

Organizing While Disabled

Access is a right, not a favor

Your disability doesn't disqualify you from organizing. This guide provides practical tools for navigating barriers, requesting accommodations, and building movements that truly include everyone.

 Estimated read time: 18 minutes

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Introduction: You Belong in This Movement

If you've ever been told that your access needs are "too complicated" or felt excluded from organizing spaces because of your disability, this guide is for you. The truth is, movements that exclude disabled people are incomplete movements. We make up over 25% of the population, and our perspectives are essential for creating the just world we're fighting for.

This guide approaches organizing from a disability justice perspective. That means we're not trying to fit into spaces that weren't designed for us. We're building new ways of organizing that center access from the start. Your needs aren't an inconvenience. They're information about how to build better movements.

Whether you use mobility aids, have chronic illness, are neurodivergent, Deaf, blind, or have any other disability, you have valuable contributions to make. Let's figure out how to make that happen.

A note on language: This guide uses identity-first language ("disabled people") based on preferences of many disability communities. Use whatever language feels right for you. The movement is big enough for all of us.

Access Audit Checklist

Before engaging with any organizing space, use this checklist to assess accessibility. Share it with organizers to help them understand what real access looks like.

Physical Access

- ☐ Step-free entrance (or ramp available)
- ☐ Accessible bathrooms (spacious, grab bars)
- ☐ Elevators for multi-story buildings
- ☐ Wide doorways and aisles (36 inches minimum)
- ☐ Accessible parking nearby
- ☐ Seating options (not everyone can stand for long)
- ☐ Temperature control (extreme temps affect many conditions)
- ☐ Fragrance-free space option

Communication Access

- ☐ ASL interpreters or CART services available
- ☐ Materials in large print or Braille
- ☐ Plain language options for materials
- ☐ Visual descriptions for images/videos
- ☐ Microphones for speakers
- ☐ Good lighting for lip reading

- ☐ Quiet spaces for those with sensory needs
- ☐ Written agendas provided in advance

Digital Access

- ☐ Screen reader compatible websites
- ☐ Captions for video content
- ☐ Alt text for images
- ☐ Keyboard navigation possible
- ☐ Color contrast meets WCAG standards
- ☐ Documents in accessible formats
- ☐ Virtual attendance options
- ☐ Recording available for async participation

Remember: No space will be perfectly accessible to everyone. The goal is continuous improvement and responsiveness to access needs as they arise.

Accommodation Scripts That Work

Asking for accommodations can feel vulnerable. These scripts help you communicate your needs clearly and effectively.

Initial Request Template

Email/Message Script

"Hi [Organizer Name], I'm excited about participating in [event/organization]. To participate fully, I need [specific accommodation]. Can we work together to make this happen? I'm happy to discuss options that might work."

Specific Situation Scripts

For Meeting Accommodations

"I use a wheelchair and need to confirm the meeting space is accessible. Can you tell me if there are stairs at the entrance, and if the bathroom is accessible? If not, could we move to an accessible location?"

For Communication Needs

"I'm hard of hearing and lip read to communicate. Could speakers please face the group when talking and could we ensure one person speaks at a time? I'm also happy to remind people during the meeting if needed."

For Energy/Chronic Illness

"I have a chronic illness that affects my energy levels. I may need to sit during activities, take breaks, or leave early. I'll participate as fully as I can within these limitations. Is there a quiet space I could rest if needed?"

For Cognitive/Neurological Needs

"I'm neurodivergent and process information best with some accommodations. Could you share written agendas beforehand? I may also need to step out if overwhelmed. This doesn't mean I'm not engaged, just managing my needs."

When Accommodations Are Denied

Pushing Back Respectfully

"I understand there may be challenges, but access is necessary for me to participate. Can we brainstorm solutions together? Other groups have handled this by [example]. What if we tried that?"

Setting Boundaries

"I want to be involved, but without [accommodation], I can't participate safely/effectively. Please let me know if the situation changes. I'd also be happy to help the group develop better accessibility practices for the future."

Remember: You're not asking for special treatment. You're identifying what you need to participate equally. Organizations committed to justice should welcome this information.

Alternative Ways to Participate

Traditional organizing often centers on activities that assume certain abilities. Here are alternative ways to contribute that might work better for you:

Digital Organizing

- Social media management from home
- Creating accessible content and graphics
- Online research and fact-checking
- Virtual phone banking
- Email campaign coordination
- Building and maintaining websites

Behind-the-Scenes Support

- Grant writing and fundraising
- Database management
- Creating meeting agendas and notes
- Volunteer coordination
- Supply organization and inventory
- Translation and transcription

Flexible Timing Options

From-Bed Activism

- Async meeting participation
- Creating content on your schedule
- Providing feedback via written form
- Recording trainings for others
- Research projects without deadlines
- Email support on your good days

- Signal boosting on social media
- Writing letters to officials
- Creating art and cultural content
- Providing emotional support to organizers
- Strategic planning and visioning
- Connecting people and resources

Your capacity may vary day to day, and that's okay. The movement needs people who can contribute in many different ways, not just those who can march in the streets.



Also covered in: For more on contributing without attending meetings, see our "Introvert's Guide to Organizing Meetings" which includes remote participation strategies.

Organizing on Crip Time

"Crip time" recognizes that disabled people often need different timelines than non-

disabled people expect. This isn't a flaw; it's a more honest relationship with time that can benefit everyone.

What Crip Time Means for Organizing

- **Flexible scheduling:** Meetings with buffer time, understanding late arrivals
- **Realistic timelines:** Projects account for people's variable capacity
- **Rest as resistance:** Breaks aren't luxury, they're necessity
- **Quality over quantity:** Better to do less sustainably than burn out
- **Collective pacing:** Group moves at speed that includes everyone

Practical Crip Time Strategies

For Your Own Organizing

- ☐ Build in double the time you think you need
- ☐ Schedule rest days after intense activities
- ☐ Have backup plans for bad days
- ☐ Communicate capacity honestly
- ☐ Celebrate what you accomplish, not what you couldn't

For Groups to Adopt

- ☐ Start meetings 10 minutes after posted time

- Build in breaks every 45-60 minutes
- Record meetings for async participation
- Rotate responsibilities to prevent burnout
- Plan B for everything (and Plan C too)

Crip time isn't about being "slower." It's about being more realistic about human capacity and building movements that last. When we organize on crip time, we create space for parents, elders, and anyone else who can't live at capitalism's breakneck pace.

Building Inclusive Movements

True inclusion goes beyond adding ramps and interpreters (though those are important!). It means reimagining how we organize from the ground up.

Principles of Disability Justice in Organizing

1. **Leadership of most impacted:** Disabled people, especially multiply marginalized disabled people, should lead on access
2. **Interdependence:** We need each other; independence is a myth
3. **Collective access:** We're responsible for each other's access needs
4. **Cross-movement solidarity:** Disability justice connects to all justice movements
5. **Sustainability over urgency:** Urgent pace leaves disabled people behind

Creating Access Culture

At Every Meeting

- Start with access check-in
- Share pronouns and access needs
- Provide multiple ways to participate
- Take breaks without apology
- End on time (or early)

In Planning

- Budget for access from start
- Choose accessible venues default
- Plan actions everyone can join
- Create roles for all capacities
- Build in flexibility always

Common Mistakes to Avoid

- **Inspiration porn:** Don't tokenize disabled organizers as "inspiring"
- **Savior mentality:** We don't need saving, we need solidarity
- **One-size-fits-all:** Access needs vary widely and can conflict

- **Afterthought access:** Plan for inclusion from the beginning
- **Assuming needs:** Always ask, don't guess what people need

Remember: Perfect accessibility doesn't exist. What matters is commitment to continuous improvement and responsiveness when you inevitably get things wrong.

Your Next Steps

Ready to organize in ways that work for you? Here's how to start:

This Week

1. **Assess your capacity:** What energy and abilities do you have right now?
2. **Identify one issue you care about:** What change do you want to see?
3. **Find online communities:** Search for disability + your issue area
4. **Practice one accommodation request:** Start small and build confidence

This Month

1. **Connect with local disability organizations:** They often do cross-issue work
2. **Attend one accessible event:** Virtual counts!

3. **Share your access needs with one group:** Help them learn
4. **Find your sustainable pace:** What can you maintain long-term?

Ongoing Practices

- Model asking for and providing accommodations
- Share this guide with organizers who need education
- Connect other disabled organizers to resources
- Document what works for future disabled activists
- Rest without guilt when you need to

Final thought: Every accommodation you request makes it easier for the next disabled person. Every boundary you set teaches the movement how to be sustainable. Your needs aren't a burden; they're a gift of wisdom about how to build movements that truly include everyone.