

# Older People with Disabilities: Challenges and Practical Recommendations

## Research Overview

The population of adults aged 60 and older is growing, and is expected to comprise over 20% of the US population by 2035. Aging increases the risk of disability: while 12% of US adults aged 18-54 report a disability, the rate rises to over 26% of people over age 60, and increases to 46% of those over the age of 75. Older people with disabilities can encounter unique challenges in accessing goods and services, such as transportation, housing, healthcare, social supports, employment, and technology. To gain deeper insights into the experiences and perceptions of older people with disabilities, including their access to information and exercise of rights under the Americans with Disabilities Act, the Mid-Atlantic ADA Center, in collaboration with its University of Maryland research partner, conducted qualitative and quantitative research to identify key barriers and offer practical strategies to address them. This brief summarizes key findings and recommendations from the research.

## Key Findings:

- **Social isolation and loss of autonomy** were major threats to the physical and mental well-being of older people with disabilities. Participants in our qualitative study described how inadequate accommodations and insufficient assistive technology restricted their mobility, as well as their capacity to communicate in social, medical, and employment settings. In our study, one Deaf participant feared she would “die lonely” in long-term care settings which lacked communication technology and qualified interpreters.
- **Ageism and ableism** among healthcare, senior, and housing services staff limit adequate use of services for this population. Study participants described encountering negative attitudes toward disability even among staff of senior centers, who tended to “view disability as a failure in the aging process.” Similarly, negative attitudes reflected in social, healthcare, or other settings evoked anxiety and reluctance to use available assistance and resources, according to our participants.
- **Inaccessible and inadequate transportation** is a primary barrier for older people with disabilities to access services and participate in community, social, and civic activities. Participants in our study who lived in locations without public transportation reported difficulties relying on friends or family, which increased their sense of dependency. Accessible options, such as paratransit, could be burdensome to schedule. When public transportation was available, physical barriers such as stairs or long waits for bus service severely limited their mobility and travel options.
- **Employment offers financial and social benefits to this population.** In our study, we found that older workers who are aware of their rights under the ADA are more likely to request workplace accommodations and more likely to remain employed. For example, only a quarter of older workers with limited or no access to information about the ADA requested job accommodations

when needed, compared to 75% of older workers who were knowledgeable about the law and requested accommodations. Since remaining in the workforce offers financial, health, and social benefits to older workers, requesting and receiving job accommodations improves labor-force retention and protection of rights.

### **Practical Implications and Recommendations**

- Identify key information dissemination networks for older people to improve awareness and knowledge of disability rights and resources. Available networks, such as AARP emails and publications, or local and state agencies on aging can be tapped. Informal networks, such as churches, local recreational facilities providing senior activities (e.g., Bingo, SilverSneakers), and senior centers are also potential outreach sources for training and information dissemination.
- Offer targeted training and materials to staff in aging-related organizations and programs to increase understanding of the ADA and address negative attitudes and stereotypes about disability and the aging process.
- Increase the participation of older people in disability rights and advocacy organizations. Unfortunately, older people who acquire impairments later in life tend to reject the “disability” label, as it can represent an unsuccessful or even a failed aging process. Combatting internal stigma among this population can be challenging; but sensitive language and positive images of aging “into” a disability may gradually increase acceptance as well as willingness to seek assistance.
- Technology plays an increasingly vital role in improving the well-being of older people with disabilities by enhancing communication, social engagement, and health, including accessing information about the ADA and other rights. However, the skills and affordability gap in accessing and using technology among this population can be formidable. Customized training and assistance offered to older people with disabilities that emphasize technology’s benefits might gradually moderate the skills gap, mitigate anxiety or reluctance around its use, and assist individuals to more adequately prepare for potential health or capacity limitations.

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### References

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