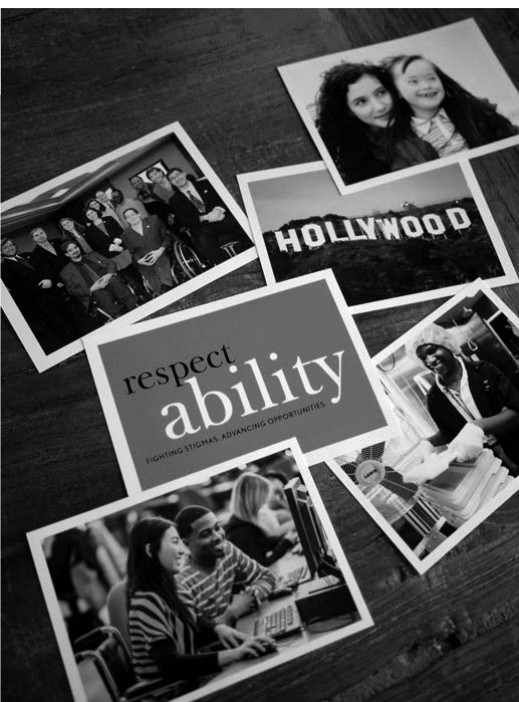


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FIGHTING STIGMAS. ADVANCING OPPORTUNITIES.



POLL-DRIVEN MESSAGING TO ACHIEVE POSITIVE CHANGE FOR PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES



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Introduction

While COVID-19 vaccinations have started, the pandemic is still ravaging lives, livelihoods and our children's education in its wake. So how will we move forward on diversity, equity and inclusion as we make our way out of this pandemic? How can the disability community move ahead and work to advance other marginalized groups at the same time?

In the aftermath of one of the most divisive election cycles in recent memory, there is a proven place for positive messages that will win hearts and minds on critical issues facing Americans. Indeed, the opposite holds true as well. Competing to show who is suffering the most actually repels support by playing what has been called a game of "Oppression Olympics."

Over the course of more than seven years, RespectAbility has engaged in strategic public opinion research to advance opportunities and reduce stigma so people with disabilities can fully participate in all aspects of community life.

Nearly 30 years after the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) was signed into law, research shows that pre-COVID, 70% of working age Americans (ages 18-64) with disabilities were out of the workforce, even though 71% say that they want to work. While there are systemic policy, program and legislative challenges to advancing opportunities for people with disabilities, research consistently shows that whether because of overt or unconscious bias, **stigma remains the primary barrier.**

Which begs the question — how do people with disabilities and those who care about them crush this barrier?

The short answer is positive, inclusive, hopeful messages supported by clear impactful facts that matter to a persuadable audience.

While one in five Americans has a disability and many more have a close friend or relative with a disability, many Americans have significant misperceptions fueling these stigmas. Studies show widespread stigmas like people with disabilities being primarily seen as "warm" but not "competent," or as dependent or helpless. More exposure and inclusion are needed. We need more and better communication, more people with disabilities on TV and computer screens, and more people with disabilities in inclusive education and the workplace.

Research Driven Messaging and Strategy

Since its inception RespectAbility has conducted public opinion research to examine the issues and attitudes surrounding employment and inclusion of people with disabilities (PwDs) in America. Over the past seven years, we have held dozens of focus groups and surveyed thousands of Americans with and without disabilities. The cumulative scope and scale of this research has been vast, covering employment, philanthropy, religion, politics and more. At the turn of the decade it seemed appropriate to revisit this body of research and share the most significant messaging theme – stay POSITIVE!

The Tough Stuff

In advocacy, an audience can be divided into three groups: those who already agree with you (the “Amen choir”); those who will never agree with you; and the “persuadables” in the middle. In the case of disability advocacy, it’s easy for well-intentioned advocates to focus time and resources preaching to the choir about strategies and messages that make us feel good but do little to bring new folks into the tent.

Statements that dictate what “should” be done or appear negative won’t move people. No one wants to be told what to do. They must be motivated and know how to act. Persuadables react strongly against any message that says what they “should” do, or that comes from a negative perspective in communicating about and advocating for people with disabilities. The persuadables make up the largest swath of the American public, if only for their perceived lack of personal contact or connection to the disability community.

People with disabilities must be able to “come out of the closet” and safely self-disclose disability. Sadly, due to stigmas that limit career and social advancement, many people with disabilities don’t choose to self-disclose. This is compounded by the fact that many people have nonvisible disabilities, including mental health conditions, chronic pain and learning disabilities. Many of these people are still “in the closet,” leaving countless people who have disabilities with an overwhelming sense of being alone as they are unaware of how many others share similar barriers to success. Moreover, many successful people who have disabilities don’t self-disclose the disability they live with every day, because they are afraid that if people learn about their disabilities, it could limit their work or social prospects. This suggests that a big part of fighting for equity is to advance both disability pride and acceptance so people can self-identify with the disability community without fear of new barriers.

The disability community has taken [cues from the LGBTQ+ playbook](#) in their quest for equality. While there is still a long way to go, American public opinion has shifted dramatically over the past decade in favor of same-sex marriage from [60% opposed in 2004 to 61% support in 2019](#). This shift was influenced by messaging like “This is about everyday Americans who want the same chance as everyone else to pursue health and happiness, earn a living, be safe in their communities, serve their country and take care of the ones they love.” This emphasis on common ground and common values, rather than differences, is credited with making it more difficult to cast gay people as being “other,” “different” or “not like me.” It also makes it more difficult for Americans to dismiss or ignore the harms and daily injustices that LGBTQ+ people face.

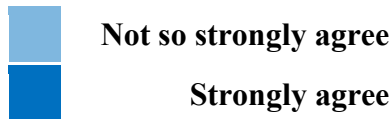
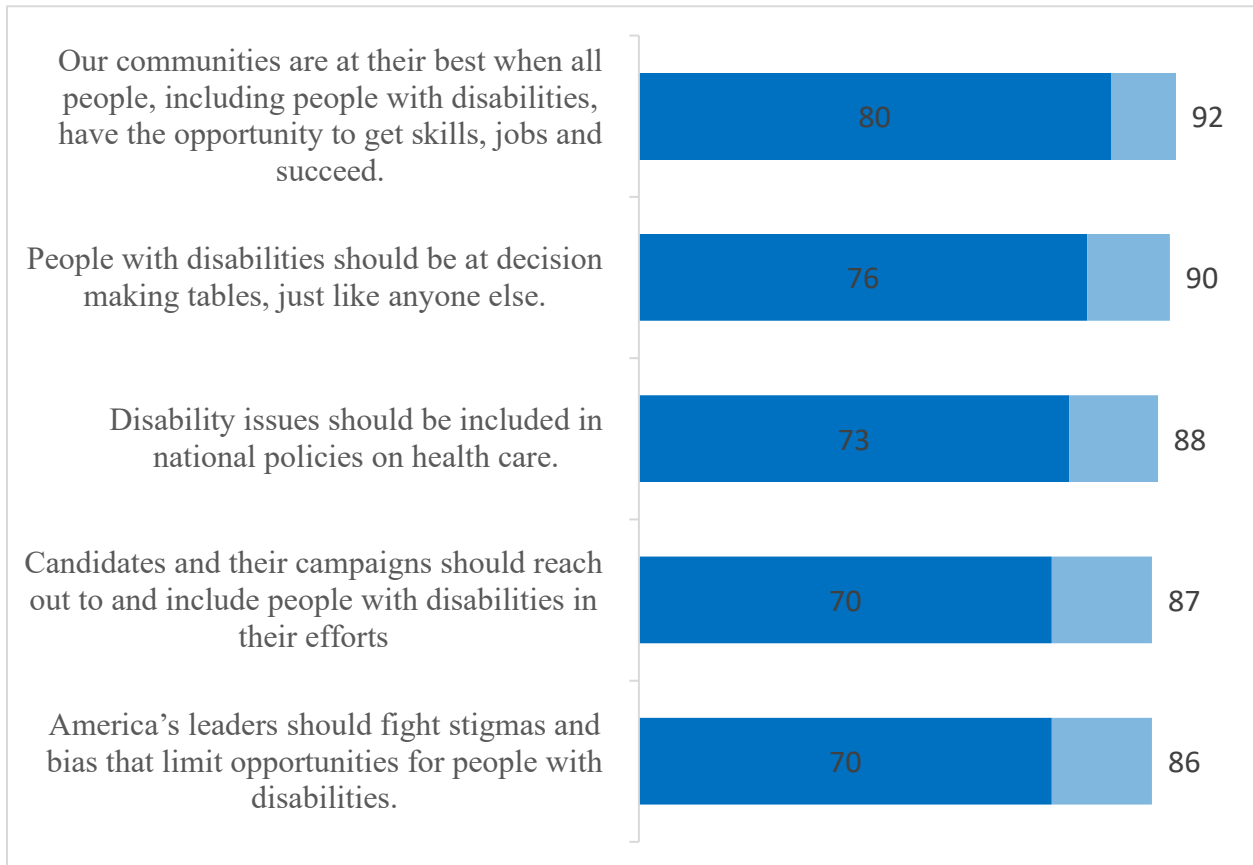
Research shows that many of these same concepts work to increase support for employment of Americans with disabilities:

Our communities are at their best when all people, including people with disabilities, have the opportunity to get skills, jobs and success.

At least 9 in 10 voters agree that our communities are at their best when all people, including people with disabilities, have opportunities, and that people with disabilities should be at decision-making tables just like everyone else.

Question: Now let me read you some statements and please tell me if you agree or disagree with each statement.

All Voters



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¹ Lake Research Partners and The Tarrance Group designed and administered this pre-election and election night survey, which was conducted using professional interviewers from October 31 – November 3, 2020. The questions about voting and the demographics reached a total of 2,400 voters nationwide who voted in the 2020 elections or who were planning to vote later on Tuesday – 1,335 interviews among voters who were reached on cell phones, including 600 interviews completed by text-to-online, and 1,065 interviews among voters who were reached on landlines (margin of error +/- 2.0%). Issue questions reached a total of 1,200 voters nationwide who voted in the 2020 elections or who were planning to vote later on Tuesday (margin of error of +/-2.8%). (Lake Research Partners and The Tarrance Group, November 2020)

The opinion landscape in American today is dynamic and conversations around diversity, equity and inclusion can sometimes feel like walking through a minefield. Will people be accused of ableism, cultural appropriation, cancel culture or identity politics? While we are increasingly divided and entrenched in our views, certain language choices force us further from each other while trying to tackle tough issues. Whether those conversations are about people with disabilities, gender identity, sexual orientation or race, **research has made clear what language works and what may instead alienate our intended audience.**

Not every conversation can or should be comfortable, nor would we presume to suggest how to engage in this critical work in areas beyond our own expertise in communicating about disabilities. However, these basic research and communication strategies are sound and may be helpful to advocates across the board.

Reflecting further on the research and groundwork laid by the LGBTQ+ community, research shows that even switching specific words such as “gay couples” or “gay and lesbian couples” rather than “homosexual couples” or “same-sex couples” is more effective. Similarly, in advocating for increased inclusion of people with disabilities, “welcoming” and “respect” are far more powerful than “equitable” or “open tent.” LGBTQ+ research also concludes that “Attacking anti-LGBTQ+ activists doesn’t give Americans a reason to support equality for LGBTQ+ people; rather, it can make them want to back away from the person or group doing the name calling.” For this reason, [research](#) encourages avoiding words like bigotry, prejudice and hatred.

This isn’t easy. We recognize that when we are advocating for ourselves or our family, loved ones and friends about their fundamental humanity and inclusion in society, **at times we want to scream at the world from the roof tops about the injustice and inequality.** We might feel better for a time, and it can work to rally the base, but with the limited time and resources, research shows us a more effective path forward.

View PPT of slides with additional data used in this report: <https://www.respectability.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/Slides-Positive-Messaging.pptx>.

So, What Works and What Doesn't?

Employment: Belief in the Dignity and Importance of Work

The data clearly show that the disability community feels the weight of low expectations. Less than one-third of people in the disability community surveyed think that society expects someone with a disability to work. This stands in stark contrast to the reality that people with disabilities overwhelmingly want to work and contribute to society. In fact, fully 85% of people with disabilities say that having a job is important to their happiness.

Question: How important is having a job to you/your friend/ family member's happiness?

	Person with a Disability	Friend, Family Member, Support Professionals & Volunteers
Extremely Important	58%	55%
Somewhat Important	27%	22%
Neutral	10%	14%
Not Very Important	2%	3%
Not Important at All	3%	6%

2

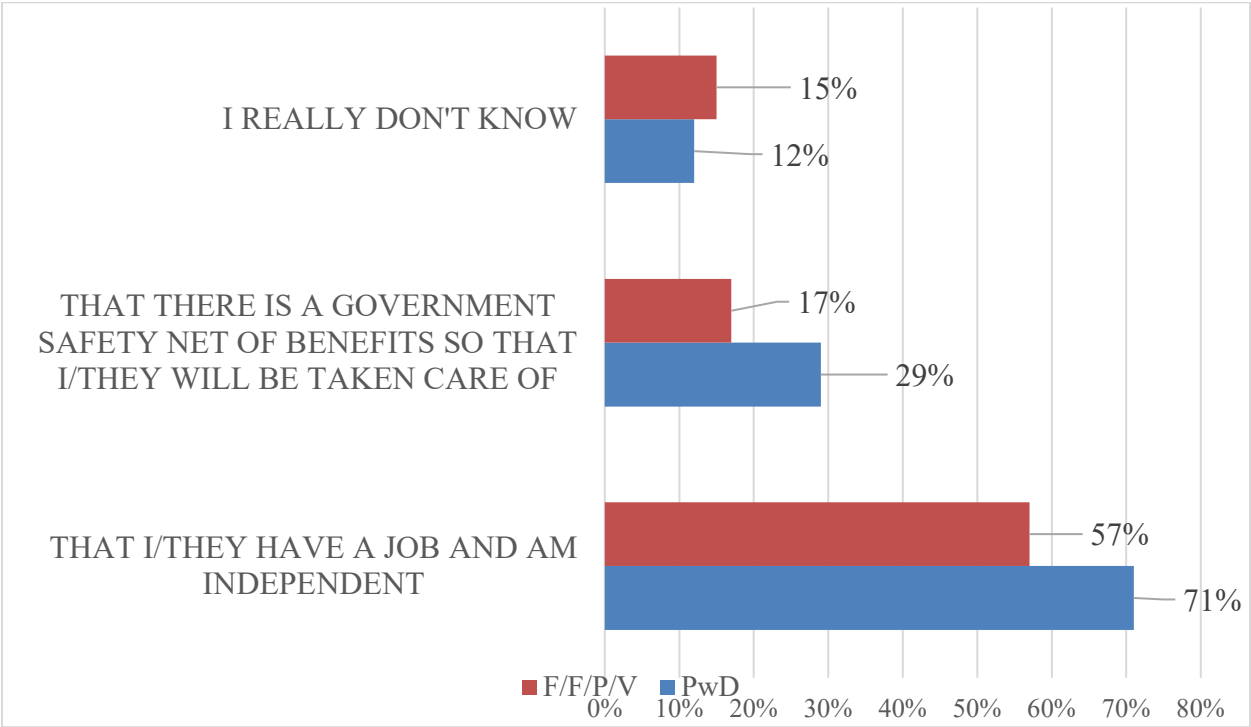
People with disabilities want to work! Despite the findings that more than 70% of people with disabilities and nearly 60% of their close friends, family members, support professionals and volunteers polled want jobs and independence more than benefits, less than one-third of people in the disability community surveyed think that society expects people with a disability to work.³ Yet 85% of people with disabilities say that having a job is important to their happiness. It should be noted that there was no partisan split for people with disabilities on this question. More than 84% of democrats, independents and republicans indicated the same.

² In July 2014 RespectAbility set out to examine the issue landscape and attitudes surrounding employment of people with disabilities (PwDs) in America today. We held focus groups in the Washington, D.C., area followed by [a poll of more than 3,800 PwDs](#), friends, families and professionals in the disability community. The survey was fielded November 6 – December 2, 2013 and includes 3839 respondents, 1969 of whom are people with disabilities. It is important to note that while this study is extremely extensive and has a large sample size, this poll was fielded almost exclusively online and was distributed widely via social media and by partnering organizations in the disability community. The sample therefore includes the "activist" PWD community and reflects more women, more Democrats, and a more highly educated audience than one might expect within the disability community overall. Phone survey options and assistance were made available to respondents. However, due to the nature of the online survey instrument, the sample likely underreports people with cognitive and intellectual disabilities, among others. (RespectAbility Disability Community Survey, November 2013)

³ RespectAbility Disability Community Survey, November 2013

Nearly three out of four people with disabilities polled said that it is more important to them to "have a job and be independent" than it is "that there is a government safety net of benefits so that I will be taken care of." This holds true across political party lines.

Question: Which is more important to you?



4

⁴ RespectAbility Disability Community Survey, November 2013

Words That Work

Our communities are at their best when all people, including people with disabilities, have the opportunity to get skills, jobs and succeed.

People with disabilities bring unique characteristics and talents to workplaces that benefit employers and organizations. Stephen Hawking was a genius who happened to use a wheelchair. People with disabilities can work in hospitals, hotels and excel in computer programming, software development and in many other areas of information technology and other fields.

Companies including JPMorgan Chase, Starbucks, Bank of America and Coca-Cola have shown that employees with disabilities are loyal, successful and help them become more profitable. If we find the right people for the right jobs it can increase the bottom line of all sorts of companies.

Government policies that help people with disabilities get and keep jobs are a win-win because they allow people with disabilities the dignity and financial benefits of work. Those same policies also grow our economy and save taxpayer money.

What Doesn't Work

Over the course of conducting this research, we have seen a push among friends, families and support professionals to encourage companies to hire people with disabilities because it is the “right thing to do.” They also suggest that employers should weigh their needs against the value of a person with a disability. We know from additional research with republican decision-makers that this is NOT a winning message strategy.

Emphasis on the Strength of What People with Disabilities Can Do, Not Complaining

	1 st Choice	Comb	Dem 1 st Choice	Rep 1 st Choice	Ind 1 st Choice
People with disabilities bring unique characteristics and talents to workplaces that benefit employers and staff. People with disabilities can bag groceries, tend our parks and schools, and be super talents in developing computer software.*	37%	66%	37%	33%	36%
Our nation was founded on the principles of “All Men Are Created Equal.” Fifty years after Martin Luther King, Jr. delivered his “I Have a Dream” speech, we still need to reach our civil rights goal. People with disabilities deserve to be able to work to achieve the American dream just like anyone else.	23%	46%	25%	17%	23%
We cannot afford to have more than 10 million Americans at home collecting benefits when they can help make America stronger. Keeping a disability unemployment compensation system that costs taxpayers \$350 billion a year is financially unsustainable. Every American who can work should be encouraged and supported to do so.	21%	37%	19%	28%	24%
Companies like Walgreens, Bank of America and others have shown that employees with disabilities add to their companies’ profitability. They are very qualified and help them make more money. If we find the right jobs for the right people it can and does increase the bottom line of companies.	17%	40%	17%	16%	19%
Companies that have diverse employees, including people with disabilities, are more likely to get government contracts. New regulations mean that companies who hire people with disabilities will be favored in government contracts. This will help them make more money.	3%	9%	3%	3%	2%

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It’s important to note that while the ADA has been largely successful at ensuring physical access to public places, it’s also the law that allows for discrimination lawsuits. Anecdotally and via focus

⁵ RespectAbility Disability Community Survey, November 2013

*While the overall messaging from this survey tracks still today, the language of “super talents” is not preferred within the disability community and is not recommended.

groups, RespectAbility has heard on numerous occasions that people and organizations within the disability community use ADA “threats” as a strategy to achieve outcomes. For example, “I just told that company that it would be a whole lot cheaper to install an electric door with a push button than it would be to defend a lawsuit and pay damages for not installing one.”

This is true and it’s important, but it also plays into a preconceived notion on the part of employers that hiring and accommodating people with disabilities can be costly and fraught with legal actions. More research is needed on this subject especially as it relates to employers’ experiences. As successful as the ADA has been in increasing physical access, it also has produced the unintended consequence of employers being concerned about lawsuit abuse.

Polling from the most recent election reinforces the importance of the economy, jobs and healthcare to voters, particularly voters with disabilities.⁶ **The economy, jobs and COVID-19 dominated voters’ concerns** with 30% saying the economy and jobs and 28% saying COVID-19 were two most important issues in deciding for whom to vote. This is followed by health care (18%), dysfunction in government (16%) and racial justice (14%).

Among voters with disabilities, COVID-19 (24%) and the economy and jobs (22%) were the most important issues in deciding for whom to vote in the 2020 elections. Twenty-six percent of the broader disability community said COVID-19 and the economy and jobs were the most important issues as well.

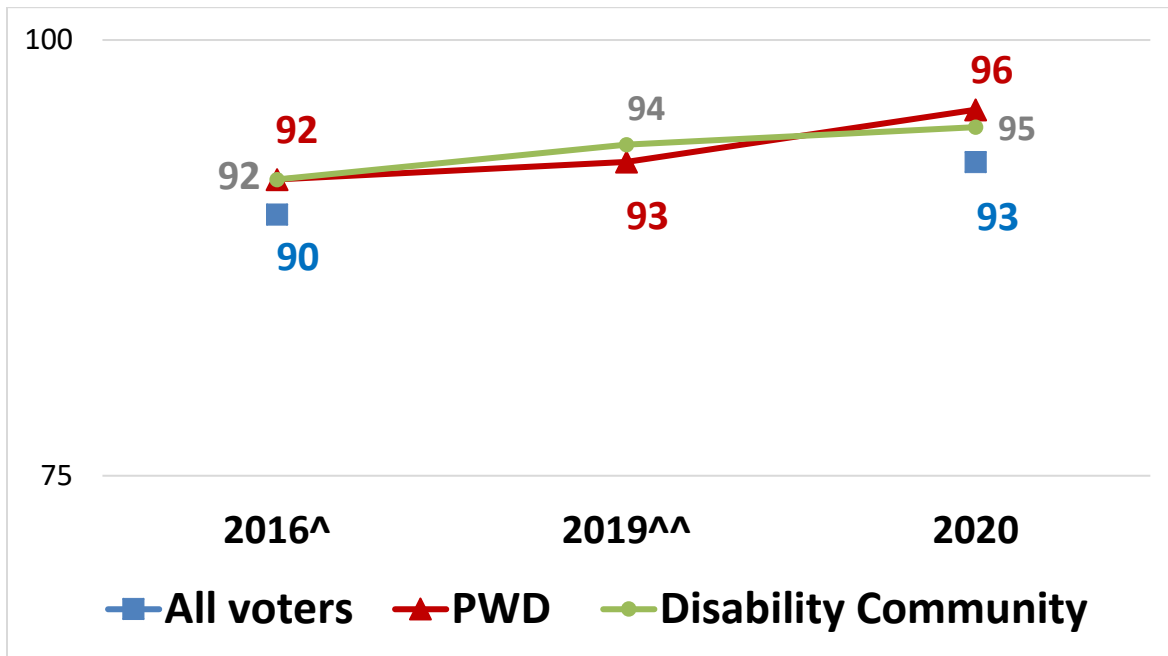
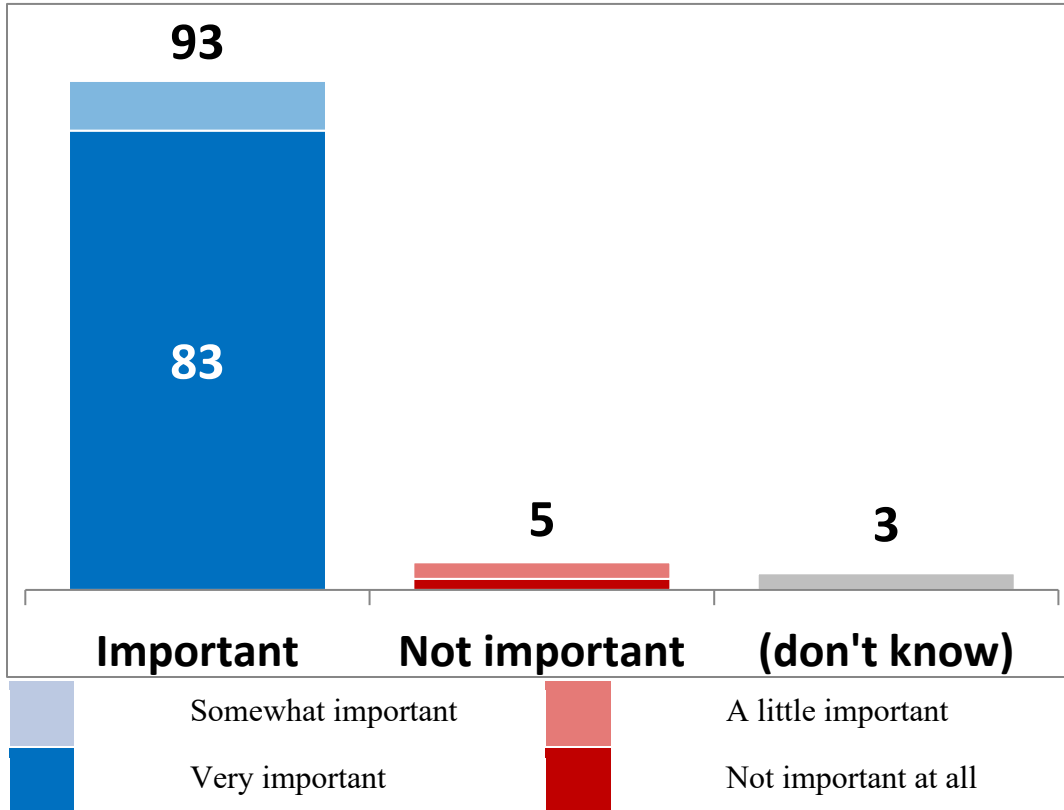
While it’s clear that positive messaging is key to advancing opportunities for the disability community, it’s also critical to engage politicians and advocate for smart policies. Politicians should be encouraged to build inclusive campaigns and staff. The simple act of treating people with disabilities with respect is powerful, and in an election season where hundreds of races were decided by 5 points or less, courting these groups is good politics and good policy.

A solid majority of voters believe **it’s very important that candidates treat people with disabilities with dignity and respect (83%)**, a core value among all voters, including voters with disabilities and the broader disability community itself.

Fully 60% of voters believe **it’s very important that congressional and presidential campaigns address issues that are important to people with disabilities**. Voters with disabilities (81%), including 79% of voters with disabilities in battleground states and 86% of older voters with disabilities, as well as African Americans (77%), are likely to say it is **very important**.

⁶ Lake Research Partners and The Tarrance Group, November 2020

How important is it to you personally that candidates treat people with disabilities with dignity and respect?



Philanthropy

Many nonprofits and foundations are known for their good works and goodwill. Nearly three-quarters (72%) of people who work in the social sector say their organizations have made a public commitment to Diversity, Equity and Inclusion (DEI) and have policies that prohibit them from denying people with disabilities equal opportunity to participate in services and activities.⁷ However the gap between the desire to be inclusive and what actually happens is massive. A recent [study by the Council on Foundations](#) shows that less than 1% of foundations have even one person with a disability on their full-time staff.

Even among this very well-intentioned group, most are not doing enough to provide people with disabilities the access and accommodations they need to fully participate like anyone else. Many don't know what they don't know, and often haven't thought about ensuring the inclusion of people with disabilities. Even among well-meaning groups who are doing a lot on DEI overall, disability is often overlooked as integral to diversity. For example:

- [Only 14% say their organizations use video captions](#) to ensure people who are deaf or hard of hearing can use the content. Captioning services are easy to use and are often free, yet 86% of these organizations are not even attempting to take advantage of such tools.
- Similarly, only 30% of respondents say their organizations enable people with disabilities to request accommodations like sign language interpreters on their event registration forms. Asking about accommodations sends a clear signal that people with disabilities are welcome and that inclusion is seen as important.
- In addition, only 59% say their events always are held in physically accessible spaces.

What keeps these seemingly supportive and innovative organizations from doing more? According to the survey, bias is the top reason, cited by more than one-third (36%) of respondents. Whether overt or implicit, prejudice against people with disabilities is a significant barrier to meaningful inclusion efforts. Hence, people with disabilities — whose talents are considerable and can help strengthen organizations — are routinely turned away and not included.

We suffer from crisis fatigue. The tendency in the social sector to catastrophize the issues we care about, and to present them in the most drastic terms possible, does not work here. It's not helpful or necessary given the hopeful potential that exists with inclusion efforts. When we tested various statements about inclusion for people disabilities, respondents were clearly drawn toward positive messaging. The following three statements were the most compelling and are imbued with optimism and confidence.

⁷ 5 focus groups of people who work in philanthropy done in 2015 in partnership with the Council on Foundations. 14 one-on-one interviews done in 2018 by phone with leaders of foundations/philanthropy serving organizations. Evaluation of online accessibility of 25 largest foundations and 25 largest nonprofits (done with assistance from Marcie Lipsitt) in 2018/19. Online survey of 969 people done by Buren Communications of subscribers to NonProfitTimes, Chronicle of Philanthropy and numerous PSO partners. Analysis by Meagan Buren, Amy Chapman, Jennifer Laszlo Mizrahi and others. <https://www.respectability.org/2020/10/new-philanthropy-study-cof>

Words That Work

Organizations are at their best when they welcome, respect and include people of all backgrounds.

Problems are best solved by working with people who have experienced them firsthand and know solutions that work. Just like issues that impact people of different racial, ethnic or other backgrounds, *people with disabilities should be involved in solving issues that impact them—hence the mantra “Nothing About Us Without Us.”*

Our nation was founded on the principle that anyone who works hard should be able to get ahead in life. **People with disabilities deserve an equal opportunity to earn an income, achieve independence and be included just like anyone else.**

Negative messages were found to be most compelling by just 7% of respondents.

Words That Don’t Work

Only one in three people with a disability has a job. *People with disabilities are twice as likely to be poor as people without disabilities.* They are disproportionately impacted by issues like school suspension and dropping out, unemployment, homelessness, abuse, incarceration and food insecurity.

Hollywood

Until recent years people with disabilities were largely absent from popular culture, TV and movies. We still have a very long way to go on this front – on and behind the screen. What we see and feel impacts how we act. This is one reason that [RespectAbility](#) has worked diligently with its partners in Hollywood and the entertainment industry to increase employment opportunities for people with disabilities and to increase their visibility on screen, in writing rooms and throughout the creative process.

According to [GLAAD](#) only 3.5% of scripted series regular characters (27) have disabilities on primetime TV in the 2020-2021 season. Furthermore, [more than 95% of characters with disabilities on television](#) are played by actors without disabilities.

And in the top-grossing films in the past five years, there has been no meaningful change in the percentage of speaking characters with disabilities. According to a recent report by [The Media, Diversity, & Social Change](#) (MDSC) Initiative at USC's Annenberg School for Communication and Journalism, in 2019 only 2.3% of all speaking or named characters in film were shown to have a disability. When the Annenberg study began tracking disability five years ago it found 2.4% of speaking characters had disabilities in 2015.

What does exist is misleading. Almost all portrayals of people with disabilities in media are [white and most are male](#), despite the fact that disability impacts everyone, directly or indirectly. We may all join the disability community at any point in our lives. And people with disabilities come from all communities – including the BIPOC, Asian American/Pacific Islander, Hispanic/Latinx, Native American and LGBTQ+ communities. “Depictions of disability are not only marginalized,” [an earlier Annenberg report says](#), “they also obscure the true diversity of this community.”

Qualitative research of leaders in the entertainment industry conducted in August 2017 showed that leaders do not believe there is a large enough talent pool of people with disabilities.⁸ It also unveiled an unconscious bias. All agreed that you can only hire the *most* talented, and many then alluded to the idea that might not mean people with disabilities.

*“Entertainment is a very competitive industry filled with enormously talented and hungry artists and professionals. **There is not enough talent with disabilities. You can’t hire people who don’t have undeniable talent.**”*

*“I just kinda agree that the most talented person is probably get the part. So, if someone with a disability is auditioning, awesome, and if they are the best, they got it. **But the competition is pretty tough.**”*

⁸ RespectAbility commissioned a focus group in August 2017. This qualitative research investigated existing perceptions of people with disabilities among entertainment decision makers and worked to identify messages and strategies to fight stigma and advance opportunities for people with disabilities in the industry. View more: <https://abilitymagazine.com/focus-group-a-candid-look-at-disability-inclusion>.

With decision-makers in Hollywood, the story reigns supreme. In the same way that these leaders are dedicated to a story's vision, they also are dedicated to their craft. There is a sincere, almost pure desire, at the heart of their work to participate in the creation of art. They appreciate, are aware of, and live the economic and practical side of the business, but they love the craft. They believe that diversity done right is less about how many boxes they check of different demographics of people for a given show, and more about authentic stories that allow an audience to see and experience something new and different. In their minds, the shows that are credited with “normalizing” behaviors such as *Will and Grace* did so because they were based in great stories.

“Modern Family did the same thing. It’s not called “Traditional Family.” It’s Modern Family because they were encapsulating this different aspect of a modern family and there are lots of others, but I think for this to become a norm and be an everyday thing it has to start with stories being written about people with disabilities and making it normal and making it something that everybody thinks about every day.”

Words That Work

What people see and hear impacts what they think and feel about themselves and others like them. Like “Will and Grace” and “Modern Family” helped to change perceptions of the LGBTQ+ community, **an increase in positive, diverse and authentic portrayals of people with disabilities on television and in films can help end stigmas and advance opportunities for people with disabilities.**

If we want to increase inclusion of people with disabilities on the screen, there are easy ways to work toward that goal. Not every role must be the lead. Actors with disabilities could easily play roles that neither hide nor emphasize their disability, for example, a doctor who uses a wheelchair, a waiter who has a prosthetic leg or a scientist who has cerebral palsy. Given that 20% of people have a disability, it’s also only natural to include people with disabilities in crowd shots.

And once again, if the messaging becomes preachy, the audience pushes back.

Words That Don’t Work

Minorities are under attack in America. *Hollywood and the creative community need to stand up to make sure our communities are welcoming, respectful, safe and inclusive of all people.* Youth of color and immigrants with disabilities are at huge risk for the school-to-prison pipeline. There are 750,000 people with disabilities behind bars in America today. People with disabilities of all backgrounds need to see positive role models like themselves on the screen. We can lead by example.

Capitol Hill

RespectAbility has conducted years of research on disability communications and there are a few reflections shared in focus groups that stick out.⁹ At a meeting with Capitol Hill staffers, one participant shared what it felt like to hear from group after group and constituent after constituent with a “sob story.” Whether it was a request to fund cancer or Alzheimer’s research, they are approached by what they see as a laundry list of worthy causes. While they are worthy, they explained that at some point they had to become numb and tune out rather than emotionally engage or invest in each one.

When reviewing what works with Republican Hill elite, it’s important to remember that there is an intense focus on perceived fraud in the system — “lazy people gaming the system for money.” Even though most of the participants thought the rate of fraud in disability benefits was 20% or less, the **bad apples are poisoning the conversation for everyone else.** In these conversations it’s important to come out against fraud first, then move on to ways we can work together.

Words That Work

We deplore the actions of individuals who would game the system of disability benefits. It makes the rest of us with actual disabilities and those who we care about look guilty. and it makes it more difficult to have important conversations like this one about our *hopes, aspirations and dreams of entering the workforce and being active, contributing members of society.* **I’m here to talk about how to enable more individuals to achieve the American Dream, how to get more individuals off public benefits, into jobs and paying taxes.**

The vast majority of people with disabilities say that they want to work at least part time, but our safety net programs do not encourage labor force participation and continue to punish people for working and saving money.

We can’t afford to have more than 10 million Americans at home when they can help make America stronger. Keeping a disability unemployment compensation system that costs taxpayers \$450 billion a year is financially unsustainable. As a nation we cannot afford NOT to have all people with disabilities, especially young people with disabilities, in the competitive workforce with fair, competitive wages. *Every American who can work should be encouraged to do so.*

⁹ July 2013- 1 focus group in Washington, D.C., of republican Hill staffers and policy elite. These were seasoned professionals at or above the level of Legislative Director with a portfolio that includes disability issues and health care.

Faith Inclusion

As with employment, the best messages for increasing inclusion in a religious community focus on universal values.¹⁰

Words That Work

We are a stronger community when we live up to our values — when we are welcoming, diverse, moral and respect one another. We want our children, parents, grandparents and other family and friends with disabilities to be able to have an equal opportunity to fully participate in our community.

People with disabilities and their families have the same hopes and dreams as everyone else even if they face different challenges. We should ensure that everyone knows that their presence and participation is *welcome and meaningful to us all*.

Focusing on expense, process and what the community “should” do is not a winning strategy. We can’t scare, guilt or shame people onto this path — they must be motivated!

Words That Don’t Work

Inclusion of people with disabilities can be as easy as giving a child a heads up before transitioning to a new activity or opening the door for a senior citizen. We can make a big difference if we start by asking people what we can do so they can participate fully as equal members of our community.

We spend a lot of time and effort to attract and retain people into religious communities. As we do this important work, we should be mindful that there are many people with disabilities who already want to be involved and are having a challenging time gaining access to our agencies, synagogues and communities.

Roughly one of every five people has a disability. Some are born with a disability, but for others it comes from an accident, aging or illness. Chances are high that eventually everyone will at least face temporary challenges such as crutches. Whatever the reason people have a disability — religious institutions need a plan, skills and budgets to meet the needs of members of our community who are experiencing disabilities.

¹⁰ Note that while RespectAbility has conducted research on disability inclusion among many faith groups, the most extensive research is within the Jewish community and those are the messaging findings included here.

The Bottom Line

In every crisis there is the opportunity for paradigm shifts and systems change that can advance progress. We are facing a dangerous winter as we wait for vaccines to become more readily available. But we will come out of it, and when we do, we will have the opportunity to create more inclusive economies and communities.

In the days and months ahead, we will have to confront the broken systems that have been exposed. These include inequities in health care, including rationing of health care, across economic conditions, geography, age, race and disability. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), 90% of all COVID-19-related hospitalizations were people with underlying conditions. And while we know that not all people with disabilities have underlying conditions, we also know that most people with such conditions are people with disabilities. We also know that more than a million people with disabilities have lost their jobs, and that distance learning has been catastrophic to students with disabilities. Indeed, mental health issues across the board are skyrocketing. But we are also oversaturated and overwhelmed with bad news. We need realistic and hopeful messages that are based on facts.

The truth is that the disability community has faced extraordinary losses — but we are also strong and resilient. Thomas Edison, who was deaf, was America's greatest inventor. Stephen Hawking unlocked the secrets of the universe from a wheelchair. Harriet Tubman freed slaves while living with a seizure disorder. Today Greta Thunberg, who is on the Autism spectrum, is a global leader working to literally save the world.

Fully 1.2 billion people in the world live with some form of disability. We bring innovation, talent, heart and solutions to challenges that impact us all. The world will be a better place when everyone — including people with disabilities — can fully participate in creating progress for everyone.

Acknowledgments

RespectAbility is deeply grateful to Meagan Buren for curating and writing this document, as well as to Robert Goldstraw for editing it. Jennifer Laszlo Mizrahi also was involved in all of the research.

All of this work was built on the efforts of our entire team. RespectAbility is a nonprofit organization that relies upon a strong team of boards, staff and supporters to move our work forward. In particular, we thank [our funders](#) and full boards, staff and Fellows:

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Our Advisors and Consultants: Nasreen Alkhateeb, Ariella Barker, Cathy Bolinger, CliftonLarsonAllen, LLP, Meagan Buren, Erin Dotson, Stan Goldman, Stan Greenberg, Nicole Homerin, Shea Mirzai, Lupe Ramos-Silva, Leah Romond, Robert Tombosky, James Trout and Donna Walton.

We also want to extend a special thank you to our Winter 2020 / Spring 2021 cohort of **National Leadership Program Fellows:** Chinyere Azike, Autumn Blalock, Zoltan Boka, Nebiyu Dingetu, KiAnna Dorsey, Tyler Hoog, Alex Howard, Courtney Hyde, Ian Malesiewski, Ava Xiao-Lin Rigelhaupt, Roque Renteria, Benjamin Rosloff, Donjeta Sahiti, Stephanie Santo, Jake Stimell and Blair Webb.

RespectAbility is able to accomplish everything we have detailed in this report due to our donors both large and small. If you would like to contribute, please visit www.RespectAbility.org/Donate or send your gift to our office at 11333 Woodglen Drive, Suite 102 Rockville, MD 20852.

Major financial support for RespectAbility's work was provided by several generous funders, which are listed on our website: <https://www.respectability.org/2020-report/appendix-a-our-funders>.



Meagan Buren

Meagan Buren, President of Buren Research and Communications, LLC, has a deep background in public opinion research, strategy, coaching and press relations, which is critical to helping clients achieve their goals. She is focused on client-facing messaging and communication challenges while they work to achieve their goals, better themselves, their communities and world.

Previously she served as Senior Project Director for Luntz Global, a leader in corporate, political and nonprofit public opinion research. There she led public opinion research to help shape the narrative and communications strategies for numerous Fortune 500 companies as well as nonprofit clients.

Prior to joining Luntz Global, Buren worked for The Israel Project (TIP) almost from its inception. For TIP she managed focus groups, polling, dial testing, grassroots training, and media outreach in the U.S., Europe, Russia and the Arab world. Buren conducted interactive language and media training sessions for ambassadors, top-ranking public officials, professionals and leaders key to impacting Middle East security and peace. She initiated and led media tours of Middle East experts worldwide, including at two cycles of the Republican National Convention, Democratic National Convention and presidential primary and debate seasons. She has been interviewed on national and international television and radio and is gifted in strategic communications.

Buren holds a master's in Communications, Culture and Technology from Georgetown University, a B.A. in International Studies specifying in the Middle East, and a B.A. in Hebrew from The Ohio State University where she graduated Phi Beta Kappa. She is a member of the Columbus 11 class of the Wexner Heritage Program.

View PPT of slides with additional data used in this report: <https://www.respectability.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/Slides-Positive-Messaging.pptx>.