

# Careers in the Arts for People with Disabilities National Online Dialogue Brief



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## National Online Dialogue Brief

Opportunities for people with disabilities have expanded remarkably since the passage of the Americans with Disabilities Act in 1990. These improvements are due in large part to the inclusion and integration of students with disabilities in public schools, anti-discrimination provisions in the law, and increased inclusion and accommodations for people with disabilities in the workforce.

In addition, cultural organizations have increased their accessibility, and people with disabilities are participating in the arts in ever-larger numbers. The field has seen increased inclusion of artists with disabilities in theater, television, and films, and advancements in Deaf theater, physically integrated dance, and disability arts festivals. Other accomplishments include increased accessibility for visitors and patrons through sign-language-interpreted and audio-described performances and programs, touch tours and tactile opportunities for museums and theater, and performances and programs modified to accommodate individuals on the autism spectrum and their families.

Despite these accomplishments, however, many people with disabilities struggle in their attempts to pursue a career in the arts. A 2009 study funded by the National

Endowment for the Arts (NEA) showed that accessibility challenges and attitudinal barriers continue to make it difficult for people with disabilities to get training for their craft and opportunities to practice it. The NEA has held a number of national and statewide convenings and conversations over the past 20 years to help uncover and address these barriers.

To continue this conversation, the NEA, in partnership with the National Arts and Disability Center (NADC) and the U.S. Department of Labor's Office of Disability Employment Policy (ODEP), took the opportunity to take the pulse of the field by holding an online conversation using the [ePolicyWorks dialogue platform](#) from June 6 to June 19, 2016. Three hundred and ninety registrants representing artists, arts administrators, arts organizations, arts educators, arts employers, and disability organizations were asked a central question: **"What ideas do you have to increase the career preparation and employment of people with disabilities in the arts?"** Participants were encouraged to share their own experiences, particularly stories of success in gaining arts employment, as well as examples of arts and disability organizations supporting people in their arts careers, while considering

the following topics:

- Challenges and opportunities for careers in the arts
- Education and job training for artists and arts administrators
- Identity, disclosure, and representation in the arts
- Disability-specific or art-specific issues
- Success stories and positive change

This report provides an analysis of the results and the most pressing challenges and recommendations identified by dialogue participants. The most common themes to emerge were the following:

- Limited arts education and training opportunities
- Disability not part of the diversity agenda
- Isolation among artists with disabilities
- Limited funding opportunities
- Difficulties maintaining crucial public benefits and career support

This report will outline the common themes and offer examples and proposed recommendations. A [full report from the dialogue](#), including participant data and a sampling of the most popular topics and ideas, is available on the ePolicyWorks website.

## Limited Arts Education and Training Opportunities

Participants noted barriers to education and training opportunities in the arts:

“Where will our disabled artists come from in the future if they aren’t given the same opportunities to learn, train, and practice their craft?”

“As a wheelchair user and one of America’s first professional wheelchair dancers, I can’t stress enough the importance of equality in training. Every dance department in colleges and universities across America must come to the realization that they are non-compliant if they do not provide equal training in the same environment for wheelchair dancers and stand-up dancers. They can no longer use the excuse that they don’t know how because Dancing Wheels has published a training manual that has been available since 2012 and there are a number of other integrated companies that provide training as well. We just celebrated 25 years of the ADA, it’s time!!”

Artists described difficulty in getting necessary accommodations in art schools, and discussed how the expectation of the “overworked artist” made it very difficult for artists with disabilities to create their art in a way that worked for them.

## Recommendations for the Field

- Recognize that there are different ways of creating and performing art. Express a willingness to work with individuals of varying abilities. Adapt courses and arts opportunities to include artists with disabilities.
- Offer mentorship opportunities and networks for artists with disabilities to assist in determining artistic goals, creating project plans, and connecting with resources.
- Train staff and professionals in the field to learn about different types of disabilities, both apparent and non-apparent, to better shape programs and opportunities and provide support and accommodations.
- Ensure exposure to the arts by including arts in schools. At the university level, make arts courses part of elective requirements.
- Offer disability studies programs. These programs can provide another critical thinking and creative outlet for discussing the disability experience. They can also be a useful resource for adapting arts curriculum.
- Ensure the accessibility of professional development workshops for artists (i.e. business side of the arts, marketing, pricing, etc.).

## Disability Not Part of the Diversity Agenda

Participants noted a lack of representation and misrepresentation of disability in the media and in arts programs. “Disability still seems like an afterthought when it comes to diversity dialogues. ... Need to see more diverse images in our own community in terms of ethnicity, age, actors with disabilities played by actors with disabilities.”

## Recommendations for the Field

- Specifically include “disability” in the list of diversities welcome to apply (beyond gender, race, etc.) for grants and participate in programs.
- Know the demographics of your patrons, grant applicants and recipients, and program participants. When gathering demographic information (age, gender, race, etc.), include disability as a voluntary category.
- Enforce federal accessibility regulations required for grant recipients receiving federal funds.
- Conduct outreach to previously untapped groups, including those that serve people with disabilities, such as minority-serving institutions, independent living centers, etc.
- Invite creative professionals with disabilities to serve on your boards, to judge your competitions, to be interviewed

and profiled for your newsletters, etc. Ask them not just about their disability, but also about their work.

- Offer a tax credit or other incentive for hiring people with disabilities.

## Isolation Among Artists with Disabilities

Artists with disabilities feel isolated whether from geography, their disability, or their chosen art form. There is a need to connect with other artists and to have opportunities to share their work. “A lot of programs are specific to locations or specific to certain disabilities. I’d like to see more online support for artists with disabilities. I’d specifically love to see a forum or forums for artists.”

### Recommendations for the Field

- Create an online forum for artists with disabilities to share ideas and resources.
- Utilize social media to connect artists with disabilities to the latest opportunities.
- Develop a website to present work of artists with disabilities (images, audio files, videos, etc.).
- Offer more opportunities for community workshops, festivals, film viewings, and artist showcases where computer or online access is limited.

## Limited Funding Opportunities

There is also a need for funding for art supplies and training opportunities. “Funding is a challenge for all emerging artists, even more so for those with disabilities.”

- Provide funding opportunities for artists with disabilities or create funding opportunities for emerging artists.
- Offer technical assistance to artists with disabilities for preparing grant applications.

## Difficulties Maintaining Crucial Public Benefits and Career Support

Many artists with disabilities fear losing their Supplemental Security Income (SSI) and Social Security Disability Insurance (SSDI) benefits, which may be their stable source of both income and health insurance coverage.

“Benefits planning is also critical for artists with disabilities who might access SSI/SSDI. We need to be able to figure how much we can make and still keep our benefits, how much we need to make to be able to afford to get off our benefits. We need to have a tight handle on our healthcare and health options should we be able to afford to get off of SSI. We need to

understand our safety net. Also, new pieces like [ABLE accounts](#) are important to integrate into the planning, as well as [PASS plans](#) and how they might help.”

Additionally, participants reported that Vocational Rehabilitation agencies could do more to support individual goals to pursue a career in the arts.

### Recommendations for the Field

- Include an arts employment specialist in Social Security Administration programs, such as [Ticket to Work](#).
- Revise Social Security Administration policies to account for arts employment, such as what happens with infrequent income or stipends for apprenticeships or fellowships.
- Encourage Vocational Rehabilitation agencies to view the arts as a viable profession and to support training and education in arts fields.

### Conclusion

Comments made by participants reinforced the nearly 20 years of information gathering about the needs of artists with disabilities identified from the national convenings held in 1998 and 2009 on careers in the arts for people with disabilities and [28 statewide forums](#) held across the country. There continues to be a need for professional development

opportunities and online space for networking, showing/selling art, and publicizing of opportunities and events; physical space for artists to practice their craft; benefits planning information; and support from Vocational Rehabilitation in pursuing arts employment.

One of the key themes to emerge was the need to address both sides of the equation: working with the arts community to include artists with disabilities and the unique perspective of the disability experience, and working with the disability employment community to promote the arts as a viable career path for people with disabilities.

While the field is well aware of the barriers facing artists with disabilities, there is still a great need to increase awareness of exemplary practices from across the country. Participants in this dialogue provided some examples of promising practices, including physically integrated dance companies, inclusive museum programming, professional theater companies and open arts studios for people with disabilities, and online directories and resources for artists with disabilities. There is a desire to learn more about what exists, where it exists, and how to replicate these practices. Moving forward, it is important to further discover and share best practices to assist others in pursuing a career in the arts and receiving the necessary supports to do so.

## Resources

### **National Endowment for the Arts Office of Accessibility**

<https://www.arts.gov/accessibility/accessibility-resources/nea-office-accessibility>

### **National Arts and Disability Center**

<https://www.semel.ucla.edu/nadc>

### **ePolicyWorks Dialogue Report**

<https://www.epolicyworks.org/epw/wp-content/uploads/2013/10/NEA-Dialogue-Report-Final.pdf>

### **ePolicyWorks Online Dialogue**

<http://careersinthearts.epolicyworks.org/>

### **ABLE Accounts**

<https://secure.ssa.gov/poms.nsf/lnx/0501130740>

### **PASS Plans**

<https://www.ssa.gov/disabilityresearch/wi/pass.htm>

### **Ticket To Work**

<https://www.ssa.gov/work>

### **Statewide Forums on Careers in the Arts for People with Disabilities**

<https://www.semel.ucla.edu/nadc/statewide-forums>

This report was prepared by Beth Bienvenu and Lauren Tuzzolino from the National Endowment for the Arts, and Olivia Raynor and Katharine Hayward from the National Arts and Disability Center.

For more information go to:

### **National Endowment for the Arts**

Office of Accessibility

202-682-5532

[accessibility@arts.gov](mailto:accessibility@arts.gov)

### **National Arts and Disability Center**

Tarjan Center at UCLA

310-825-0170

[mperez@mednet.ucla.edu](mailto:mperez@mednet.ucla.edu)

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Cover Photo: AXIS Dance Company's Sonsheree Giles spins on Rodney Bell's wheels in an award-winning dance piece by Joe Goode. Photo by Brian Rdzak-Martin.