

## **Every Life Is Worthy**

### **Religion, COVID, and Disability Resources for Faith Leaders and Communities**

The COVID-19 pandemic has had specific adverse impacts on persons with disabilities, who constitute one-fifth of the global population. Some of the challenges and overt discrimination persons with disabilities encounter may not make the local news, and without access to family or friends nearby to observe and intervene, may even go completely undocumented and unreported. But their unique plight should not go unnoticed because, even in the midst of a pandemic, **every life is worthy**.

Persons with disabilities face distinct forms of discrimination and other challenges. These include denial of medical treatment; lack of accessible, accurate, or timely information about COVID-19; reduced or unavailable services (such as personal assistance or paratransit); and more acute mental health impacts due to social isolation.

This page offers a non-exhaustive list of eight suggested actions, four to avoid, and resources to support better inclusion and equal protection of persons with disabilities.

#### **Inclusive Actions to Consider:**

- **Partner.** Work with disabled persons and in partnership with disabled persons' organizations (DPOs) rather than speaking for them.
- **Reach out.** Reach out to DPOs to understand local needs and resource deficits.
- **Teach inclusion.** Draw upon your faith tenets to disseminate inclusive messages. You have a powerful voice and the influence to check negative stereotypes. For example, you can stop discrimination that limits a person's projected "deservingness" for medical care solely because he or she is identified as "disabled."
- **Be accessible.** Ensure your community's virtual platforms for discussion and worship are truly accessible to all. For example, think about closed captioning or sign language interpretation for persons who are Deaf or

hard-of-hearing, ensuring compatibility with text-to-speech software for persons who are blind or Deafblind, or simplifying virtual platforms to include a call-in number, making it easier for congregants with disabilities to participate.

- **Know your rights.** Frame your efforts to promote inclusion as a right -- a “reasonable accommodation” -- rather than help or charity.
- **Provide support.** To reduce social isolation, direct faith-based counseling or other emotional support services to persons with disabilities, particularly those identifying as having psychosocial disabilities.
- **Call people to action.** Increase volunteerism within your community to fill service or information gaps for persons with disabilities. This could include: providing pertinent information about local shelter-in-place orders or other COVID-19-related regulations by phone or through other accessible media, distributing medical or food supplies, providing – when possible and perhaps through a hotline – personal assistance or urgent transportation, or developing inclusive virtual programs targeted to children with disabilities who are facing particular challenges with online education.
- **Protect the vulnerable.** With domestic violence increasing, particularly against women with disabilities, consider how you can use the language of faith tenets to reduce these incidents, provide targeted preventative counseling, and increase cooperation with law enforcement to prevent or report such incidents. Be creative and diligent in keeping lines of communication open with people who may be in abusive or at-risk situations. For instance, video chats can increase accurate monitoring of concerning situations.

### **Actions to Avoid:**

- **Avoid framing your efforts and activities as “charity.”** Reframe as a rights-based approach preventing further marginalization of persons with disabilities during this pandemic.
- **Avoid speaking for or representing persons with disabilities.** Work in partnership with DPOs or persons with disabilities to have an authentic understanding and inclusive approach.

- **Avoid a one-size-fits-all approach.** Individuals with the same disability may have particularized needs. Those with different disabilities require different methods and platforms of reasonable accommodation and types of assistance.
- **Avoid inaccessible virtual platforms.** At this time, many may find comfort and solace in faith-based activities, so make your religious activities as technologically accessible to as many individuals as possible by using multiple platforms, media, and methods for dissemination.

### Helpful References:

(Please note: External, non-U.S. Government links provided are for informational purposes only. The views expressed on these sites are not endorsed by the U.S. Government.)

- [International Disability Alliance COVID-19 Resource Page](#) (Available in multiple languages including English, Spanish, Arabic, and French)
- [U.S. International Council on Disabilities COVID-19 Resource Page](#)
- [U.S. Department of Health and Human Services Office of Civil Rights Bulletin on COVID-19](#)
- [International Foundation For Electoral Systems: How To Hold Accessible And Inclusive Virtual Meetings](#)
- [National Alliance on Mental Illness: COVID-19 Information and Resources](#)
- [The Center for Faith and Opportunity Initiatives](#)
- [Peter Fremlins' Disability Debrief](#)