

A NEW LENS ON DISABILITY INCLUSION





easterseals disability services

SCENE

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THE STATE OF DISABILITY INCLUSION IN ENTERTAINMENT

There are more than one billion disabled people around the globe, and in the United States, over 70 million adults have a disability. These numbers alone are powerful evidence of why it's essential to create more inclusive communities across all areas of life. But people with disabilities aren't just statistics. They are a vibrant, diverse group with stories to tell—stories that can change hearts, minds, and attitudes toward disability.

For almost a decade, Easterseals
Disability Services has been actively
collaborating with the disability
community and key players from across
the entertainment industry to amplify
these stories, driving disability inclusion
and authentic representation.

In 2018, in partnership with *Variety*, Easterseals published "Abilities Unlimited: How People with Disabilities Are Helping Hollywood Win," which celebrated advancements in disability inclusion and representation across the entertainment industry. Six years later, "Reimagining Hollywood: A New Lens on Disability Inclusion" offers refreshed perspectives on the current state of disability inclusion in entertainment. Easterseals expanded its partnerships to include *Variety, TheWrap*, Hollywood Radio & Television Society (HRTS), and Film Independent.

Front and center are the voices of the disability community and their views on what's working and what needs to evolve, both in front of and behind the camera. The key to this is ensuring that people with disabilities are empowered to tell their own stories in their own creative ways.

Over the past year, trailblazing disabled creatives, along with industry leaders who are strong allies to the disability community, have shared insights with Easterseals. We held three "Blue Sky" sessions—one in Los Angeles and others virtually—to gather concrete calls to action on how the Hollywood community can be more inclusive, increase and

advance accurate narratives about disability, and level the playing field for disabled talent who are prepared to work.

To further inform these efforts, in September 2024, Easterseals conducted a nationwide survey of 800 adults with disabilities to better understand their viewership and perspectives on disability representation in the media.

It's a known fact that entertainment has the power to positively influence attitudes and break down outdated constructs. With more authentic representation of people with disabilities, a more equitable world can be created for everyone.

As you read, watch, and share all of the resources this report has to offer, remember that you can play a pivotal role in setting the stage for change. Join us in our mission to reshape the way the world defines, perceives, and experiences disability through entertainment. IN THE UNITED STATES,



HAVE A DISABILITY



MOMENTUM

In recent years, **Crip Camp** earned an Oscar nomination, **CODA** took home multiple Oscars, and Ali Stroker won a Tony Award. And now, we've seen major advancements in authentic disability representation with **Out of** My Mind and Wicked. Let's keep the momentum of progress going!

PROFITABILITY

Studio and network leadership must acknowledge the significant return on investment that comes with incorporating diverse representation into their content.

CREATIVITY

Disabled creators with growing platforms are building audiences and taking control of their narrative, and the industry is taking notice. Directors, producers, and casting directors should use these platforms to identify talent and encourage disabled creatives to create.

INCLUSIVITY

Disabled people belong at every level of the media industry—from assistants to executives and from background actors to leading roles.

ACCESSIBILITY

Leading disabled creatives agree that production accessibility coordinators are vital for every media event and production. This essential role must be formalized and further developed.

LOYALTY

Entertainment and media has the opportunity to uplift and celebrate the diversity of the disability community. When they do, they'll not only win hearts and minds, but also a loyal audience and broad viewership.

REVOLUTIONARY

Mediamakers have the power to partner with the disabled community to redefine what true empowerment in media representation looks like.

UNIVERSAL

Disability belongs across all forms of media—film, TV, streaming, digital content, audio, news, and social media.

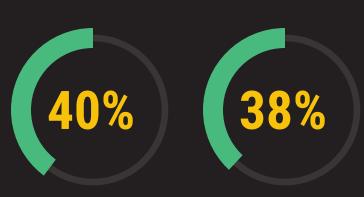
NATIONWIDE

SUBJEY

In Hollywood, where stories have the power to shape societal perceptions, individuals with disabilities remain glaringly underrepresented both on-screen and behind the scenes. Despite the industry's diversity, equity, inclusion, and accessibility (DEIA) efforts, the "spotlight" rarely illuminates the authentic voices of over 70 million American adults with disabilities, revealing a significant gap in inclusion and opportunity.

MINIMAL REPRESENTATION

Only 40% of adults with disabilities reported seeing a person with a disability in any television show or movie within the past three months, and 38% reported seeing such representation in advertising. This marks the lowest levels recorded in the last four years of Easterseals' surveys.



STAGNATION IN MEDIA PORTRAYALS

A majority (61%) of respondents feel that portrayals of people with disabilities in media have either stagnated or become less frequent over the last five years, aligning with findings from the USC Annenberg Inclusion Initiative, which noted a decline in characters with disabilities in top films.



THE CALL FOR CHANGE

83% of adults with disabilities emphasize the importance of studios addressing the decline in on-screen representation and committing to greater inclusion and authenticity in films.

83%

UNTAPPED MARKET

Authentic disability representation has financial incentives—45% of adults with disabilities are more likely to watch films or shows featuring genuine portrayals, and 74% are more inclined to support brands that include people with disabilities in their advertising.





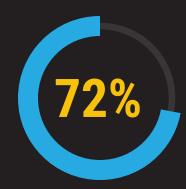
EMPOWERING MESSAGES

With 68% of respondents agreeing that positive portrayals of people with disabilities boost confidence, identity, and a sense of belonging within the disability community, disability representation is imperative.



INTEREST IN RECOGNITION

There is significant enthusiasm for a disability-focused award show or public celebration, with 72% of respondents expressing interest in celebrating the contributions of people with disabilities in entertainment.





This data reinforces the urgent need for entertainment, media, and advertising industries to rewrite the script. To amplify disability inclusion is not only a moral imperative but a smart business strategy with wide-reaching benefits.

PARTIE B PERSPECTIVES

Our partners are raising the bar for Hollywood studios, networks, and media companies to make their productions more accessible and inclusive.





Melissa Grego, a trailblazer in the entertainment industry, has spent her career breaking barriers and advocating for inclusion. As the CEO of the

Hollywood Radio & Television Society (HRTS), she has worked tirelessly to elevate disability inclusion in Hollywood, an initiative shaped by her personal experience and partnership with Easterseals.

In 2017, HRTS recognized the importance of disability inclusion as a natural progression in its broader diversity efforts. Through initiatives such as a panel featuring Disney, Amazon MGM Studios, and other industry leaders, Grego has helped bring critical conversations to the forefront.

Partnering with Easterseals, HRTS created a comprehensive resource guide, providing members with an in-depth look at the opportunities, challenges, and professional development available around disability inclusion.

Together, HRTS and Easterseals have been pivotal in advancing inclusion efforts. By providing a special report and resource guide, this partnership has empowered leaders at studios, networks, and others across Hollywood to engage meaningfully with disability inclusion. Grego's leadership has been instrumental in creating spaces for these conversations and driving change within the industry.

"Disregard people with disabilities and fail to accommodate them at your own peril," Grego said in a recent interview, highlighting the imperative for inclusion in business. Her personal experience with disability, having recently acquired one herself, has deepened her understanding and commitment to these efforts. "I've learned so much, and that's helped me in my own experience," she reflected. "Learning about disability inclusion through our partnership with Easterseals equipped us with the knowledge to approach this new reality from an inclusive perspective."

Grego's transparency about her disability and her deliberate approach to leadership has set a powerful example. As she navigates chronic health issues and limited mobility, Grego continues to lead with authenticity. Her ability to balance her professional responsibilities while managing her health has inspired her colleagues and demonstrated the importance of community support. "People with disabilities are operating in our industry with unique obstacles," she noted, adding that this often makes them remarkable problem solvers.

Looking ahead, Grego envisions a Hollywood where disability inclusion is the norm, not the exception. She believes systemic change is possible through continued collaboration between the entertainment industry and organizations like Easterseals. "There's an appetite for doing better," she said. "We're all going to make money the more authentic and inclusive we operate." For Grego, the path forward involves not just creating

opportunities for people with disabilities but also ensuring that their voices are heard and valued in every aspect of production.

Under Grego's leadership, HRTS is committed to driving this change and continuing its work with Easterseals. Together, they're building a future where the entertainment industry reflects the diverse world we live in—and hope for a world where people of all abilities can thrive.





"I'm extremely passionate about the role of production accessibility coordinators. Having a liaison between the person hired to do the job and the studio is crucial because everyone's way of discussing their disability is different. Having production access coordinators creates a whole new pathway for people with disabilities to get jobs and stayed employed."

Nicole Lynn Evans
Actor, Writer, Producer



"I've always been an actor, but when I became an amputee, I started writing and producing my own films to explore facets of the disabled experience that I wasn't seeing on screen. My favorite part of participating in the EDFC every year is meeting and collaborating with filmmakers with disabilities, and all coming together to celebrate once the films have premiered."

Rachel Handler
Actor & Writer

"At Amazon MGM Studios, we ask, 'What productivity tools do you need?' because asking, 'Do you need an accommodation?' can come across as if it's something extra or someone must go out of their way. It's not about making special accommodations—it's about providing the right tools so everyone can be as productive as anyone else."

Jerome Core

Head of Inclusive Content for Amazon MGM Studios & Easterseals Southern California Board Member



"Businesses that do really engage in disability inclusion initiatives have 28% higher revenue, two times the net income, [and] 30% higher profit margins... But I am very, very excited for the time that we don't have to continuously legitimize our existence within spaces based solely on our economic power and value."

Keely Cat-Wells

CEO of Making Space, co-founder of Making Space Media, HRTS Foundation Board Member & Disability rights advocate

Photo by Chyna Phography



At the 2024 Film Independent Spirit Awards, Keivonn Woodard's role in *The Last of Us* won him the award for Best Breakthrough Performance in a New Scripted Series. He delivered his acceptance speech in American Sign Language, with his interpreter speaking into a microphone from the audience. The crowd was thrilled—this was a well-deserved win and another instance of the Spirit Awards recognizing the progress we've made for disability inclusion in entertainment.

What the crowd didn't know was that another act of creative, inclusive problem-solving had taken place at Keivonn's table earlier that night, ensuring accessibility throughout the show. The Spirit Awards' Deaf consultants and Keivonn's interpreters had realized they would not be visible while interpreting at their table in the audience because of the darkness in the space, so the show's producers, Shawn Davis, Andrew Schaff, and Danielle Federico, incorporated lit-up water bottle holders placed at the tables from their sponsor, Fiji. The Deaf consultants had insisted a spotlight would attract unnecessary attention and instead landed collaboratively on a thoughtful alternative that illuminated the interpreters.

The producers of the Spirit Awards will be quick to tell you that the key part of this story isn't this one

instance of smart problem-solving. It's an overall access mindset. As producer Andrew Schaff said, "The greatest gift that anyone in this industry can [give]...is not to guess. It's to enlist the right individuals and companies, and bring them on to guide you." With the foresight of seasoned Deaf consultants, the producers had the opportunity to make the Spirit Awards even more inclusive with one subtle, creative, tasteful move.

This year, Film Independent is celebrating its 40th anniversary. Their commitment to diversity and inclusion is nothing new, though—as Aline Loustaunau, Director of Marketing, said, "From our inception, we've had the vision to uplift underrepresented voices and break barriers. And because we're celebrating two milestones, the 40th anniversary of Film Independent leading right into the 40th anniversary of the Spirit Awards next year, it's kind of a time of reflection. We're looking back to see how far we've come."

A commitment to diversity and inclusion requires consistency and adjustment over time. As an organization, it also means practicing what you preach internally. "If we are going to embrace our external community," Loustaunau said, "we want to do that within our own group. And I think working with Easterseals helps

us broaden the spots that maybe we're not as knowledgeable about." Film Independent's partnership with Easterseals helps them stay upto-date on internal cultural competency trainings, accessibility coordination, and more.

Film Independent hosts several programs, including an annual Forum—an event that brings together diverse voices from all corners of filmmaking. Maria Raquel Bozzi, Senior Director of Education and International Programs, remembered a poignant moment from this year's

Forum: "We brought 40 together international filmmakers from all over. and people who are participating currently in our programs...and we also brought the Easterseals Disability Film Challenge group. That was a magical moment for me at the end of the Forum to see that we have created this event where everybody feels like they could come up and talk shop with the person next to them."

In a world still navigating the impacts of COVID-19,

the entertainment industry continues to learn how to recreate and maintain the accessibility it abruptly needed to implement in 2020, including virtual events, an increase in Zoom auditions and meetings, and overall health accommodations. Rachel Bleemer, Director of Programming and Events, explains how Film Independent adapted and used this time to deepen their mission of disability inclusion: "During the pandemic, we went virtual with a lot of our screenings, and I remember we programmed a film called *Crip Camp*, and it really opened up some

conversations. We worked with James [Lebrecht] who directed and produced the film, and just hearing what he had to say about pressuring the industry and the distributors to make sure that they have closed captioning and audio listening devices...I've seen a huge shift in how much we're asking these studios to send over closed captioning and the audio tracks, there's an immediate 'yes.' And there's an understanding of even what that is at this point. So I think we've already seen a shift there, and it's exciting."

"From our inception, we've had the vision to uplift underrepresented voices and break barriers..."

Aline LoustaunauDirector of Marketing

of Finance & Operations, remarked, "I'm proud to be here at this critical moment, particularly now as the industry is really challenged. It's an important time for us, and we strive to serve as a beacon of inclusion for independent filmmaking." For an organization dedicated to fostering new talent and shepherding in the next generation of filmmakers and creatives, it's important that Film Independent

Valecia Phillips, Director

creates space for their partners to express their accessibility needs, and proactively fosters an environment that feels inherently inclusive to all. As their staff will tell you, it's a multi-step process: you have to ask questions, you have to lean on your team, and you have to be willing to challenge and evolve the way it's "always been done." Sometimes that means ensuring closed captions are available on your films, or that your award show is wheelchair accessible. Sometimes it is as simple as lit-up water bottle holders on the table right in front of you.



"Authenticity is casting disabled people in roles that are disabled characters, but on top of that expanding and opening minds into 'why can't this character be disabled?"

Marissa Bode
Actor and Artist

Photo by Daniel Doperalski for Variety



"We need so much more authentic content featuring folks with disabilities. There is a definite gap in the romance department. My hope is that more authentic content around intimacy and relationships is greenlit, because I believe that romance deepens folks' empathy. Also... we're hot."

Shaina Ghuraya

Writer, Producer, Director, Co-founder of the Disabled BIPOC Film Collective

"A lot of times, accessibility does not require more money, it requires more planning strategically planning ahead and integrating accessibility from the very beginning."

Nic Novicki

Comedian, Actor, Founder of the Easterseals
Disability Film Challenge & Easterseals
Southern California Board Member

Photo by Daniel Doperalski for Variety



"The way we are going to get the attention of...these huge decision-makers of the studios, is we have to show them we are a valuable market."

Natalie Trevonne

Actor & Writer



DABTILBO

LEARN FROM LEADERS IN ENTERTAINMENT

Easterseals has partnered with two leading media outlets—
TheWrap and Variety—to spotlight the current state of disability inclusion in Hollywood and foster deeper conversations among entertainment leaders.

THEWRAP



The Wrap explored disability representation through its event, The Grill, and a groundbreaking three-part article series by Kristen Lopez, a disabled journalist who provides an authentic perspective on inclusion in the industry.



WATCH NOW: From
Conversation to Action:
Will the Industry Adopt
Burgeoning Accessibility
Tools to Boost Authentic
Representation?



Three-part article series by Kristen Lopez for TheWrap



Hollywood's Disability Coordinators Streamline Production, Expand Access

BEHIND THE SCENES ENTHUSIASM IS GROWING





After 'CODA,' How is Hollywood Faring on Disability Representation?
WICKED IS UPPING THE ANTE





Al Sets the Stage for Disabled People's Success in Entertainment

WITHOUT GREATER INCLUSION, AI COULD EXACERBATE DISABILITY BIAS



KRISTEN LOPEZ is an entertainment writer, film critic and pop culture essayist. Her work has been published on *Forbes*, *MTV*, *TheWrap* and *The Hollywood Reporter*, among others.



REIMAGINING HOLLYWOOD
Photo by Randy Shropshire @rms.bts.pix

"We, as a community, are tired of the talking, the panels, the 'what can we do better?' questions. These discussions have been happening for years now, and we're still asking the same questions. How about the industry just make the changes instead of talking about them? Hire more disabled creators, put them in lead roles, take a chance, and see what happens."

Danny J. Gomez

Actor & Disability Advocate



"I don't just want to see a token disabled character in a movie or on TV every once in a while. That's not true disability representation. Disabled people belong everywhere in the media industry—behind the scenes, informing every aspect of a media project, working at every level of a company. I want to see disabled people in the background, as supporting characters, and in leading roles. Inclusion in Hollywood needs to be a movement and not a moment."

Emily Ladau

Author & Media Consultant



"Stop making it weird. Don't make it weird. Everybody shows up in the way they need to show up in that particular space."

Lolo Spencer

Actor, Entrepreneur & Disability Advocate

Photo by Daniel Doperalski for Variety



"As our content began reaching a wider audience, we realized that we had an opportunity to not just entertain, but educate, as well. There are so many stigmas to dispel, curiosities to state, and laughs to be had; we became hooked on sharing our world and raising awareness. And the most beautiful part: you can, too!"

Cole & Charisma Sydnor

YouTubers & Social Media Influencers





WATCH NOW: Ashley Eakin, Siân Heder, John Hoffman, Rick Glassman, Nic Novicki, and Sue Anne Pien chat about the entertainment value of inclusive stories.





Accessibility Is Worth Investing In: Why Hollywood Must Prioritize Disability Inclusion

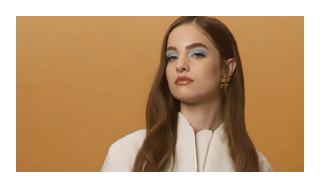
INCLUSIVE STORIES AREN'T JUST IMPORTANT, THEY'RE ENTERTAINING AND FUN!





WATCH NOW: Autumn Best, Marissa Bode, Peter Farrelly, Amber Sealey, and Lauren "Lolo" Spencer give the inside scoop on how they're breaking new ground in entertainment.





How Creatives With Disabilities Are Building Careers and Changing the Entertainment Industry

REQUIRED VIEWING: "WICKED",
"WOMAN OF THE HOUR", "OUT OF MY
MIND", "DARUMA", AND "THE SEX
LIVES OF COLLEGE GIRLS"



Photo by Daniel Doperalski for Variety



"We are all human. We all have bodies; we all relate to those bodies and each other in different ways. It's been very eye-opening to step into this community and realize the untapped potential that exists here."

Siân Heder
Writer, Producer, Director

Photo by Daniel Doperalski for Variety



"As a writer, casting director or producer, you don't have to write a disabled character. All you have to do is write a character and then consider someone with a disability for it, because that's all we are. I'm a character."

John Hoffman

Executive Producer, Writer,
Director & Showrunner

Photo by Daniel Doperalski for Variety



"There's not enough emphasis
put on the importance of seeing
someone on screen who you
can relate to. It makes you
feel seen, and is the kind of
validation that's so critical
for building self-esteem and
confidence, especially for kids."

Tal Anderson

Actor, Editor, Writer

ON HER EXPERIENCE ON THE SET OF AS WE SEE IT

"That was the first time as an adult female who's highly masking autistic [that] I was put in an environment where I was safe to just be myself. I'm not weird or out of place or I don't belong in this world — I fit in right here."



Photo by Daniel Doperalski for Variety



Disabled creatives bring invaluable lived experience and expertise to the entertainment industry. Prioritizing accessibility from the start ensures inclusion across budget, production, and promotion.

Writers

- 1. Include at least one writer with a disability in your writers' room.
- 2. Make it commonplace to have people with disabilities as characters in your scripts.
- 3. Remember: disability is one of many character traits, just like any other aspect of being human.

Casting Directors

- 1. For a role where the character has a disability, prioritize casting actors with disabilities.
- 2. Audition actors with disabilities for roles that do not explicitly reference disability as a character trait.
- 3. Include people with disabilities in crowd scenes and as background characters.

Studios & Networks

- 1. Hire an accessibility coordinator to ensure policies, practices, and procedures are inclusive across disability types, communities, identities, and needs.
- 2. Prioritize inclusive hiring practices across various roles, positions, and responsibilities, including contractors and consultants.
- 3. Make sure casting facilities and sets are on the ground floor or are fully accessible via a working elevator.
- 4. Host inclusive events by providing sign language interpreters and real time captioning, and by ensuring accessibility accommodations for sensory, mobility and other types of disabilities.
- 5. Feature people with disabilities authentically in marketing and press.

Directors & Producers

- Recognize that disability is an untapped market that today's audiences want and expect to see represented in authentic and compelling ways. Make sure a diverse cross-section of disability communities and identities are represented in projects.
- 2. When submitting content to festivals include captioning and audio description (e.g., enlist companies like 3Play Media to help).

TOOLS & RESOURCES

Our curated resources give you a play-by-play of reimagined industry standards for disability inclusion.

EASTERSEALS DISABILITY FILM CHALLENGE

The Easterseals Disability Film Challenge gives filmmakers—with and without disabilities—the opportunity to collaborate to tell unique stories that showcase disability in its many forms. The film challenge is a five-day filmmaking contest, open to all, that provides a platform for new voices in the entertainment industry. Each year, aspiring storytellers are prompted to creatively write, produce and complete a short film. Challenge winners receive invaluable access to entertainment professionals, opening the door to an industry notoriously difficult to enter.



MAKING SPACE

Making Space is a talent acquisition and learning experience platform that creates new pathways to employment and career advancement for disabled populations. Their accessible, self-service and employer-supported learning is designed to enable seamless navigation between education and employment. They prioritize equipping talent with relevant and job-specific skills for perfect-fit opportunities, leading to swift placements, career growth and mobility. Built with disabled talent in mind, Making Space is on a mission to create a more equitable and accessible future of work.



INEVITABLE FOUNDATION

Inevitable Foundation is investing in disabled writers and filmmakers so they can achieve artistic and financial freedom and use film and television to destignatize disability and mental health globally.



IMDbPRO DISCOVER

IMDbPro Discover is an advanced search tool that allows members to find people and projects based on a variety of key IMDb data, experience, and expertise. It also includes advanced features to customize, export, and share lists. IMDbPro Discover is only available on desktop site.



SAG-AFTRA'S PERFORMERS WITH DISABILITIES COMMITTEE

SAG-AFTRA's Performers with Disabilities Committee's mission is to achieve full access for and inclusion of performers and broadcasters with disabilities by working to increase employment opportunities and improve working conditions in all areas of entertainment and news media.



WGA DISABLED WRITERS COMMITTEE

The Disabled Writers Committee advances the visibility and employment of disabled writers while encouraging, celebrating, and endorsing accurate and diverse portrayals of disabled people in all areas of media. We also serve as an expert resource for various issues impacting and related to the disabled community.



CASTING SOCIETY, DIRECTORS GUILD, AND PRODUCERS GUILD

Each of these organizations has a disability-focused committee to advance careers both in front of and behind the camera.







Casting Society Dir

Directors Guild

Producers Guild

HOLLYWOOD RADIO & TELEVISION SOCIETY

Led by a Board of Directors comprising TV and entertainment's most distinguished leaders, Hollywood Radio & Television Society (HRTS) is the premier networking, education and mentorship association in the industry. HRTS provides an unparalleled forum for conversation and community through events, a mentorship program, and other initiatives for professionals at all career stages — from student to C-suite — in Los Angeles, NYC and around the world.



FILM INDEPENDENT

Film Independent champions creative independence in visual storytelling in all its forms, fostering a culture of inclusion. They support a global community of artists and audiences who embody diversity, innovation, curiosity and uniqueness of vision.



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Easterseals and its affiliate organizations are 501(c)(3) nonprofit organizations.

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