

# Disability Justice and Language Access in Climate and Resiliency Planning

*By Morgan Jericho*



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## Introduction

Individuals with disabilities, and the deaf and hard of hearing (DHH) community in particular, are often left out of conversations relating to sustainability, disability justice, resiliency, and disaster management. Despite recent efforts to incorporate social justice and the principles of diversity, equity and inclusion into the higher education sustainability movement, disabled individuals continue to be excluded. This essay provides an overview of how disabled individuals are represented in society and how our perspectives and experiences are often overlooked in climate justice advocacy. It provides information on supporting and including disabled individuals and the DHH community overall and within higher education, particularly as it relates to climate resiliency and disaster management planning. The essay also suggests actions that individuals, campuses and organizations can take to ensure that the sustainability movement is accessible to disabled individuals.

The environmental justice movement too often leaves the DHH community out of conversations when it comes to educating and planning for resiliency from the impacts of climate change. For example, climate organizers often encourage going to protests, writing letters and making phone calls to elected officials, doing volunteer work in the field, and planning for natural disasters and recovery. However, due in part to the differences of communication modality within the DHH community, the members of the community can find it difficult to participate in these ways.



Deaf Youth participate in CorpsTHAT, a program that supports the inclusion of Deaf and Hard of Hearing participants in conservation corps and outdoor programs. Photo courtesy of CorpsTHAT.



Another example can be found on the [EPA's Environmental Justice webpage](#), where, at the time of this writing, environmental justice was defined as "the fair treatment and meaningful involvement of all people regardless of race, color, national origin, or income, with respect to the development, implementation, and enforcement of environmental laws, regulations, and policies." Disability is notably absent.

Discrimination and exclusion is a daily reality for disabled environmentalists, as noted in a recent [Greenpeace Blog](#) (2022). At the COP 26 Climate Summit in Glasgow in 2021 for example, Israel's Energy Minister Karine Elharrar could not access the summit because it was not wheelchair accessible. In general, efforts to encourage sustainable actions such as biking more and eliminating plastic straws are often adopted without consideration for people with disabilities.

People with disabilities represented 15 percent of the world's population in 2022 ([The World Bank](#)), and experience adverse socioeconomic and environmental outcomes more intensely, often due to discrimination and marginalization. Despite this, people with disabilities are often unheard and unconsidered in the development of environmental policy. A shift in the attitudes and perspectives of abled people toward including the perspectives of disabled people and accommodating their needs is necessary.

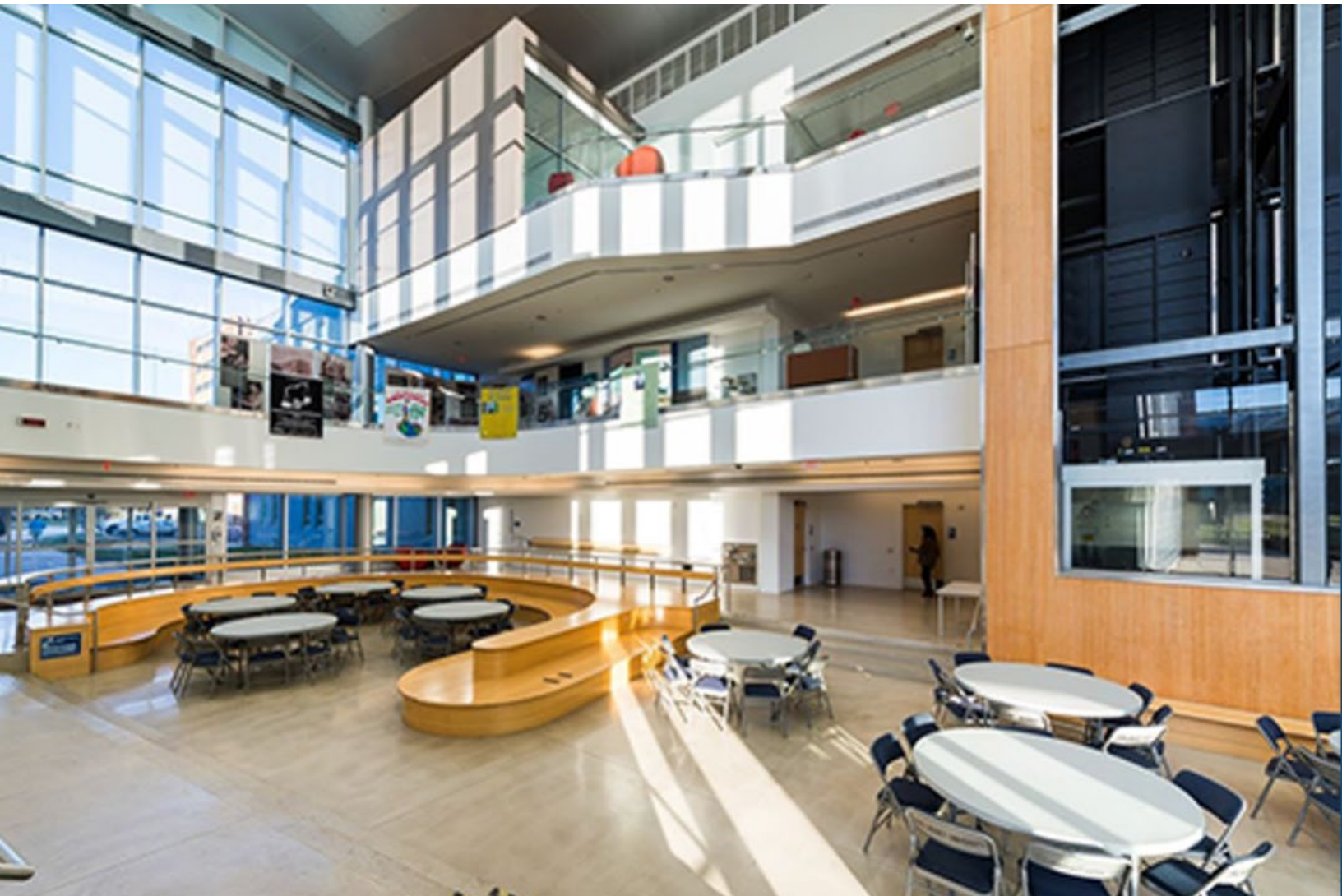


Efforts to encourage sustainable actions like eliminating plastic straws or biking more can be alienating to individuals with disabilities.

# Equity & Inclusion for Disabled Communities in Higher Education

As a result of these experiences of discrimination and marginalization, by the time individuals with disabilities graduate high school and go into the workforce or go into college, they often have a limited understanding of how climate change could impact them personally. Higher education institutions, particularly those that are committed to diversity, equity and inclusion, should take proactive steps to ensure that members of the DHH community are not excluded.

Fortunately, there are programs and online resources available that aim to achieve better access for the DHH community. For example, programs and organizations like [DeafTEC](#), [National Deaf Center](#), [Atomic Hands](#), [Technology Access Program](#), and [CorpsTHAT](#) work hard on providing opportunities to build professional skills in the STEM field that can contribute to environmental sustainability. Rochester Institute of Technology's DeafTEC provides a helpful list of [accommodations](#) that help to enable full participation in campus life for the DHH community.



The James Lee Sorenson Language and Communication Center at Gallaudet University.



## From the Author

As a University of South Florida student, I had the opportunity to attend a climate policy advocacy conference to learn about legislative lobbying and policy processes. I had arranged interpreting services in advance through USF's disability office and I was excited to go. On that day of the conference, I arrived with two interpreters. I was met with conference attendees that avoided my presence and conversed instead with the interpreters about their climate action involvements. The interpreters informed attendees that they were there only for me, however several attendees thought that the interpreters brought me to the conference. My role as a student aspiring to be a sustainability professional was dismissed on several occasions. It was a hard day, and I had to leave the conference early. Despite the interpretation services provided to me, I had a negative experience due to a lack of empathy and understanding by individuals in attendance.



Support for disabled individuals extends beyond the need for technology and interpretation services; it also needs to be addressed culturally at the organizational and individual level, as the story above illustrates.

Dismissive behavior toward disabled individuals can be avoided with education and training. In particular, producing a communication guide for individuals with disabilities and sharing this with event managers and attendees would be a proactive step toward encouraging inclusion. University of Alaska Anchorage's [Communication Guide for Individuals with Disabilities](#) provides a good model and set of recommendations for other institutions.

Colleges and universities can support DHH students and communities directly by offering academic programs on language access, ASL or Deaf Studies. More broadly, institutions can create or refine curricular or co-curricular programs through a lens of inclusion and access by offering proactive support for disability access.

## Potential approaches to promote inclusivity in higher education sustainability

Invite disabled activists to give presentations to students who are taking sustainability courses.

Hire a disabled consultant with expertise in organizational change management to redesign organizational websites and/or practices to become more inclusive.

Anticipate the budgetary needs for accommodations in event planning. For example, reserve 10 percent of the annual event planning budget for accommodations to ensure that DHH individuals can participate fully.

Be willing to hire and train people with disabilities, with the goal of having them become creative partners in a collaborative environment.

## Disability Justice in Climate Resilience and Disaster Planning

Disabled individuals suffer disproportionately from climate change related emergencies, and their input is therefore critical in conversations about climate resilience and adaptation. For instance, people who are deaf or blind may not have equal access to warning alerts, and persons with mobility issues are not always able to access shelters. These challenges came up for Gallaudet College when Hurricane Irene hit Washington, DC in 2011. During the emergency response, Gallaudet took action to ensure that DHH, Deaf-Blind and wheelchair-using students and staff were kept comfortable in their dormitory rooms. While emergency lighting and power from generators was used on campus, students living off campus had trouble accessing resources to stay comfortable and informed due to loss of power and wifi. Students were able to go on campus to obtain the electricity and wifi connections they needed. To ensure that those that are most in need of emergency care receive it, emergency planners must proactively ensure that disabled individuals under all circumstances have access to disaster-relief resources.



As higher education sustainability leaders are increasingly involved in climate resilience planning, it is important for them to be aware of disability justice issues that can come up in disaster planning and management. Solutions that could be implemented include multimodal communication warning notifications; solar powered refrigeration for medication storage; transportation vehicles with modifications to accommodate wheelchairs; weighted blankets for anxiety reduction in shelters; and much more.

Climate action and disaster management requires actions at public, organizational, and individual levels. Disaster management and resiliency largely depend on municipalities to provide resources to residents within their communities. However, municipalities have limited resources and may focus on certain areas within their jurisdiction. Deaf people have the additional barrier of not being able to obtain information in a timely manner, which can reduce opportunities for them to obtain life-saving resources. Gallaudet's newly founded certificate and minor degree program in [Disaster and Emergency Planning](#) attempts to address these challenges by empowering DHH individuals to be leaders in the disaster management and planning field.

### **Steps that colleges and universities can take to ensure inclusivity in emergency preparedness**

Consult with disabled and DHH communities directly to understand their emergency needs, accessible communication modes and ways they can help.

Advocate for accessible disaster risk reduction efforts to ensure that persons with disabilities are not left behind.

Make sure warning communications are accessible through multiple communication modes, and that escape routes and shelters can accommodate persons with physical and language disabilities.

Implement inclusivity into disaster management and climate resilience academic programs so that future leaders of disaster management and planning can be better trained to practice inclusivity.

Engage with other DHH advocacy groups and organizations through funding and support. For example, colleges and universities can establish fundraising campaigns through organizations like [Off the Grid Missions](#), a non-profit organization dedicated to providing DHH individuals access to life-saving resources, especially in high-risk and remote regions around the world.

Create a campus committee, think tank, incubator or other program led by people with disabilities that aims to respond to community emergencies.



## Preparing Disabled Students for Green Jobs

Green jobs related to disaster preparedness and other sustainability challenges are crucial for building a more resilient society. It is important to remember diversity and inclusion practices in building green workforces. This involves giving everyone a chance to learn from people with disabilities when it comes to innovative solutions to climate change.

DHH people have skills and experience in various areas that could benefit the green workforce. Potential employees with disabilities can be creative partners for innovative solutions through their abilities to elevate access issues up front and provide first-hand expertise on ways to reach those most in need. These solutions come from having different perspectives on a problem that comes from their different lived experiences.

Recognizing and addressing the systemic challenges that the DHH community goes through in education will set up a path to giving additional education and training that will be beneficial in providing DHH people with professional skillsets that can contribute to a greener society.





## Concluding Thoughts

The rapid changes expected to result from climate change can feel overwhelming and unsettling. Fortunately, humankind has demonstrated a capability to adjust, innovate, and be resilient through trying times. A key aspect of resilience is the ability of individuals to recognize and move past their biases and presumptions about others so they are better able to collaborate in finding innovative solutions. Awareness of the challenges faced by the disabled community (including the DHH community) and action to address them will help grow a more inclusive and more effective sustainability movement.

At minimum, higher education institutions must make accommodations for DHH students and other community members. However, a much deeper level of understanding and engagement is needed. As the higher education sustainability movement evolves, I hope that disabled individuals are looked upon not only as a group whose needs must be met when considering sustainability and resiliency planning, but as leaders with unique lived experiences that can help to ensure that no one is left behind.



Deaf Youth participate in CorpsTHAT, a program that supports the inclusion of Deaf and Hard of Hearing participants in conservation corps and outdoor programs. Photo courtesy of CorpsTHAT.