with alternative terms you can use instead. Take some time to read through the list and see if there are any ableist terms you have a tendency to use, and make an intentional effort to remove them from your vocabulary. If you make a mistake and use an ableist term, take a moment to apologize, correct yourself, and move on.

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## Prioritize accessibility in physical spaces.

The list below includes just a few things you may want to consider regarding accessibility in physical spaces. Everyone has different access needs, so when planning an in-person meeting or event, consider sending out a form where each person can list their accessibility needs so you can ensure that everyone is accommodated.

- Include information about accessibility on your marketing materials and registration forms, or in the meeting invitation. Highlight what you already offer, and ask folks to indicate accessibility needs when registering or RSVPing for a meeting.
- Offer ASL interpreters or a live audio transcript for events that include sound.
- Offer braille versions of documents, or create digital versions of documents that can be read out loud by screen reader software.
- Bathrooms should be available on the main floor of your event, and they should be wheelchair accessible.
- For larger events, you may want to create a designated quiet space where attendees can go if they feel overwhelmed or overstimulated.
- All doorways and hallways should be wide enough to accommodate wheelchairs. The ADA standard is 32 inches.
- Refrain from using scented products, like air fresheners or perfumes, in public spaces.
- Ensure that all ramps and elevators are functional, if applicable.

## Make your online content accessible.

Accessibility is an important consideration for online content as well. [This guide](#) provides a helpful overview of web accessibility guidelines. The ADA also provides more in-depth [Web Content Accessibility Guidelines](#).

- Include accurate captions on all videos.
- Write out image descriptions and/or alt text for pictures you post on social media or upload elsewhere.
- Use fonts that are easily readable. Simple, sans serif fonts, like Arial, Calibri, Helvetica, or Comic Sans are generally good.
- Ensure that there is contrast between the text and background color.
- Whenever possible, use text (instead of images of text) so your website, event descriptions, and other content are accessible for people who use screen readers.
- Use large, easily readable font sizes.
- Make website menus descriptive and easy to navigate.

## Advocate for policy change to support people with disabilities.

Many state, local, and federal policies are ableist, and sometimes openly discriminatory towards disabled people. If you're interested in policy advocacy, there's a lot to be done to ensure that legislation protects the rights and lives of disabled people. Below are just a couple of policy facts surrounding disability, but we encourage you to do some research into other federal policies that affect disabled people.

- Under section [14\(c\) of the Fair Labor Standards Act](#), employers are allowed to pay disabled workers a subminimum wage, which is lower than the federal minimum wage. Read this [Vox article](#) to learn about the origins of this policy and current efforts to combat it.

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- Many disabled people still do not have marriage equality, because **they risk losing access to federal disability benefits** and healthcare if they get married. The **Marriage Equality for Disabled Adults Act** was introduced in the House of Representatives this January. It would ensure that when disabled people get married, they can retain the same benefits as before marriage.

There are many, many other policies that affect disabled communities. Educate yourself on these issues, then work with disability justice organizations to advocate for change.

### **Where can I learn more about disability justice?**

Check out the links below to learn about various facets of disability justice from a number of different organizations.

- **List of national disability organizations and resources**
- **Project LETS, a national grassroots organization and movement led by and for folks with lived experience of mental illness/madness, Disability, trauma, & neurodivergence**
- **Sins Invalid, a disability justice based performance project that incubates and celebrates artists with disabilities, centralizing artists of color and LGBTQ / gender-variant artists**
- **Resources on disability justice and youth from Youth Celebrate Diversity**
- **NPR segment about people with disabilities being paid below minimum wage**
- **Interview about diversity, equity, inclusion, and disability with U.S. Representative Ayanna Pressley and disability rights activist Rebecca Cokley**
- **Research about disability issues in the criminal justice system**