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How Foundations Can Ensure Diversity Efforts Include People With Disabilities

By Jennifer Laszlo Mizrahi

In Darren Walker's annual Ford Foundation letter this year, he acknowledged the grant maker's "ableism" – discrimination against people with disabilities. Yes, ableism is a real thing, just like racism, sexism, and other "-isms."

Sue Desmond-Hellmann, chief executive of the Gates Foundation, recently noted, "We want everybody to be able to work at the foundation no matter what their background is."

It's great when large and well-respected foundations play a leadership role in advancing causes. Yet all foundations, even those much smaller than Ford and Gates, can work to increase inclusion and employment of people with disabilities by influencing their grantees.

The statistics are grim. People with disabilities are twice as likely to live in poverty and be victims of crime than people without disabilities. About 1.2 million Americans age 16 to 20 have disabilities. Only 7 percent complete college. Many enter the school-to-prison pipeline, and today more than 750,000 people with disabilities are behind bars in America.

One in five Americans has a disability. Before the Americans With Disabilities Act, 70 percent of people with disabilities were out of the work force. Today, 26 years later, that percentage remains the same.

People with physical, learning, sensory, intellectual, mental-health, and other disabilities are often left out of the diversity discussion. It's time for that to end. People with disabilities deserve the chance to achieve a better future, just like anyone else.

Spreading the Gospel

Foundations of all sizes can encourage their grantees to have more inclusive hiring practices where people with disabilities are concerned, but they should also look inward to be sure they are doing the same.

Here are 10 key questions that grant makers should ask themselves – and their grantees.

1. Does your organization have policies or programs that support inclusion of people with disabilities at all levels? Are they prominent on your website and print materials? Do your event registration forms invite people to flag any accommodations they might need, such as sign-language interpreters or the ability to bring a service animal?
2. Are all people with any kind of disability welcome to participate? If not, why not? If so, how do you plan to identify, reach, and welcome them?
3. Do you serve people with disabilities as you do everyone else, or are they forced into segregated "special-needs programs"?
4. Has someone who uses a wheelchair checked the physical accessibility of your offices?
5. Has a person who is blind or who uses adaptive computer technology checked your website and facilities for accessibility?
6. Do your videos have closed captioning? Do you have a way to communicate with people who are deaf or use adaptive devices?
7. Do you employ people with disabilities? If so, what are their jobs? Do they receive the same compensation and benefits as other employees in similar positions?
8. How do you educate your staff, board of directors, trustees, and other key people about serving and working with people with disabilities?
9. Has your organization considered how the language it uses may affect its ability to include and mobilize people with disabilities?
10. Once your organization has decided inclusion is important, how will you make it happen? Are you looking into all the benefits that can come, for example, from using the latest and greatest techniques and apps to enable people who have disabilities to gain education, employment and independence?

Watch Your Language

As you work to diversify, remember to respect individuals with disabilities as people, not projects. Don't pity them. And be sensitive about the language you use. For example, avoid calling someone "wheelchair bound" or "handicapped." Don't define people by their disabilities, for instance calling them "the disabled." We are people first.

As a philanthropist, you can have a huge impact on social justice, diversity, and inclusion whether or not you support groups that focus on those issues.

1. Request grantees explore ways of becoming more inclusive of people with from all backgrounds. They can get many free tools and tips from our group, www.RespectAbilityUSA.org.

2. Apply a diversity lens to grants in a variety of areas, such as ensuring that children with disabilities get the education and training they need to succeed, that people with disabilities have full access to job and work-force programs, and that programs to end rape and abuse include people with disabilities, who are disproportionately victims of such crimes.

3. Build an inclusive environment by ensuring that people with disabilities help set your group's policies and practices.

This catchphrase captures the philosophy well: "nothing about us without us."

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