



## People With Disabilities Must Be Included in Climate Action Planning

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Trevor Odelberg, Ph.D. Candidate, Electrical and Computer Engineering, University of Michigan

Mara Pusic, BA Public Policy '24, University of Michigan

With research support from Duncan Greeley, PhD, Materials Science and Engineering, University of Michigan

Community Partner: Detroit Disability Power

### EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The risks to humans from climate change are wide-reaching but felt unequally among members of society, including people with disabilities (PWD). Despite this, PWD are often “invisible” to decision-makers and planners.<sup>1</sup> Current climate action plans rarely address how cities will respond to the disproportionate impact of climate change on disabled people. This lack of response deepens existing inequalities and places PWD at significant, and potentially life-threatening, short- and long-term risk. Climate action plans must consider how climate change disproportionately impacts disabled people. In this report, specific risks are identified, followed by recommendations detailing how current and future climate action plans can bring disabled people into the policy-making process and enact the change necessary to allow them to lead more healthy and fulfilled lives.

### Climate Change Disproportionately Affects People with disabilities

Individuals who are economically, institutionally, culturally, or similarly marginalized are more vulnerable to the worst effects of climate change. This includes people with disabilities, which covers a diverse range of strengths and needs representing 25% of the adult population in the United States.<sup>2</sup> During natural disasters, the lives of people with disabilities are at 2–4x higher risk than non-disabled individuals, mostly impacting those with a mobility disability.<sup>3</sup> Climate change has increased the frequency of extreme weather, including flooding, heat waves, and large storms, which can limit access to power, heat, cooling, food, water, and transportation.<sup>4</sup> Examples of how PWD are adversely impacted include:

- People with mental health disabilities such as schizophrenia, bipolar disorder, and major depression are more vulnerable to heat. In a study by epidemiologists from the British Columbia Center for Disease Control (BCCDC), people with

### Key Findings

**People with disabilities and other individuals who are economically, institutionally, culturally, or similarly marginalized are more vulnerable to the worst effects of climate change.**

**Other factors such as race, gender, and poverty compound the risks of climate change to PWD.**

**Nationwide, policymakers and city planners rarely include PWD in the development of climate action plans, and as a result, these plans rarely address the specific needs of PWD in a climate crisis.**

**Planning committees need to provide accessible ways to give members of the Disability Community meaningful participation during the formation stages of climate action plans.**

**There is space moving forward for the City of Detroit to better engage with PWD during the final development of the Detroit Climate Strategy.**

schizophrenia were nearly three times as likely to die during a heat wave than during normal weather patterns.<sup>5</sup>

- People who need refrigerated medications, oxygen generators, motorized wheelchairs, and more may experience power outages as life threatening.<sup>6</sup>
- People who have hearing loss, low vision, or cognitive disabilities may not receive emergency communication and notifications (about boiling contaminated water for instance) in an accessible way.<sup>7</sup>

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### **Climate change is especially dangerous for disabled people as they share disproportional overlap with other at-risk populations.**

Having multiple marginalized identities compounds the vulnerabilities individuals face and can significantly increase the potential for harm. For instance, in the U.S., more than 20% of PWD live below the federal poverty level. There is a strong correlation between climate change and increased risks for low-income individuals, such as heightened vulnerability to flooding. This is predominantly attributed to factors such as geographical susceptibility, insufficient infrastructure, and constrained resources. These amplified environmental and health risks further worsen the economic hardships faced by those with low incomes.<sup>8</sup> Disabled people are also more likely to be elderly, have more barriers to accessing quality healthcare, and belong to communities of color, all of which are groups who have lower climate security.<sup>9,10</sup>

### **Climate Action Plans Routinely Exclude PWD**

City governments have begun adopting climate action plans that focus both on carbon reduction and community resiliency to combat the effects of climate change.<sup>11</sup> Climate action plans detail long and short-term goals for cities and inform roadmaps for initiatives that affect all citizens. However, there is relatively limited empirical research on how PWD cope during or after a natural disaster, and they are often “invisible” to decision-makers and planners.<sup>12</sup> Few climate action plans have acknowledged the disproportionate risk to disabled individuals. Out of the 25 largest cities in the US, only 11 have published plans that acknowledge the impact of climate change on people with disabilities, and approximately half of those plans include provisions addressing climate vulnerability for PWD.<sup>13</sup> This stems from the historical underrepresentation of disabled populations in the policy-making process. However, there is a growing awareness of the need to address climate vulnerabilities through policy action that includes direct collaboration with disabled people. In 2019, the United Nations Human Rights Office published an analytical study on the protection of the rights of persons with disabilities in the context of climate change, highlighting the need for PWD to be included in climate discussion.<sup>14</sup>

One city that has taken steps in integrating disability-inclusive planning for climate resilience is San Francisco, California. During the development of the city’s [Hazards and Climate Resilience Plan](#), the San Francisco Office of Resilience and Capital Planning hosted five stakeholder engagement workshops, one of which focused on older adults and PWD.<sup>15</sup> Highlighted themes from the stakeholder engagement session included the need to address accessible transportation during an evacuation, energy availability following a natural disaster for residents requiring powered assistive devices, accessibility in buildings along emergency exit routes, and “the overlap between vulnerable populations and vulnerable residential buildings to focus future grant and incentive programs”.<sup>16</sup>



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In its final [climate resilience plan](#), the San Francisco Department of Disability and Aging Services was tasked with developing an evacuation strategy for people with mobility needs in the event of a major disaster. Furthermore, the San Francisco Mayor’s Office on Disability was tasked with performing a study to assess the extent to which vulnerable populations are not adequately connected to city social services and to provide recommendations to better engage those populations.

Similarly, the [City of Boston’s 2021 heat resilience plan](#) acknowledges the elevated risk that PWD face due to climate change. Their plan specifically tackled this increased risk by distributing free resources, such as hundreds of air-conditioning units to residents with physical disabilities or chronic illnesses. Additionally, their plan outlined an outreach campaign that is

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aimed at utilizing public education channels for pre-heat wave resource mobilization, helping communities such as those with disabilities to be well informed on heat wave information and relief resources.<sup>17</sup>

### **Recommendations to Incorporate the Needs of Disabled people in Climate Action Plans**

1. Climate action plans should acknowledge the disproportionate effect climate change has on people with disabilities. Very few published plans have any language acknowledging the elevated risk to disabled individuals which further marginalizes their needs.
2. Planning committees should have members who are disabled and provide accessible paths for resident participation during the formation stages of climate action plans. Historically, citizens with disabilities and experts on disability have been excluded from the policy-making process. Widely accepted strategies, which involve incorporating both lived experiences and professional expertise into policy discussions through citizen panels like consensus conferences, should be utilized to guide the disability response in climate action plans.<sup>18</sup> Community engagement opportunities need to be accessible for a diverse range of disabilities and intersectional identities to ensure equal access to participation and a complete picture of the multiple factors that can shape the experiences of people with disabilities. This may include accessible transportation options and information that is accessible to those with hearing and visual disabilities.
3. Activists and city planners must analyze examples of existing climate action plans that address disability inclusion when considering policy solutions. This may involve the comparison of approaches, such as enhancing transportation accessibility and upgrading emergency alert systems.<sup>19</sup>

### **Opportunity for Engagement and Advocacy for Detroit Disability Power**

The City of Detroit is in the process of developing a new [Detroit Climate Strategy](#), organized around six main themes. The sixth theme highlights the feedback solicited from over 6,000 residents in partnership with Detroiters Working for Environmental Justice during the development of the initial 2019 Detroit Sustainability Action Agenda. While the original plan extensively engaged the local community by soliciting the active participation of underrepresented groups, it does not list any involvement of PWD or representative stakeholder organizations. Furthermore, none of the 43 action items address the implications of sustainable

development or climate change on PWD.

The City of Detroit must accessibly engage with PWD during the final development of the Detroit Climate Strategy.



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## ENDNOTES

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