

A CALL TO CONSCIENCE

Obstacles, Opportunities, and Pathways to Inclusion

Advancing Inclusion for Adults with Disabilities who have Significant Support Needs

SUMMIT COMPENDIUM

July 27, 2026

10:00 a.m. – 4:00 p.m.

Jack Morton Auditorium

The George Washington University
Washington, D.C.



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WELCOME!

Dear Summit Participants,

Welcome to A Call to Conscience: Advancing Inclusion for Adults with Disabilities who have Significant Support Needs.

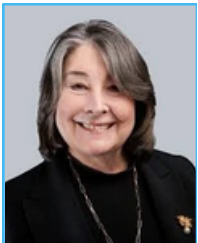
This publication was created to complement the conversations taking place throughout the Summit. Within these pages, you will find stories, reflections, and recommendations that highlight both the promise of inclusion and the barriers that remain.

We are grateful you are here. Thank you for lending your voice, your expertise, and your conscience to this shared work.

With gratitude,



Ellen Dyke
Board Chair, SPARC



Debi Alexander
Chief Executive Officer, SPARC

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About This Compendium

As part of A Call to Conscience, panelists and conversationalists were asked to reflect on a simple but important question:

“If you had the power to remove one obstacle standing in the way of full inclusion for adults with complex needs, what would you change, and how would you begin to change it?”

The responses collected here come from family advocates, researchers, educators, healthcare leaders, attorneys, policymakers, service providers, and individuals with lived experience. Together, they remind us that inclusion is a shared responsibility — and that every person deserves dignity, agency, connection, and the opportunity to thrive.

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The People Behind the Conversation

Every policy discussion, healthcare decision, transportation plan, housing initiative, and accessibility improvement ultimately affects a person. Before exploring the obstacles and opportunities identified by Summit panelists, we begin with the voices and experiences of individuals whose lives reflect both the promise of inclusion and the barriers that still remain.



Katherine Montgomery

*Advocate, athlete, employee,
and SPARC Board member*

“No Limits.”

If there is one thing **Katherine Montgomery** dislikes, it is being underestimated. An advocate, athlete, employee, board member, and community leader, Katherine has built a life filled with purpose and possibility. She works at a doggy daycare, serves on SPARC’s Board of Directors, travels independently by public transportation, goes to the gym regularly, and has completed marathons using a specialized racing chair. Alongside her service dog, Titan, she embraces life with energy and determination.

Accessibility is not just a personal issue for Katherine; it’s a mission. She is passionate about universal design and regularly uses her lived experience to educate others. Whether participating on panels, advocating within the community, or simply navigating daily life, she works to create a world where people with disabilities are included from the start rather than accommodated as an afterthought.

Despite her accomplishments, barriers remain. Transportation challenges, inaccessible buildings, shortages of personal support assistants, and assumptions about wheelchair users continue to affect daily life. Katherine has often encountered people who see her wheelchair before they see her capabilities. Too often, mobility needs are mistaken for limitations in intelligence, competence, or independence.

Katherine envisions a future where inclusion is woven into every aspect of society and where accessibility is considered from the beginning rather than added later. Through her leadership and advocacy, she is helping to build that future today.



Jonathan Ampofo

“Joy, creativity, and belonging are not luxuries — they are essential parts of a full and meaningful life.”

Music has a way of bringing **Jonathan Ampofo** to life. Whether he is drumming, dancing, listening to music, or creating art with crayons, creative expression is woven into nearly every part of his day. He describes himself as a good listener and someone who respects others, and those qualities are reflected in the gentle and thoughtful way he moves through the world.

Many of Jonathan’s happiest moments are tied to music and movement. Dancing helps him connect with others, express his feelings, and experience joy. Walks in the park, time with friends, and opportunities to create art also play an important role in his daily routine.

Like many people with disabilities, Jonathan sometimes encounters obstacles that make community participation more difficult. Transportation challenges, limited access to programs that align with his interests, and interactions with impatient or unkind people can be discouraging. He has also experienced situations where others make assumptions about him without taking the time to understand who he is. When Jonathan talks about dignity, he speaks in terms of freedom and choice. He dreams of more opportunities to dance, create art, visit museums, and explore what interests him. His story reminds us that joy, creativity, and belonging are essential parts of a full and meaningful life.



Maghfoor

“Connection is about much more than language.”

Though **Maghfoor** faces significant communication barriers, those who spend time with him quickly recognize his warmth, kindness, and genuine interest in other people. He loves art, enjoys music, and treasures time with his family. His smile and expressive personality often communicate more than words ever could.

For many years, opportunities for community participation were limited. Having never attended school in his home country, Maghfoor’s world was largely centered around family. That changed when he began attending a program through Specially Adapted Resource Clubs (SPARC). His father described him as overjoyed at the chance to attend what he viewed as “school” for the first time. Today, he eagerly looks forward to every visit, rarely missing a day.

Communication remains one of Maghfoor’s greatest challenges. He often relies on gestures, facial expressions, and translation tools to express his thoughts and needs. Outside familiar settings, misunderstandings can occur, and people sometimes make assumptions about him because they cannot easily communicate with him. One assumption he encounters is that he is unfriendly or distant, when in reality, he cares deeply about the people around him.

Maghfoor’s story is a reminder that every person deserves to be seen beyond the barriers they face and valued for the humanity they share with others.





Bailey Brant

“Being heard and taken seriously.”

For **Bailey Brant**, life is at its best when it is shared with others. She enjoys music, spending time with people she cares about, and participating in activities that bring people together. More than anything, Bailey values genuine conversation and the feeling that someone is truly listening.

Connection is at the center of Bailey’s world. She lights up when people take the time to talk with her and engage with her as a person rather than focusing on her disability. Through both words and body language, Bailey communicates her thoughts and feelings, finding her strongest sense of belonging among people who understand her. Like many individuals with significant disabilities, Bailey encounters barriers that can make community participation more difficult. She has also faced assumptions about who she is and what she is capable of before people have taken the time to get to know her.

When asked what dignity means, her answer was simple and powerful: being heard and taken seriously. She hopes for a future where accessibility is no longer an exception but an expectation.



Tammy Murphy

“Dignity often begins with the freedom to live life according to our own values and dreams.”

Tammy Murphy is unapologetically herself. She describes herself as hardheaded, loves the color purple, and has a deep affection for horses. Much of her joy comes from the natural world around her. Whether volunteering at a farm, observing wildlife, or spending time outdoors, Tammy feels connected to life when she is surrounded by animals and open spaces. She is also an avid reader and enjoys writing stories, both of which allow her imagination to roam freely.

Those who know Tammy quickly discover her sense of humor and independent spirit. She proudly calls herself a joker and enjoys helping others whenever she can. Her church family and the people she knows through the farm have become important sources of friendship and a sense of belonging. While she values relationships, she also values authenticity and wants people to understand that she has her own opinions, preferences, and voice.

Throughout her life, Tammy has encountered obstacles that have made participation more challenging. Financial limitations, inaccessible spaces, restrictive rules, and assumptions about people with disabilities can sometimes leave her feeling overlooked. Yet even in those moments, Tammy continues to advocate for herself and the things she believes are important. When Tammy imagines the future, she dreams of a home of her own, complete with a fenced yard, a garden, and dogs. It is a vision rooted in independence, comfort, and choice. Through her love of nature, her commitment to community, and her determination to remain true to herself, Tammy reminds us that dignity often begins with the freedom to live life according to our own values and dreams.

"I can contribute. I can help. I can be a net positive to our society. But I need changes to occur to allow this."

Dear Members of the Virginia General Assembly,

My name is Alannah Wilson, and I am a 25-year-old woman living in Northern Virginia. I graduated in May 2025 with my bachelor's degree in Communication Sciences and Disorders, and I will begin my first professional role this upcoming school year as a Speech-Language Pathology Assistant with Prince William County Schools. This is a milestone I am deeply proud of, and one that I worked hard to reach.



Alannah Wilson
Speech-Language
Pathology Assistant,
Prince William County
Schools

I also have cerebral palsy and receive support through Virginia's Medicaid Waiver program. These services have been essential to my ability to live independently and pursue my education and career goals. Through consumer-directed attendant care—up to 54 hours per week—I was able to attend college away from home for five years, complete my degree, and recently move into my own apartment. I rely on an attendant every day to complete essential daily tasks that allow me to live safely and independently. As I prepare to begin my career, I am facing serious concerns about losing the very services that made this achievement possible. While programs like Medicaid Works and 1619(b) protect Medicaid health coverage for working individuals, they do not protect Medicaid Waiver services. This gap places people like me in an impossible position: choosing between pursuing meaningful employment and keeping the supports that allow us to live independently.

I want to emphasize several critical points that illustrate the urgency of this issue:

1. Maintaining employment is actually cost-effective for the Medicaid Waiver program. With gainful employment and employer-provided benefits, Medicaid becomes a secondary payer. This reduces long-term costs to the state. The purpose of the Medicaid Waiver is to keep people out of institutions. If I cannot maintain both employment and the supports that allow me to live independently, I risk institutionalization at some point in my life—an outcome that is far more costly and contrary to the goals of the waiver.
2. My independence requires living in an area with infrastructure that supports people with disabilities. I must live away from my family because Northern Virginia is one of the few regions where accessible transportation, employment opportunities, and disability-supporting services exist. Remaining in this area is essential for my safety, independence, and ability to work.
3. The current income limit does not align with the cost of living in Northern Virginia. The waiver income limit is approximately \$2,982 per month. My rent alone in NOVA consumes a significant portion of that amount, and when combined with utilities, transportation, food, and the cost of consumer-directed care, I cannot meet basic living expenses. At this income level, I also cannot meet my obligations to repay my student loans—loans I took out to earn the degree that allows me to contribute meaningfully to my community. Without waiver supports, I cannot pay for the daily assistance I need for activities of daily living, which are essential for someone with a physical disability to remain independent. Medicaid Waiver programs also impose a strict resource limit of \$2,000 total, including savings, bank accounts, and retirement accounts. Although tools like ABLE Accounts and Special Needs Trusts exist, they come with significant restrictions. Funds can only be used for approved expenses only, require documentation, and cannot be accessed freely. This means I cannot save for a car, a vacation, emergencies, or long-term financial stability. I cannot build a future in the same way my peers can.

I need help now. I will lose my Medicaid Waiver if I start my job in the next month, but I will not be able to maintain a job without the supports provided by the waiver program. I am one of many young adults with disabilities who have worked hard, graduated high school and college, and are ready to contribute to society—but we are stopped from pursuing opportunities because of policies created decades ago that do not reflect today's realities. I can contribute. I can help. I can be a net positive to our society. But I need changes to occur to allow this. I would be grateful for the opportunity to discuss this with you. This is a time-sensitive issue, and I respectfully plead for your help in addressing it. You may contact me with any questions. Thank you for your time, your attention, and your commitment to the people of Virginia.

One Obstacle. One Solution.

In a lightning round across three expert panels, Summit contributors each named a single obstacle — and a concrete way to begin removing it. Their reflections are organized below by theme.

If you had the power to remove one obstacle standing in the way of full inclusion for adults with complex needs, what would you change, and how would you begin to change it?



Building Inclusive Communities: **Inclusion Begins in the Classroom**



Lucy Beadnell

Chief Advocacy and Policy Officer,
The Arc of Northern Virginia

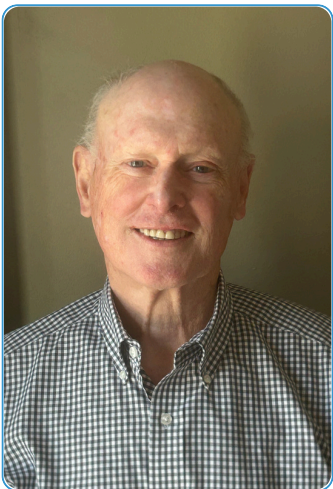
OBSTACLE

Educational systems continue to separate students with and without disabilities, limiting opportunities for meaningful interaction, understanding, and relationship-building from an early age. This segregation contributes to societal barriers later in life and reinforces misconceptions about disability and belonging.

PROPOSED SOLUTION

Mandate fully inclusive educational systems where students with and without disabilities learn, grow, and participate together. Inclusive education creates shared experiences, fosters empathy and understanding, and helps build communities where inclusion is expected and embraced across housing, employment, volunteer opportunities, and civic life.

Building Inclusive Communities: **Expanding Community Participation**



Mark Coles

Senior Advisor at National Science
Foundation (Retired), and
SPARC Parent

OBSTACLE

Many adults with significant disabilities are limited to highly structured and segregated environments that, while safe and supportive, restrict opportunities for broader community engagement. Concerns about safety, liability, and risk often prevent businesses from offering individualized opportunities for adults with disabilities to interact with the public and participate meaningfully in community life.

PROPOSED SOLUTION

Expand the concept of safe and supportive environments to include individualized workplace and community engagement opportunities matched to each person's interests, strengths, and support needs. Community Service Boards and other agencies should partner with local businesses to create supervised opportunities for adults with disabilities to engage with the public. Such initiatives could benefit both individuals with disabilities and participating businesses by fostering greater community goodwill and inclusion.

Building Inclusive Communities: **Creating Inclusive Communities through Accessible Housing**



Michael D. Toobin, Esquire

Law Office of Michael D. Toobin, P.C.

OBSTACLE

Individuals with disabilities often face limited housing options that are both accessible and integrated into the broader community. The shortage of housing designed to accommodate a wide range of physical and support needs can make it difficult to find homes that promote independence, community connection, and long-term stability. At the same time, affordability challenges can place accessible housing out of reach for many individuals and families.

PROPOSED SOLUTION

One potential solution is to create public-private partnerships to develop small cohousing neighborhoods designed around accessibility, inclusion, and community. Local park authorities and government agencies manage thousands of acres of undeveloped land that could be leveraged for this purpose. Land could be donated to developers to create neighborhoods where all homes incorporate universal design principles and are fully accessible. Purchase prices could be subsidized to make these homes affordable for individuals with disabilities, their families, and other community members, creating diverse and inclusive neighborhoods where people can live, connect, and thrive.

Ensuring Dignity and Access: **Modernizing Medical and Communication Access**



Mara Flynn

Parent of an Adult Son with Complex Disabilities and Medical Needs

OBSTACLE

Virginia laws and regulations have not kept pace with advances in medical technology and communication methods for adults with complex disabilities. Adults residing in group homes often cannot use modern medical devices, such as diabetes pumps and related equipment, because regulations do not permit caregivers and support staff to assist with these technologies as they can in public school settings. As a result, individuals may be forced to abandon superior medical treatments in favor of outdated alternatives. In addition, Virginia laws do not adequately recognize all forms of alternative communication used by nonspeaking individuals — effectively denying their right to communicate.

PROPOSED SOLUTION

Legislative and regulatory reforms should allow adults with complex medical needs in community settings to use modern medical devices, and require specialized training for the caregivers and support personnel who assist them. Virginia should also update its laws and regulations to recognize all communication methods used by individuals with disabilities as valid forms of communication, regardless of whether they are formally endorsed by professional organizations.

Building Inclusive Communities: **Creating Inclusive Communities through Accessible Housing**



Walter Alcorn

*Member, Fairfax County
Board of Supervisors
(Hunter Mill District);
Principal Director, WMATA*

OBSTACLE

One significant obstacle in our area is the lack of accessible, individualized adult day, employment, and community participation options for adults with the most complex support needs. The impact is usually isolation, stalled independence, and uneven quality of life across adulthood – but it shows up differently for young adults and older adults.

When young adults with the most complex support needs leave high school, they often hit a services cliff. In school, they may have structured routines, therapies, social contact, transition support, and legal entitlement to services. After that, families in Northern Virginia, Maryland, and DC often face limited program options, long waits, staffing shortages, transportation problems, and services that are not built for people with intensive behavioral, communication, or medical needs.

For older adults with complex support needs, the same shortage often creates compounding exclusion. By this stage, the issue is not just lack of opportunity, but also aging, health changes, and caregiver instability. Programs may exist, but they are often hard to access, not designed for high-support needs, or separated from ordinary community life. This can leave people isolated at home, under-served, or placed in settings that focus more on supervision than meaningful participation.

This region has many resources on paper, but families often face fragmentation across jurisdictions. DC, Maryland, and Virginia have different eligibility rules, waiver structures, provider networks, and transportation systems. So even in a resource-rich metro area, people with the highest support needs can still struggle to find consistent, individualized, inclusive opportunities.

PROPOSED SOLUTION

A practical method to begin addressing the fragmentation of community participation options is to develop more person-centered community support models tied to local partnerships. For example, counties, service providers, employers, recreation centers, libraries, and community colleges and universities could collaborate to create small-scale, flexible participation pathways through a shared intake and referral system. This system could provide supported volunteering, customized employment, inclusive classes, and structured community activities across different settings.

Why this helps:

1. It reduces fragmentation, which is often as disabling as the lack of services itself.
2. It makes existing resources easier to use.
3. It highlights service gaps with real data, which can support stronger advocacy for targeted investment.



**Delegate Aaron M.
Kaufman**

Maryland House of Delegates

PROPOSED SOLUTION

If I had the power to remove one obstacle standing in the way of full inclusion for adults with complex needs, I would address attitudinal barriers. As a person with cerebral palsy who was born at 32 weeks, I believe negative attitudes and misconceptions about disability remain the greatest barrier to inclusion.

From my own experience, I know firsthand that too many people view accommodating individuals with disabilities as a burden. They see inclusion as too expensive, too complicated, or too much of a liability. Some even believe that including people with disabilities in classes, workplaces, or community events somehow detracts from the experience of those who are not disabled. Over the years, I have heard all of these arguments.

Another common barrier is the assumption that disability automatically means low intelligence. Despite being a 39-year-old college graduate, I still encounter people who speak to me as if I were five years old. These attitudes are not only disrespectful, but they also limit opportunities for people with disabilities to fully participate in society.

To begin changing this obstacle, we must challenge ableist assumptions and negative attitudes whenever we encounter them. While it may be difficult to change the hearts and minds of some adults, we can create lasting change by educating children from an early age. Children should regularly interact with people with disabilities and learn about the wide range of talents, abilities, and contributions that people with disabilities bring to their communities.

We also need to teach children to look beyond labels such as cerebral palsy or Down syndrome and see the person first. Rather than defining someone by a diagnosis, they should learn to see a classmate, teammate, coworker, or friend—a unique individual with interests, talents, and dreams.

In addition, more companies should require Disability 101 training for their employees. I once had a colleague tell me that they did not know the difference between cerebral palsy and cystic fibrosis until they started working with me. That conversation surprised me because these are very different disabilities. Basic disability education can help dispel myths, reduce fear and misunderstanding, and create more inclusive workplaces.

True inclusion will not happen until society stops focusing on what people with disabilities cannot do and starts recognizing what they can do. By challenging stereotypes, educating young people, and increasing disability awareness, we can build a more inclusive world for adults with complex needs.

Strengthening Systems of Support: **Building the Workforce that Inclusion Requires**



Dr. Nicci T. Dowd

Assistant Professor, School of Education, Marymount University

OBSTACLE

A critical barrier to full inclusion for adults with complex needs is the lack of sustained funding and a stable, purpose-driven workforce. Although coordinated transition models and community-based programs exist, they are often under-resourced and inconsistently implemented. Families frequently encounter high staff turnover, limited capacity, and professionals who are positioned as task-completers rather than relationship-builders.

PROPOSED SOLUTION

Increase investment in recruiting, supporting, and retaining professionals who approach disability services through advocacy, high expectations, and belief in individual potential. Funding, training, and accountability systems should be aligned to support professionals in building meaningful employment opportunities and community connections — while elevating disability support work as a skilled, respected, and sustainable profession.

Strengthening Systems of Support: **Putting People at the Center of Support Systems**



Jerry Hulick

Principal and Consultant, Caring Consulting Group; Member, United Cerebral Palsy National Board of Trustees

OBSTACLE

Traditional disability service models are often rigid, provider-centered, and insufficiently responsive to the diverse needs and preferences of individuals with disabilities. Funding structures and service categories can limit flexibility, self-direction, and opportunities for meaningful inclusion across different levels of disability severity.

PROPOSED SOLUTION

Promote self-directed services, person-centered funding models, expanded use of technology, peer support networks, and broader community supports. Funding should follow the individual rather than providers, and collaborations among disability organizations, housing providers, employers, and advocacy groups should be strengthened. Policies should support integration into mainstream community life and align funding with individualized support needs.

Ensuring Dignity and Access: **Making Healthcare Accessible and Person-Centered**



Merrill A. Friedman

*Regional Vice President,
Inclusive Policy and Advocacy,
Elevance Health*

OBSTACLE

Healthcare communication often relies on complex language, acronyms, medical terminology, and extensive paperwork, making it difficult for people with disabilities to understand and navigate. These barriers can create confusion, anxiety, and cognitive overload, resulting in delayed care, missed appointments, and incomplete information sharing. People with disabilities also frequently encounter inaccessible facilities and equipment, sensory-overwhelming environments, and healthcare interactions that are paternalistic or dismissive — resulting in exclusion, mistrust, and poorer health outcomes.

PROPOSED SOLUTION

For communication barriers: use plain language, reduce unnecessary jargon, provide information in advance when possible, and offer accommodation based on individual communication preferences. For access barriers: implement comprehensive disability competency training for healthcare professionals, medical students, and administrative staff, addressing communication, accessibility, sensory-friendly practices, and person-centered care. Improved disability competency can reduce barriers, increase engagement, and foster more inclusive healthcare experiences.

Ensuring Dignity and Access: **Designing for Dignity and Inclusion**



Jessica Bonness, NCIDQ

*Program Director and Associate
Professor, Interior Architecture
+ Design, Marymount University*

OBSTACLE

People with disabilities encounter physical, social, and cultural barriers throughout the built environment, including healthcare facilities. While ADA standards promote accessibility, they often focus on minimum access requirements rather than dignity, inclusion, and equitable experiences. Barriers include separate accessible entrances, ineffective wayfinding systems, inaccessible signage, and environments that fail to account for sensory sensitivities — creating frustration, confusion, exclusion, and diminished dignity.

PROPOSED SOLUTION

Adopt Co-Design and Universal Design principles throughout the planning and design process. Co-Design actively engages individuals with disabilities and other stakeholders throughout project development so that lived experience informs design decisions. Universal Design emphasizes creating environments usable by as many people as possible — focusing on accessibility, intuitive use, error tolerance, and perceptible information. Together, these approaches create more inclusive, dignified, and functional spaces for all users.

Ensuring Dignity and Access: Redefining Human Worth



**Megan Mahowald, Ph.D.,
CCC-SLP**

*Professor and Program Director,
Speech-Language Pathology;
Associate Dean, College of
Health and Education*

OBSTACLE

One of the greatest barriers to full inclusion is the way our society defines human worth. Too often, value is measured by productivity, independence, communication style, or how closely a person aligns with able-bodied norms. Communication can become a gatekeeper, determining who is seen, heard, and valued. This perspective marginalizes individuals with complex developmental disabilities, acquired communication impairments, and degenerative conditions by placing the burden on them to prove their worth rather than recognizing their inherent dignity. Every person deserves not only access to communication but also acceptance free from judgment and rooted in respect for who they are.

PROPOSED SOLUTION

Achieving meaningful inclusion requires a fundamental shift in how we view and value one another. Communication should be recognized as both a fundamental human right and a civil right, with policies that ensure equitable access to diverse communication methods, funding, and provider education, honoring all forms of expression as valid and meaningful. Equally important is a cultural shift that encourages us to lead with respect rather than assumption and to recognize every person's capacity for connection, identity, and self-expression. Inclusion should not depend on a person's ability to meet able-bodied or productivity-based expectations. Instead, it should honor the inherent dignity and humanity of every individual.



Ensuring Dignity and Access: Presume Competence



Conner Cummings

Member, Autism Society's Council of Autistic Advisors; Member, Executive Committee, Virginia Board for People with Disabilities; Citizen Member, Virginia Disability Commission; and Champion of Conner's Law — permitting Virginia courts to extend child support for an adult child whose severe, lifelong disability began before adulthood.

OBSTACLE

One of the biggest obstacles facing people with disabilities is presumed incompetence. Too often, people judge us by how we speak, move, or communicate rather than seeing our abilities, potential, and intelligence. When people assume we cannot understand, contribute, learn, or achieve, they create barriers that limit opportunities and inclusion. No matter how we communicate — by mouth, fingers, AAC, technology, gestures, or movement — people should listen to us and presume that we are smart, capable, and able to achieve our goals in our own way.

PROPOSED SOLUTION

We must believe in people with disabilities and create a world where anything is possible. That begins with guaranteeing universal access to high-tech Augmentative and Alternative Communication (AAC) and the training needed to use it effectively. It means listening to us, however we communicate, giving us opportunities to try new things, and recognizing that success happens on different timelines. In 2015, at age 23, I learned to tie my shoes, swallow a pill, and helped change a law: Conner's Law. Those accomplishments happened because people believed in me and did not give up on me. We should focus on people's potential, not their limitations, and never stop believing in what they can achieve.

Strengthening Systems of Support: Investing in Prevention and Resilience



Jamie Dyke, LCSW

Learning Manager, LTSS Center of Excellence; Certified PCT Mentor

OBSTACLE

One of the greatest threats to the well-being and inclusion of individuals with disabilities occurs when policymakers make decisions without fully understanding the impact of reducing funding for programs that enhance quality of life. When decision-makers do not recognize how resilience-building programs, preventive services, and community programs strengthen individuals, families, and communities, funding reductions can undermine opportunities for inclusion, independence, and long-term success — with consequences that extend well beyond people with disabilities.

PROPOSED SOLUTION

Greater education and awareness are needed among policymakers and elected officials regarding the value of investing in people, prevention, and resilience-building programs. Individuals who understand the long-term benefits of these investments should be encouraged to seek leadership and elected positions to shape policy. By recognizing that preventive support and community-based programs often reduce costs over time while improving outcomes, policymakers can make informed decisions that strengthen both individual lives and communities as a whole.

Looking Toward the Future: Bridging the Digital Divide



Qing Zeng-Treitler, PhD

Director, Biomedical Informatics Center; Professor, Clinical Research and Leadership, School of Medicine and Health Sciences, The George Washington University

OBSTACLE

There is a major digital divide affecting adults with severe and multiple disabilities — including older adults with combined vision, hearing, mobility, and cognitive impairments — and the general population. Technology and AI development are often focused on workforce productivity rather than accessibility and inclusion. The lack of digital literacy support, accessible technologies, and intentionally inclusive design contributes to social isolation and limits self-expression and participation.

PROPOSED SOLUTION

Policymakers should prioritize funding for inclusive AI development, universal design standards in digital health tools, and community-based technology deployment programs. Thoughtfully designed AI and assistive technologies can reduce barriers, enhance communication, support self-expression, and help combat social isolation among people with disabilities.

Looking Toward the Future: Making Disability Visible in Data



Bonnielin Swenor, PhD, MPH

Director, Johns Hopkins Disability Health Research Center

OBSTACLE

People with disabilities are frequently excluded from the data used to inform policies, programs, and resource allocation. Disability is often not collected as a core demographic variable despite policy requirements. These data gaps hinder efforts to identify and address disparities across healthcare, education, employment, housing, transportation, and other sectors.

PROPOSED SOLUTION

Expand and improve disability data collection and utilization. Policymakers should ensure disability is treated as a core demographic variable, engage disability community members in data-related efforts, and improve organizational capacity and training. Better data will support more effective policies and more equitable resource allocation.

Looking Toward the Future: Dreaming Big and Believing in What Is Possible



Liz Weintraub

Senior Advocacy Specialist, Association of University Centers on Disabilities (AUCD)

OBSTACLE

One of the greatest obstacles to meaningful change is the attitudes of families and professionals. They must dream big, believe in what is possible, and have faith that dreams can come true.

Common Threads

The stories and perspectives shared throughout this compendium reflect a wide range of experiences, expertise, and ideas. Yet despite their differences, several common threads emerge — pointing toward a shared vision of communities where adults with significant support needs are fully included, valued, and supported.



Presume Competence

See potential before limitations. Begin with the belief that every person has something meaningful to contribute.



Ensure Every Voice Is Heard

Communication takes many forms. Inclusion requires listening, understanding, and creating pathways for self-expression.

Build Communities of Belonging

People thrive when they have opportunities to form relationships, contribute to their communities, and participate in meaningful ways.

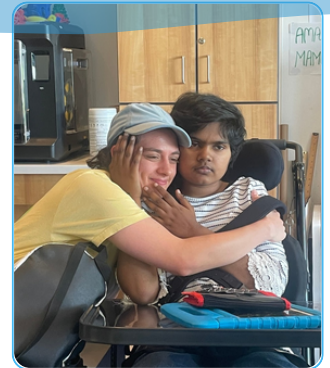
Design with Everyone in Mind

Accessibility and universal design create environments where more people can live, work, learn, and connect.



Invest in People

Strong support systems depend on families, direct support professionals, educators, healthcare providers, and community partners who are equipped to help individuals thrive.



Expand Opportunity

Reliable transportation, accessible housing, meaningful employment, and community participation are essential building blocks of inclusion.

Use Innovation Responsibly

Technology, research, and data can help reduce barriers when developed in partnership with people with disabilities and guided by equity and inclusion.

Lead with Dignity

Every policy, program, and decision should begin with a simple question: Does this support the dignity, agency, and belonging of the people it is intended to serve?

A Call to Action

Inclusion is not the responsibility of any single system, profession, or organization. It is a shared commitment requiring action from policymakers, healthcare leaders, educators, employers, advocates, families, and community members.

The contributors to this compendium have shown us where the barriers lie — and, just as importantly, where the openings are. Each of us can begin today: by presuming competence, by listening across difference, by designing for everyone, and by insisting that dignity guide every decision.



“Believe and create a world where anything is possible.

— Conner Cummings





SPARC (Specially Adapted Resource Clubs) is Virginia's nonprofit provider of community-integrated day programs for adults with severe and multiple disabilities who require one-to-one support and have aged out of K-12 special education. Founded by families who saw their adult children lose access to structure, connection, and community, SPARC creates inclusive, person-centered spaces where participants pursue activities, relationships, and meaningful community life.

SPARC's work directly advances the community integration mandate established by the Americans with Disabilities Act and affirmed through the Olmstead decision — helping the region fulfill its commitment to equity and inclusion for people with the most significant support needs.

