



*For people with intellectual  
and developmental disabilities*

## ***A Journalist's Guide to Disability for Election 2024***

Did you know people with disabilities are the largest minority voting bloc in our country? It's also a population that has been growing rapidly as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. Yet all too often, people with disabilities and the issues vital to them and their loved ones are absent from candidate debates, interviews, and media coverage.

**Disability intersects with every issue because people with disabilities exist in every community and have diverse identities and beliefs. In addition, many disability issues are directly impacted by legislation and policies. That's why it's crucial your election coverage addresses these issues.**

The upcoming elections carry substantial significance, particularly for the rights and essential services for people with disabilities. Their experiences and concerns must be prioritized alongside other critical issues. Including disability voices and highlighting disability issues also reflects a commitment to diversity and inclusion and educates all voters.

To ensure accessible and inclusive coverage, please keep the following considerations in mind.

**Representation:** The media has immense power in shaping ideals in our society. That's why representation of people with disabilities matters, which means looking for disability angles in the issues you cover, interviewing disabled people about a wide range of topics, and putting forth accurate and respectful portrayals of them. Here are a few other tips:

- Normalize the supports and technologies people with disabilities need to navigate daily living and fully participate in our society.
- Educate yourself and your colleagues about [ableism](#).
- Be vigilant about how your story may propagate negative stereotypes or feature disabled people as a burden or inspiration.
- Make sure photos that accompany your news stories encompass underrepresented people with disabilities, including people with intellectual and developmental disabilities.
- When covering disability issues, don't just speak to thought leaders and family members – interview diverse people with disabilities about their firsthand lived experiences.
- Include the perspectives of people with disabilities in all kinds of stories, not just ones talking about disability.

**Inclusive Language:** The language used to describe people with disabilities is very individualistic. Person-first language (i.e., people with disabilities) emphasizes the person, not the disability. By placing the person first, disability is no longer the primary, defining characteristic of an individual, but one of several aspects of the whole person. Alternatively, identity-first language (i.e., disabled person) emphasizes a person's disability as a core part of their identity. When interviewing a person with a disability, you should always ask how they prefer to be identified. For most IDD communities, if your story doesn't focus on one person, we recommend using person-



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first language. [Within the autism community](#), many self-advocates prefer and appreciate the use of identity-first language (i.e., autistic person). In addition, please avoid using the term “special needs” in your stories as this terminology is vague and becoming outdated. [Find more resources and education on language](#) from the National Center on Disability and Journalism. If candidates or colleagues are using offensive, derogatory, or harmful rhetoric for people with disabilities, we urge you to call them out.

**Accessible Information:** The news is a vital source of information and education for many, but not everyone can access it equally. Ensure that your reporting is accessible to people with various disabilities. Write in [plain language](#), consider a multimedia approach to sharing your story (i.e., visual and text-based), provide accurate captions and transcripts for all audio and visual content (including web and social media streaming), use text descriptions of the content and purpose of images, use accessible fonts and formatting for online content, and put hyperlinks in context so screen reader software can provide more information. [You can use a free web accessibility checker](#) to identify issues.

To enhance your understanding of the issues impacting the disability community and guide your coverage of candidates and their stances, here’s what you should know.

**Voting Barriers:** Despite being such a significant population, people with disabilities are [less likely than nondisabled people](#) to turn out to vote in elections. That’s because they face a multitude of barriers in casting their votes. The Arc is working with other civil rights groups to challenge sweeping voter suppression laws that make it more difficult for voters with disabilities to participate in our democracy. We hope that you will do your part by shining a spotlight on policies and practices that hinder disability rights and inclusion in your community. Investigate and report on any discriminatory practices or barriers that may prevent individuals with disabilities from exercising their right to vote. This includes issues around mail-in voting, drop box voting, guardianship, getting support from a person of their choosing to cast their ballot, and accessible voter information. In addition, when covering campaign events and polling stations, always include accessibility information for these locations (i.e., whether an ASL interpreter will be there or if the location has wheelchair access).

**Covering Topics Important to People with Disabilities:** Your election reporting should cover issues and policies that directly impact people with disabilities. Report on the candidates' stances on these topics and the impact of proposed policies. Below are areas that are causing deep inequities in the quality of life, autonomy, and opportunities for people with disabilities during this election cycle.

➤ **Getting A Safe & Inclusive Education**

Education is a vital issue for voters, and everyone agrees that schools should be safe and nurturing places for all children. For students with disabilities, it’s too often a nightmare. Some of the barriers they face include disproportionate suspensions, harsh discipline practices, isolation



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from general education classes and peers, a dire shortage of special education teachers, low expectations and support, higher rates of being bullied, and a lack of urgency around identifying students who need special education services. It's no wonder the academic achievement and graduation rates for students with disabilities lag far behind their peers. It's important that journalists and candidates draw attention to these systemic issues that have a big impact on the futures of people with disabilities. [Get a deeper look at these education issues](#) so you can shine a spotlight on these injustices.

➤ ***Experiencing the Dignity of Employment***

As with most elections, candidates will address key aspects of job growth, labor disparities, worker rights, and the evolving job market. While these issues impact nearly every voter, one important group continues to be ignored: people with disabilities. Roughly 78% of people with disabilities and 85% of people with IDD are unemployed. When people with IDD do find employment, they are often paid less money for doing the same work. Most people with disabilities want to work and earn a living, but biases about their abilities and accommodations continue to keep them out of the workforce. Because of these realities, people with disabilities are twice as likely to live in poverty. People with IDD should be employed alongside people without disabilities and earn competitive wages, but too many barriers exist that lead to unemployment or underemployment. COVID-19 had a positive impact on the employment of disabled people, due to the labor shortage and ample remote work, but policies are quickly reversing. Discussions of employment must center disability and how candidates intend to improve the lives and opportunities of workers with disabilities. [Learn more about employment](#) the barriers and best practices.

➤ ***Living in the Community, Not an Institution***

People with disabilities want to live in their own homes and communities, not in nursing homes or institutions where their freedoms and choices are limited. Medicaid is a key program that makes community living possible through long term supports and services (LTSS). Every U.S. state has a Medicaid program, and millions of people with disabilities rely on LTSS for daily activities, such as dressing, bathing, meal preparation, taking medication, employment support, mobility assistance, and more. Yet LTSS has been chronically underfunded for years, resulting in a national shortage of direct care workers, years-long wait lists for access to services, and, ultimately, isolation and institutionalization that strips people with disabilities of their dignity. More than 650,000 people – 73% of which are people with IDD – are stuck on waiting lists for a nationwide average of 67 months. Medicaid also has an institutional bias, which means states that receive federal dollars for Medicaid must cover services within institutions, but community-based services aren't guaranteed. This crisis has largely been under the radar as the general public has the misconception that there are ample services available for people with disabilities. [Get well-versed on the LTSS issue](#) and include it in conversations and articles involving state and federal safety net programs.

➤ ***Experiencing Victimization and Criminalization***



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Crime rates and safety in communities are always key issues during elections. A critical and often overlooked angle is the overrepresentation of people with disabilities in the criminal justice system. Disabled people are more likely to experience victimization, be arrested, be charged with a crime, and serve longer prison sentences once convicted, than those without disabilities. Individuals with other marginalized identities are even more likely to get caught up in the system. Once entangled, they face unique challenges, bias, and inaccessible services, which only perpetuates the cycle of criminal justice involvement. People with disabilities must be afforded the supports and accommodations required to make justice and fair treatment a reality. [Learn more about criminal justice issues](#) to guide your coverage.

### ➤ ***Supporting Paid and Unpaid Caregivers***

Underfunding in LTSS has also created a crisis in the availability of Direct Support Professionals (DSPs), the workers who provide these services. DSPs make on average \$15 an hour nationally, which is the same wage, or less, as workers in fast food, convenience, or retail – or even unemployment. Given this low investment in their skilled work, DSPs face a significant turnover rate of 30-70%. Many DSPs want to continue doing this important work, but it is not financially sustainable. At the same time, federal regulations have remained largely silent about training requirements, which means providers are relying on unqualified and poorly trained people more than ever, and then scrambling to invest in their workforce.

With dwindling access to skilled DSPs, families must increasingly fill in the gaps to ensure their loved ones have the support they need for a quality, meaningful life. Nearly one million U.S. households have an adult with IDD living with and supported by a caregiver. Yet managing the needs of people with disabilities without training or support is leaving caregivers stressed, isolated, in poor health, and suffering financially. Nine in ten caregivers of people with IDD report that their caregiving responsibilities had an impact on their employment. Many have lost their jobs and/or income because of the demands of care. What's more, it's becoming a multi-generational crisis as people with IDD are living longer than ever, putting the burden of care on siblings and younger family members. Paid caregivers deserve more investment in their work and unpaid caregivers need public and private support. [Get background on the family caregiver crisis](#) and what can be done to help.

### ➤ ***Having Financial Independence***

Social Security and Supplemental Security Income (SSI) play a vital role in helping people with disabilities pay for basic needs like food, clothing, and shelter. More than 12 million people with disabilities receive benefits from Social Security, SSI, or both. These programs were designed to combat poverty among disabled people, but certain income-based and/or asset-limit eligibility policies do just the opposite. SSI benefits are extremely modest, averaging only about \$550 per month, and beneficiaries cannot have more than \$2,000 in assets, neither of which have been indexed to inflation. Thus, many people with disabilities cannot plan and save for future needs like others, contributing to ongoing economic inequalities often resulting in lifelong poverty. Many are just one emergency away from homelessness and hunger. These barriers are compounded



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by the Social Security Administration being in a state of crisis, where millions are waiting for appointments, decisions on applications, and appeals on rejected claims. [Learn more about financial security issues](#) and policies that you can get candidates' positions on.

Looking for even more topics to explore and experts to interview?

Check out [our position statements](#) and [our press center](#) to discover other issue areas that you can explore in your coverage. You can also schedule an on-the-record or background interview with The Arc's local and national experts. Simply contact the communications team below.

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### **About The Arc**

The Arc advocates for and serves people with intellectual and developmental disabilities (IDD), including Down syndrome, autism, Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorders, cerebral palsy, and other diagnoses. Founded in 1950 by parents who believed their children with IDD deserved more, The Arc is now a network of nearly 600 chapters across the country promoting and protecting the human rights of people with IDD and actively supporting their full inclusion and participation in the community throughout their lifetimes. Through the decades, The Arc has been at the forefront of advances in disability rights and supports. Visit [www.thearc.org](http://www.thearc.org) or follow us @TheArcUS to learn more.

*Editor's Note: The Arc is not an acronym; always refer to us as The Arc, not The ARC and never ARC. The Arc should be considered as a title or a phrase.*