

# Ford Foundation and supporting the disability rights movement: We've only just begun

By Jim Dickson and Sarah Blahovec

Praises, kudos and congratulations to the Ford Foundation for its recent recognition of the disabled community. On Monday, September 12, 2016, Darren Walker, president of The Ford Foundation, announced that the foundation would stop “fueling injustice” and would now be including people with disabilities in all aspects of the foundation’s work.<sup>1</sup>

Ford went through an 18-month strategic planning process to produce Ford Forward, the goal of which is to “disrupt inequality.” Originally, there was no mention of people with disabilities in the plan. When disability leaders challenged Ford for its sin of omission, some criticized gently. Others were accurate and blunt in calling out the exclusion of people with disabilities as an act of hypocrisy.

The Ford Foundation should be commended for the comprehensive and appropriate way it is putting disability on its agenda. It is not creating a new category, a disability ghetto for funding. Instead, the Ford Foundation will be asking how all of its grantees and contractors are addressing disability issues. In addition, the foundation’s own staff, board and consultants will be working to include individuals with disabilities to all aspects of the foundation’s life.

When it comes to recognizing and integrating the disability community into their work, grantors, foundation boards and organization personnel need to keep in mind the mission of what they have set out to do by establishing their

institutions. In the words of Roberto Clemente, “If you have a chance to accomplish something that will make things better for people coming behind you and you don’t do that, you are wasting your time on this earth.”

The question now is this: What is the rest of the philanthropic community going to do? Will foundations continue to ignore the planet’s 1 billion people with disabilities and the 56 million Americans with disabilities, our country’s largest minority? Many people have trouble believing there are so many of us; yet there are 11 million legally blind Americans, only 1 million of whom are totally blind and use canes or dogs to get around. And while the vast majority of the disabled are poor and unemployed, those with disabilities need to be viewed as productive, engaged citizens with something to contribute (as opposed to objects of pity and a burden on society).

A recent report issued by The Pew Research Center<sup>2</sup> found that people with disabilities are more likely to follow the news more closely than the general population, and 15.6 million of us voted<sup>3</sup> in the 2012 general election, yet we are not seen as a voting bloc. In 2012, there were nearly as many disabled voters as black voters, and we significantly outnumbered Hispanic voters. For the 2016 election, it is projected that one-sixth of all eligible voters have some form of disability. The disability voting bloc is growing despite the fact that 30 percent of us experienced problems<sup>4</sup> voting at the polls in

2012, as compared with only 8 percent of able-bodied voters.

Darren Walker explicitly stated that he and the foundation were “ignorant” in excluding consideration of people with disabilities from their work. This ignorance stems from many causes; the three most important and devastating of which are shame, guilt and fear. These powerful emotions come from the fact that the disability community is the only oppressed group that anybody reading this article could join at any time. In fact, if you live long enough, most of you will become disabled. Thinking about disability, and sometimes being with people who are disabled, inevitably makes us think about our own vulnerability and mortality.

However, those of us with disabilities know that the biggest barrier to our integration into society isn’t our own limitations but the attitudes of others toward us and our disabilities. Justice William J. Brennan recognized this when he said that, “Congress acknowledged that society’s accumulated myths and fears about disability and disease are as disabling as are the physical limitations that flow from actual impairment.”

When it comes to disability, foundations (in general) are not leaders and visionaries. Instead, many of their staff and their boards are captives of the fears and prejudices that are part and parcel of American culture and society.

There are foundations that donate to organizations that serve people with disabilities: the Foundation Center reports that in 2012, 4 percent of grants go to-



People at Liberty Plaza during the final Disability Day at the Capitol sponsored by the Georgia Council on Developmental Disabilities. Photo by Ryan Johnson, [www.flickr.com/photos/dancingterrapin/25035573051/](http://www.flickr.com/photos/dancingterrapin/25035573051/).

ward disability causes, but these grants are overwhelmingly for care and research. Of course, these are worthwhile efforts, but where are the investments in the disability rights movement?<sup>5</sup>

Adding insult to injury, the 16th largest grant in the disability category goes to Goodwill Industries, an organization that uses an outdated labor law loophole to pay its disabled employees subminimum wages. In fact, disability rights organizations are engaged in efforts to pass legislation to close this loophole and prevent businesses and “charitable organizations” (such as Goodwill) from exploiting disabled workers for cheap labor. The fact that foundations provide substantial financial support to organizations such as Goodwill shows that ignorance of disability issues is not only extremely prevalent but also contributing to the exploitation and harm of people with disabilities.

Regardless of a foundation’s mission or its geography, people with disabilities and our issues offer vast opportuni-

ties for investment. We are one-fifth of the population, we live everywhere and we cross all racial, gender and religious boundaries. Just about every problem faced by our society offers a new pathway to solutions when viewed through a disability lens. For example, it is estimated that 750,000 incarcerated individuals have a disability, so criminal justice reform can and must take into consideration the disability status of the prison population.

Also, as previously stated, it is still legal for employers (such as Goodwill) to obtain special wage certificates that allow them to pay disabled employees subminimum wages based on outdated productivity benchmarks. This is but one example of how disability is inherently tied to income inequality. The lack of accessible and affordable transportation also has been identified as a major barrier to employment for those with disabilities.

Similarly, the lack of affordable housing that is also accessible for people with disabilities limits options

for those who wish to remain in their communities. This, along with federal law, condemns many to living in nursing homes, even though community-based living (coupled with appropriate support services) costs less. This is why the disability community is fighting for the passage of the Disability Integration Act, a crucial piece of civil rights legislation that will prioritize the right of people with disabilities to receive home- and community-based services as an alternative to living in nursing homes or institutions.

Civic engagement is yet another area that offers funders an opportunity to support strategies that include consideration of the rights and needs of the disability community. The voter participation gap between citizens with disabilities and the able-bodied is 5.6 percent. This supports the need for foundations to include disability organizations when granting funds in support of integrated civic engagement.

Also, despite there being 36 million disabled voting-age Americans, people

with disabilities are most often not included in the media's public opinion surveys. Thus, the work of those interested in researching the disabled electorate (such as Doug Kruse and Lisa Schur of Rutgers University) needs to be supported.

The fundamental tenet of the disability rights movement is "nothing about us without us." Therefore, foundations that wish to address many of the issues they care about must reach out and engage with organizations and leaders who are at the forefront of the disability rights movement.

We have labels for the bundles of myths and emotions that oppress other communities: racism, sexism and homophobia. For years, disability theorists have proposed terms such as disability phobia, dis-ism, and ableism. Like most things having to do with disability, these words have been ignored by the general population. In order for society, as well as philanthropy, to change their behavior and attitudes, discriminatory and exclusionary practices must be labeled and condemned.

Philanthropic leaders and their institutions must emulate Darren Walker and the Ford Foundation. They must look inward and ask themselves: Why am I ignoring this large and growing disenfranchised community? This will not be simple task. It will require a serious commitment of thought, effort and resources dedicated to learning how foundations can properly support the disability community. But philanthropy can and must expect this of itself. ■

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## Notes

1. Darren Walker, "Ignorance is the enemy within: On the power of our privilege and the privilege of our power," *Equals Change*, September 12, 2016, <http://www.fordfound.org/ideas/equals-change-blog/posts/ignorance-is-the-enemy-within-on-the-power-of-our-privilege-and-the-privilege-of-our-power/>.
2. Ruth Igielnik, "A political profile of disabled Americans," *FactTank: News in the numbers*, September 22, 2016, <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2016/09/22/a-political-profile-of-disabled-americans/>.
3. Lisa Schur, Meera Adya and Douglas Kruse, *Disability, Voter Turnout, and Voting Difficulties*, U.S. Elections Assistance Commission, July 18, 2013, <https://www.eac.gov/assets/1/Page/Disability%20and%20voting%20survey%20report%20for%202012%20elections1.pdf>.
4. Ibid.
5. See Jim Dickson, "Philanthropy's Blinds Spot: The Disability Rights Movements," *Responsive Philanthropy*, Spring 2011, [http://www.ncrp.org/files/rp-articles/Responsive\\_Philanthropy-Spring2011-Dickson.doc](http://www.ncrp.org/files/rp-articles/Responsive_Philanthropy-Spring2011-Dickson.doc).

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