

Accessibility in Crisis: Toward Just Evacuation Policy

Ellie Chang

Occidental College Department of Urban and Environmental Policy

UEP 410: Controversies in Policy and Politics

Professors Martha Matsuoka, Karla Peña, and Madeline Wander

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Acknowledgments

While writing can feel like a solitary feat at times, my community has shown up for me in countless ways throughout the year-long process of writing this paper. To the UEP department: thank you for being my academic home for four years, for pushing me to grow as a leader and thinker and giving me space when I needed it. UEP will always be where I found my voice. To Professor Wander: thank you for standing by me during a difficult year. Your dedication to your students beyond the classroom amazes me. I felt so seen and supported by you throughout the comps process. To my family: thank you for your unwavering support and care over the past year. Through it all, I never once questioned our love for each other as a family.

Introduction

Climate change is increasing the frequency and magnitude of natural disasters, creating growing threats to communities across the United States.¹ Wildfires, floods, extreme heat, hurricanes, and other climate-related disasters can cause widespread destruction, displacement, and loss of life. However, the impacts of these disasters are not experienced equally. Disabled people are disproportionately affected by disasters, facing barriers to evacuation, emergency communication, transportation, shelter, and access to essential services.²

Using thematic analysis of interview data from disability advocates, emergency preparedness professionals, and representatives from community organizations, this project answers the following question: **In the wake of the Eaton Fire, how can disabled people's lived experience and expertise inform just and accessible evacuation policy?** Six themes emerged from the interviews, highlighting both the structural barriers that contribute to the disproportionate impacts of disasters on disabled people and the transformative potential of including disabled people in emergency planning and policymaking. Together, these findings demonstrate that disability-inclusive disaster policy requires more than providing accommodations after an emergency occurs. It requires meaningful participation by disabled people in the development of emergency policies themselves.

In this report, I start by presenting key background information including frameworks and mandates related to disabled inclusion, and the impact of the Eaton Fire on disabled people. I then review empirical research and conceptual frameworks on disability and climate disasters, including the disproportionate impact of climate change on disabled people and their exclusion

¹“Is Climate Change Increasing the Risk of Disasters?” World Wildlife Fund, accessed August 21, 2026, <https://www.worldwildlife.org/resources/explainers/is-climate-change-increasing-the-risk-of-disasters/>.

² “Disability-Inclusive Disaster Risk Reduction and Emergency Situations | Division for Inclusive Social Development (DISD),” accessed August 22, 2026, <https://social.desa.un.org/issues/disability/disability-issues/disability-inclusive-disaster-risk-reduction/disability>.

from climate planning. Then, I present my findings, highlighting the ways disabled people are neglected in emergency preparedness and the types of change that are possible when disabled people are central in disaster planning. Finally, I share my recommendations on ways to center the lived experiences of disabled people in climate planning toward saving lives.

Background

Frameworks and Mandates for Disability Inclusion

There are multiple different frameworks for disability rights. The Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) is the most advanced international human rights instrument on the rights of persons with disabilities. It provides standards of protection for the civil, cultural, economic, political and social rights of persons with disabilities on the basis of inclusion, equality, and non-discrimination.³ In the United States, the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) is a hallmark piece of legislation for disability rights and inclusion. Passed in 1990, the ADA is a civil rights law that ensures people with disabilities have the same opportunities as everyone else to access employment and benefit from government services.⁴

The Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction 2015–2030 is an international agreement adopted by United Nations member states to guide global efforts to reduce disaster risk and strengthen community climate resilience. The framework identifies four priorities for action: understanding disaster risk; strengthening disaster risk governance; investing in disaster risk reduction and resilience; and enhancing disaster preparedness, response, recovery, and reconstruction. In so doing, the Sendai Framework emphasizes prevention, preparedness, and reducing underlying risks before disasters happen.⁵

Disability inclusion is written into the Sendai Framework. The framework recognizes that people with disabilities can face increased risks during disasters and emphasizes the importance of including them in disaster risk reduction planning and decision-making. Additionally, it calls

³“International Standards,” OHCHR, accessed August 20, 2026, <https://www.ohchr.org/en/disabilities/international-standards>.

⁴“Introduction to the Americans with Disabilities Act,” ADA.Gov, July 29, 2026, <https://www.ada.gov/topics/intro-to-ada/>.

⁵“What Is the Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction? | UNDRR,” April 4, 2023, <https://www.undrr.org/implementing-sendai-framework/what-sendai-framework>.

for the participation of people with disabilities in the development and implementation of policies and plans, as well as greater accessibility and the use of universal design in disaster preparedness and response. Universal design is the process of creating products, buildings, and environments that everyone can use to the greatest extent possible, without needing special adjustments. The common curb cut is a famous example of universal design—something that benefits both disabled and able bodied people. The framework also emphasizes the importance of collecting disaster-related data that can identify how different populations experience disasters. This has huge implications for the future of disability and disaster policy, such as safer and more efficient evacuations.⁶

Moreover, in 2019, the United Nations Human Rights Council published a resolution that addressed the rights of people with disabilities in connection with climate change for the first time. The document recognized “the need for ensuring meaningful participation, inclusion and leadership of persons with disabilities and their organizations within disaster risk management and climate-related decision-making at the local, national, regional and global levels.”⁷

In the U.S., Title II of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) requires that state and local governments provide people with disabilities an equal opportunity to benefit from governmental services and activities. This includes, but is not limited to, emergency and disaster-related programs provided by state, local and, third-party entities. Under this regulation, emergency management services such as preparation, notification, transportation, and evacuation must be accessible to people with disabilities.⁸

⁶ Ibid

⁷ *UN Climate Resolution Emphasizes Protection of Disability Rights* | Human Rights Watch, July 15, 2019, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2019/07/15/un-climate-resolution-emphasizes-protection-disability-rights>.

⁸ “State and Local Governments,” ADA.Gov, November 13, 2025, <https://www.ada.gov/topics/title-ii/>.”

Despite the fact that one in every five adults in Los Angeles County is disabled,⁹ Title II of the ADA is not adequately enforced, leading to dangerous evacuations and potential loss of life. Experts say people with disabilities are often left behind during evacuation and recovery efforts, and that as climate change amplifies the frequency and scale of natural disasters, the discrepancies are becoming more serious.¹⁰ In fact, L.A. County failed to follow recommendations from the California Governor’s Office of Emergency Services, which said the county must do more to “adequately address” the emergency planning and evacuation needs of its most vulnerable residents. This notice was issued less than 16 months before the January 2025 firestorm that engulfed large sections of the Los Angeles basin, leading to tragic losses of homes, schools, businesses—and life.¹¹

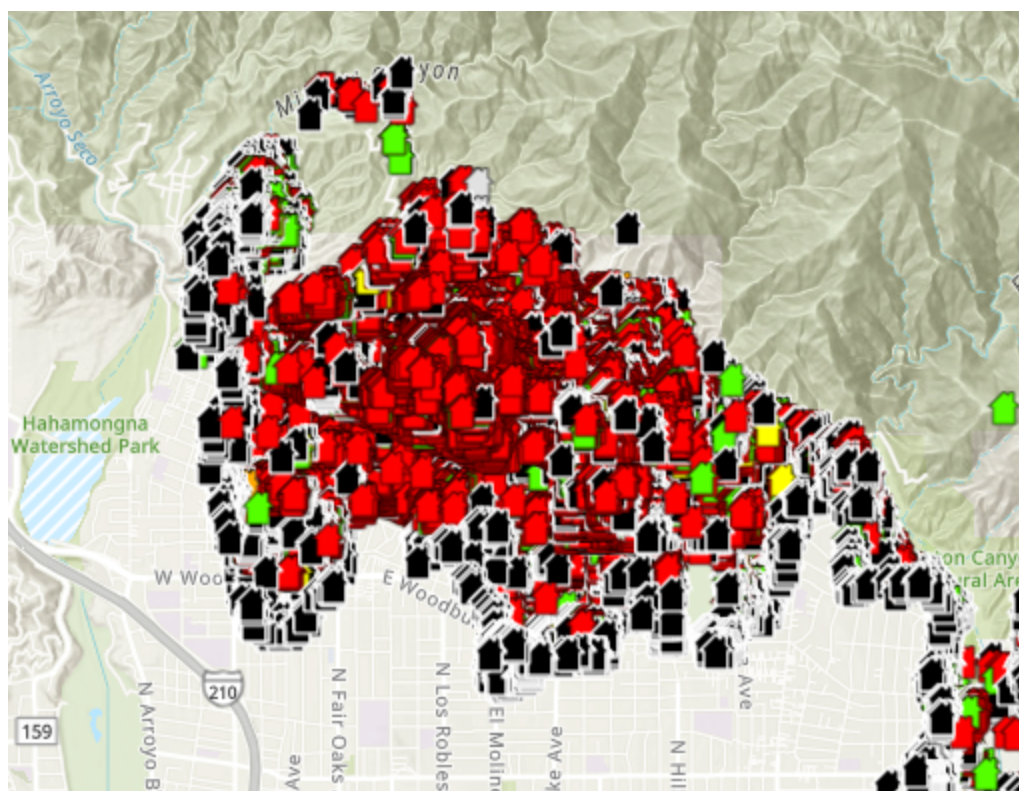
The Reality of Disability Exclusion: The Eaton Fire

Figure 1: Impact of the Eaton Fire

⁹ “LA County Department of Public Health - Report,” accessed September 9, 2026, <http://publichealth.lacounty.gov/phcommon/public/reports/rptsbygroup.cfm?ou=ph&prog=hae&unit=ha&categoryid=155>.

¹⁰ Stacey S. Brown et al., *The Impacts of Extreme Weather Events on People with Disabilities*, 2023

¹¹ X et al., “Elderly, Disabled Were Left Stranded during L.A. Fires as Evacuation Plans Broke Down,” Los Angeles Times, March 29, 2025, <https://www.latimes.com/california/story/2025-03-29/la-me-la-county-emergency-planning-disabled>.



This map indicates property damage due to the Eaton Fire. The red houses are homes that were destroyed. The black houses were houses that survived the fire.¹²

In January 2025, the Eaton Fire in Altadena, California, caused widespread destruction. The Eaton Fire burned more than 14,000 acres and destroyed over 9,400 structures. The broader Los Angeles County January 2025 fire season forced more than 100,000 residents to evacuate, destroyed thousands of homes, and burned tens of thousands of acres of the wildland-urban interface.¹³

The Eaton Fire revealed stark gaps in emergency planning for disabled residents. Despite three urgent 911 calls reporting that two homebound men—one with cerebral palsy and one with diabetes-related mobility loss—were trapped inside their home, rescue never arrived. Both died

¹²Eaton Fire – LA County Recovers, n.d., accessed August 19, 2026, <https://recovery.lacounty.gov/disasters/eaton-fire/>.

¹³“Eaton Canyon Natural Area,” Studio-MLA, n.d., accessed August 24, 2026, <https://studio-mla.com/design/eaton-canyon-natural-area/>.

as the fire consumed the structure.¹⁴ Their case underscores systemic failures: delayed evacuation warnings to vulnerable neighborhoods, the lack of coordinated protocols to mobilize paratransit or accessible transportation, and insufficient dispatcher training to prioritize households in which residents cannot self-evacuate.¹⁵ Indeed, during the COVID-19 pandemic, Los Angeles County dissolved its Access and Functional Needs Advisory Committee, leaving emergency plans vague about responsibilities and triggers for assisting disabled people.¹⁶ This tragedy is not an isolated incident, but a symptom of broader inequities in climate disaster response, where disabled communities face disproportionate risks of injury and death due to inadequate planning, coordination, and accountability. Addressing these gaps is essential to building inclusive, resilient climate adaptation strategies.

Such planning must also include the displacement that occurs because of such disasters. In the U.S., displacement creates long-term inequities: 21% of disabled evacuees never return home—nearly four times the rate of nondisabled evacuees.¹⁷ Contributing factors include a lack of affordable, accessible housing in disaster-affected areas and the inaccessibility of most emergency shelters for disabled folks. When disabled people do not have a safe and accessible place to evacuate to, they end up stranded and in dangerous situations. While there are more than 600,000 Angelenos under the age of 65 who live with a disability, according to U.S. Census data, the Los Angeles Housing Department listed fewer than 400 properties available on its Affordable

¹⁴“Despite Three 911 Calls, Two Homebound Disabled Men Died In Eaton Fire | KQED,” accessed August 20, 2026,

<https://www.kqed.org/news/12048956/despite-three-911-calls-two-homebound-disabled-men-died-in-eaton-fire>.

¹⁵Ana B. Ibarra, “As LA Fires Approached, She Had to Save Someone Else. How Can California Prepare Caregivers for the next One?,” *Health, CalMatters*, February 19, 2025,

<https://calmatters.org/health/2025/02/california-wildfires-emergency-preparedness/>.

¹⁶X et al., “Elderly, Disabled Were Left Stranded during L.A. Fires as Evacuation Plans Broke Down,” *Los Angeles Times*, March 29, 2025,

<https://www.latimes.com/california/story/2025-03-29/la-me-la-county-emergency-planning-disabled>.

¹⁷admin, *New Census Data Shows U.S. Fails Disabled People After Disasters – The Partnership for Inclusive Disaster Strategies*, n.d., accessed August 20, 2026,

<https://disasterstrategies.org/new-census-data-shows-u-s-fails-disabled-people-after-disasters/>.

and Accessible Housing registry after the January firestorm.¹⁸ Additionally, in 2019, the National Council on Disability found that people with disabilities are frequently institutionalized against their will in nursing homes, psychiatric facilities, and other long-term care institutions during and after disasters, despite legal protections requiring integrated services.¹⁹ These systemic failures illustrate how disability inequities are compounded at every stage of disaster response.

¹⁸Daniella Lake, *People With Disabilities Struggle to Secure Accessible Housing After Disasters Like the L.A. Fires*, October 31, 2025, <https://capitalandmain.com/people-with-disabilities-struggle-to-secure-accessible-housing-after-disasters-like-the-l-a-fires>.

¹⁹“National Council on Disability | Preserving Our Freedom: Ending Institutionalization of People with Disabilities During and After Disasters,” accessed November 26, 2025, <https://www.ncd.gov/report/preserving-our-freedom-ending-institutionalization-of-people-with-disabilities-during-and-after-disasters/>.

Literature Review

Research on disability studies has expanded significantly over the past forty years, reflecting growing concern over the ways in which disabled people are excluded due to systemic barriers. Scholars have examined disability as socially constructed, emphasizing the importance of integrating accessibility into all aspects of life. Similarly, the past thirty years have brought an expansion of literature on climate change and environmental justice. Scholars have established race and income as key factors which shape environmental burden and exposure to climate-related harm.

Despite these advances, the intersection of environmental justice and disability justice remains understudied, limiting scholarly understanding of how disabled people are disproportionately impacted by climate change as well as how they can actively contribute to climate mitigation and adaptation efforts. Existing research often frames disabled people primarily through narratives of vulnerability, overlooking their agency, expertise, and leadership within climate movements.

This literature review draws on foundational and contemporary scholarship in environmental justice and critical disability studies to underscore these gaps as well as uplift work that is beginning to fill these gaps, on which my project builds. First, I synthesize research on the impact of climate change related disasters on disabled people. Then, I explore the concept of vulnerability and how disabled people are constructed within climate disaster and evacuation discourse. Next, I review the concept of eco-ableism, emphasizing the ways in which the climate movement has neglected disabled perspectives. Finally, I examine research exploring the distinct and valuable contributions disabled people make to climate activism and environmental advocacy. By integrating core environmental justice concepts with a disability justice

framework, this review synthesizes the state of research on this topic, on which this project expands.

The Impact of Climate Change-Related Disasters on Disabled People

Research overwhelmingly finds climate change poses immense risk to the health and well being of the human population.²⁰ However, disabled people face additional multifactorial risks to their health and safety. First, existing disabilities mediate whether and how people are physically, mentally, socially, or spatially susceptible to climate harms. For example, people with mobility limitations may not be able to relocate quickly, meaning they could be abandoned in a rushed evacuation. Hurricane Katrina is an example of how infrastructure breaks down for disabled folks during a crisis.²¹ Some disabled people may be physiologically more likely to suffer adversely from heat or smoke—compounded by pollution they may already be exposed to, an example of the ways environmental injustice and accessibility intersect.²² Secondly, disabilities can impact how and when people gain access to information that would allow them to prepare for the climate event. Information about bushfires, heat waves, and sea surges might not be in accessible formats (such as captions or audible messages), limiting the reach to disabled audiences.²³

A recent Census Bureau report shows that an emergency or disaster can often be the tipping point that ends independence for a disabled individual. Important highlights from this research include:

²⁰ Cadeyrn J. Gaskin et al., *Factors Associated with the Climate Change Vulnerability and the Adaptive Capacity of People with Disability: A Systematic Review*, Weather, Climate, and Society, October 1, 2017, <https://doi.org/10.1175/WCAS-D-16-0126.1>.

²¹ Alina Engelman et al., “Global Disability Justice In Climate Disasters: Mobilizing People With Disabilities As Change Agents,” *Health Affairs* 41, no. 10 (2022): 1496–504, <https://doi.org/10.1377/hlthaff.2022.00474>.

²² Ibid

²³ Ibid

- 70 percent of Deaf people who were evacuated reported living in unsanitary conditions a month after the disaster. (However, for individuals who are not Deaf, only 7% faced unsanitary conditions).
- 74 percent of evacuees who use a wheelchair reported experiencing a lack of food one month after a disaster. (But for those able to walk, this figure stands at only 9%).
- 59 percent of Deaf evacuees reported that they never went back home; more than four times the rate for people who are not Deaf.²⁴

Additionally, the risk for disabled people to be permanently institutionalized increases greatly with climate evacuation. During disasters, disabled populations face barriers to evacuation, transportation, communication, shelter, and recovery.²⁵ Thus, it is clear why persons with disabilities are two to four times more likely to die or be injured in climate emergencies including heatwaves, hurricanes, and floods than their able bodied counterparts.²⁶

These disparities demonstrate that the consequences of disasters do not end when an evacuation order is lifted. For disabled people, evacuation can disrupt access to housing, medical care, medications, mobility equipment, communication, transportation, and social support systems. During disasters, disabled populations face barriers at nearly every stage of the emergency management process, including evacuation, transportation, communication, shelter, and long-term recovery.²⁷ These barriers can have consequences that extend far beyond the immediate disaster. When disabled people are unable to safely evacuate, return home, access

²⁴admin, *New Census Data Shows U.S. Fails Disabled People After Disasters – The Partnership for Inclusive Disaster Strategies*.

²⁵ Ibid

²⁶“Disability in a Time of Climate Disaster | Harvard University Center for the Environment,” January 19, 2023, <https://www.environment.harvard.edu/news/disability-time-climate-disaster>.

²⁷Yuriko Matsuo et al., “Evacuation and Transportation Barriers Among Vulnerable Populations in Natural Hazard-Related Disasters: A Scoping Review,” *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health* 22, no. 11 (2025): 1680, <https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph22111680>.

necessary services, or maintain their independence, they may be forced into institutional settings or become dependent on systems that do not adequately meet their needs. In this way, disasters can exacerbate existing inequalities and turn temporary emergencies into permanent disruptions to disabled people's lives.²⁸

Disability and Emergency Management

Emergency management has always been a struggle for disabled populations. Despite legal mandates, plans rarely account for the needs of disabled people. A study by the *Journal of Emergency Management* assessed disaster planning of local Offices of Emergency Management (OEM) in regards to people with disabilities (PWD). They found that OEM implementation of ADA requirements was generally suboptimal; only 41 percent reported detailed operating procedures for PWD. Additionally, training of staff to ensure that they were knowledgeable on the ADA requirements for inclusivity was rarely conducted. They also found that accessible communication strategies, including emergency notifications, were often lacking; only 28 percent of OEMs reported availability of sign language interpreters at shelters.²⁹ The study concluded with the need to develop strategies for involvement of people with disabilities in all phases of the emergency management process.

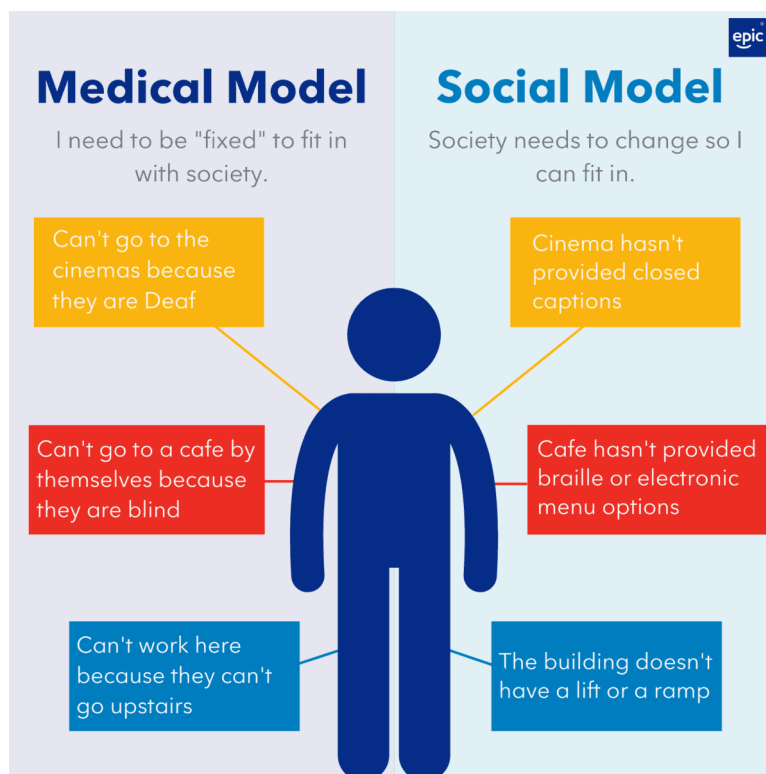
Social Model of Disability

Figure 2: Medical vs Social Model³⁰

²⁸ Ibid

²⁹ M. H. S. Robyn R. Gershon et al., "Are Local Offices of Emergency Management Prepared for People with Disabilities? Results from the FEMA Region 9 Survey," *Journal of Emergency Management* 19, no. 1 (2021): 7–20, <https://doi.org/10.5055/jem.0506>.

³⁰ Image description: A blue stick figure in the middle of the image. The background of the image is split down the middle with the left side titled "Medical Model" and the right side titled "Social Model." On the medical model side, there is a caption stating "I need to be "fixed" to fit with society." The corresponding caption for the social model is "Society needs to change so I can fit in." The image provides three examples of each model in three different colors. The first example on the medical side (in yellow) it states "can't go to the cinemas because they are Deaf." The



By providing three hypothetical examples, this figure visually describes the medical and social model of disability.³¹

Disability Justice adopts a view of disability as socially constructed rather than the traditional medical model. As the diagram above shows, the difference between these two models lies on what/whom the onus of disability is placed. The medical model emerged out of the need for a uniform, efficient workforce during the industrial revolution.³² Within the medical model, a disabled person's impairment is seen as a flaw, and the solution is to cure, fix, or rehabilitate the body or mind to fit societal norms. If a person cannot be "cured," they are often removed from society and placed in an institution so as to not disrupt our society's industrial

corresponding example on the social side (also in yellow) states "cinema hasn't provided closed captions." The second example on the medical side (in red) states "can't go to a cafe by themselves because they are blind." The corresponding example on the social side (also in red) states "Cafe hasn't provided braille or electronic menu options." The final example on the medical side (in blue) states "Can't work here because they can't go upstairs." The corresponding example on the social side (also in blue) states "The building doesn't have a lift or ramp."

³¹Epic Assist, "The Biggest Barrier for People with Disability," *EPIC Assist*, July 22, 2021, <https://epicassist.org/the-biggest-barrier-for-people-with-disability/>.

³²Meletis, Christos, "Conceptual Models of Disability throughout History," *ENIL*, July 16, 2025, <https://enil.eu/conceptual-models-of-disability-throughout-history/>.

system built around a narrow ideal of physical and cognitive ability toward “productivity.”³³

Indeed, the medical model underscores the deep connection between capitalism and our societal understanding of ability.

The social model offers a counter to this view. Emerging in the 1970s, it was later formalized by disabled activist and academic Mike Oliver. The starting point for the social model was the publication of *The Fundamental Principles of Disability* by the Union of the Physically Impaired Against Segregation (UPIAS) in 1976. It stated that:

In our view it is society which disables physically impaired people. Disability is something imposed on top of our impairments by the way we are unnecessarily isolated and excluded from full participation in society.³⁴

This statement completely shifted the understanding of disability by arguing that the main cause of social exclusion of disabled people was not impairment, but the way society responded to people with impairments. According to the social model, it is not their impairment that disables people, but rather barriers put in place by society. As disability and feminist scholar Susan Wendell articulates, “Disability is socially constructed through the failure or unwillingness to create ability among people who do not fit the physical and mental profile of a ‘paradigm’ citizen.”³⁵ If those barriers were removed—if spaces were accessible and attitudes inclusive—then “disability” as a form of exclusion would no longer exist.

The (Constructed) Vulnerability of Disabled People amidst Climate Change

Disability is a factor that increases vulnerability and exposure to climate change. Additionally, with disability disproportionately affecting already vulnerable populations—people from lower-income countries, older adults, poorly-educated persons, low-income earners,

³³ Ibid

³⁴“Fundamental Principles of Disability,” *National Disability Arts Collection & Archive*, n.d., accessed December 16, 2025, <https://the-ndaca.org/resources/audio-described-gallery/fundamental-principles-of-disability/>.

³⁵Susan Wendell, *The Rejected Body: Feminist Philosophical Reflections on Disability* (Psychology Press, 1996), 60.

unemployed persons, and those in ethnic minority groups, the compounding impacts of multiple marginalizing identities mean that disabled people are especially at risk of the direct and indirect effects of climate change.³⁶ Additional risks include the inaccessibility of information about environmental risk and the design of the built environment. Additionally, systemic attitudes toward disabled people, who as a group, are often viewed as ‘the least worth saving,’ pose threats for disabled people’s safety.³⁷ Ableist views rooted in eugenics frame disabled people as ‘destined to die.’ These views frame disability as something to fear, neglecting the resilience and joy of the disabled community.

Within environmental management’s systematic process of guiding human activities to minimize negative impacts on the natural environment, a common narrative suggests that for certain categories of people, “expected losses” are inevitable.³⁸ This phrase functions as coded language for abject ableism. By treating the deaths of disabled people during climate disasters as predictable or unavoidable, this framing reveals how systemic ableism has produced and sustained conditions of neglect in which preventable harm and death are normalized. In a recent study, researchers found that:

[D]isabled populations are disproportionately affected by climate change at three different stages: a) before the disaster (e.g. access to urgent information, early warning systems); b) during the disaster (e.g. evacuation, transport and shelters); and c) after the disaster (e.g. housing, food, water, medical care, education).³⁹

The overarching neglect that disabled populations face magnifies ableism as a systemic force of oppression. Another study states “the so-called vulnerability of people with disabilities to climate

³⁶ Cadeyrn J. Gaskin et al., *Factors Associated with the Climate Change Vulnerability and the Adaptive Capacity of People with Disability: A Systematic Review*, Weather, Climate, and Society, October 1, 2017, <https://doi.org/10.1175/WCAS-D-16-0126.1>.

³⁷ David Abbott and Sue Porter, “Environmental Hazard and Disabled People: From Vulnerable to Expert to Interconnected,” *Disability & Society* 28, no. 6 (2013): 839–52, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09687599.2013.802222>, 843

³⁸ Ibid 844

³⁹ Aleksandra Kosanic et al., “An Inclusive Future: Disabled Populations in the Context of Climate and Environmental Change,” *Current Opinion in Environmental Sustainability* 55 (April 2022): 101159, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cosust.2022.101159>.

change is a result of stigma, discrimination, and structural, institutional, and socioeconomic barriers that undermine both disability and collective societal climate resilience.”⁴⁰

Discrimination, together with structural and socioeconomic barriers, compounds the varied negative effects of climate change on health, water, food security, and other rights, undermining social equity and well-being.⁴¹ For example, people with albinism face stigma, inequality in accessing quality sunscreen, health care, and indoor employment.⁴² Thus, the impacts of climate-change-related events affect disabled people in a multifactorial way.

The Importance of Centering Disabled People in Climate Planning

Prior research has emphasized the importance of disabled people having a voice in disaster planning and policy. Michael Stein from the Harvard Law School Project on Disability states:

[P]ersons with disabilities and their organizations must be enabled to share their knowledge and experience by meaningfully participating in climate negotiations, policymaking, responses, and research. People with disabilities are problem solvers because we must adjust our daily existence to navigate a world that has not been designed with us in mind.⁴³

It is critical that disabled people are empowered in decision making contexts because their lived experience is a valuable tool. Adaptability and the ability to respond to outside stressors was a consistent finding indicating that disabled people should be climate leaders. However, due to systemic ableism and forces such as eco-ableism, disabled people have not been represented in climate policy.

⁴⁰ Penelope J. S. Stein et al., “Advancing Disability-Inclusive Climate Research and Action, Climate Justice, and Climate-Resilient Development,” *The Lancet Planetary Health* 8, no. 4 (2024): e242–55, [https://doi.org/10.1016/S2542-5196\(24\)00024-X](https://doi.org/10.1016/S2542-5196(24)00024-X), 244.

⁴¹ Ibid

⁴² Ibid

⁴³ Rachel Reed, “People with Disabilities Must Be Included in Climate Planning and Responses, Say Harvard Researchers,” *Harvard Law School*, n.d., accessed December 18, 2025, <https://hls.harvard.edu/today/people-with-disabilities-must-be-included-in-climate-planning-and-responses-say-harvard-researchers/>.

Eco-ableism

The marginalization of disabled people through environmental choices and design, impacts the sense of belonging disabled people feel in environmental activism spaces. Thus, they are less likely to engage in conversations about climate change mitigation strategies. In their research paper “Environmental Hazard and Disabled People,” Abbot and Porter explore disabled people’s relationship with the environmental movement. The authors note that “in thinking about the relationships between disability and sustainability and the environmental movement, individual accounts of discrimination surfaced.”⁴⁴ One interviewee from the article noted that she wanted to recycle but that the recently introduced net covers for recycle bins needed two hands to fix them on so she was unable.⁴⁵ Disabled people face an impossible double standard: they desire to participate in environmental activism, but face accessibility barriers. When they advocate for accessibility, their perspective is often met with hostility and dismissal.

The exclusion of disability in the environmental movement is structured by eco-ableism, defined as “the marginalization of disabled people through environmental design; the exclusion of disabled people in environmental decision-making; and the discrimination against disabled people through environmental discourses, beliefs, and attitudes.”⁴⁶ Aspects of eco-ableism such as plastic straw bans mirror the medical model of disability. By placing the responsibility for environmental change on individual behavior, these policies reproduce the idea that social or ecological harm results from personal “defect” or moral failure rather than systemic inequality.⁴⁷ The assumption that disabled people do not value sustainability suggests passivity and a lack of agency. Additionally, the successful positioning of responsibility onto the individual masks the

⁴⁴ Abbott and Porter, “Environmental Hazard and Disabled People,” 842.

⁴⁵ Ibid 843

⁴⁶ Emerson Cram et al., “Crippling Environmental Communication: A Review of Eco-Ableism, Eco-Normativity, and Climate Justice Futurities,” *Environmental Communication* 16, no. 7 (2022): 851–63, <https://doi.org/10.1080/17524032.2022.2126869>.

⁴⁷ Ibid

changes that are required at a societal level, thus diminishing the value we place on inter-dependency and reciprocity, values that the disability community uphold.⁴⁸

Conclusion

Existing scholarship demonstrates that disabled people experience disproportionate barriers during climate-related disasters and that these barriers are largely produced by structural and institutional conditions rather than disability itself. Scholars have also increasingly emphasized the importance of disability representation and participation in emergency planning. However, less attention has been given to how disabled people's lived experiences and advocacy can actively shape emergency policy, particularly at the local level. Existing literature often positions disabled people as populations requiring protection rather than as political actors and experts capable of transforming disaster preparedness systems. This project addresses this gap by exploring how disabled people can pursue decision making power, increasing joy and community resilience in the process.

⁴⁸ Abbott and Porter, "Environmental Hazard and Disabled People," 847.

Data & Methods

Engaging people with lived expertise is a growing movement in developing policy solutions. In November 2024, the Center for Health Care Strategies published a report on the importance of engaging people with lived experience and expertise in State behavioral health reforms. The report found that engagement from those with lived experience helps states understand barriers, disparities, and lived realities faced by marginalized groups when accessing behavioral health care. As a result, policies and programs become more responsive, equitable, and grounded in real needs rather than assumptions. This in turn improves access, satisfaction, and overall effectiveness of behavioral health services.⁴⁹

Using this report as a model, I drew upon semi-structured interviews with experts and activists in the disability policy world to answer my research question. Often, disabled people's agency is lost as they are excluded from conversations about urban planning, environmental management, and justice. I aim to remedy this by centering disabled people's lived experience and expertise in my research. Specifically, I obtained IRB approval to interview eight disabled leaders in the disability policy and emergency management fields who each brought a unique perspective that collectively helped tell the story of how disabled people experience disasters. I then systematically coded the data (in the form of transcripts) using the qualitative data analysis software [ATLAS.ti](https://atlas.ti.com/). Finally, using thematic analysis, I identified key themes that I use to present my findings below.

⁴⁹Vanessa Finisse, "Making the Case for Engaging People with Lived Experience and Expertise in State Behavioral Health Reforms," *Center for Health Care Strategies*, n.d., accessed December 16, 2025, <https://www.chcs.org/resource/making-the-case-for-engaging-people-with-lived-experience-and-expertise-in-state-behavioral-health-reforms/>.

Findings and Discussion

My analysis of my interview data revealed seven recurring themes that can be grouped into two overarching trends. First, disabled people experience structural neglect throughout climate emergency preparedness and evacuation. This neglect manifests in feelings of expendability, fear, hopelessness, and exclusion from decision-making processes. Second, when disabled people are meaningfully involved in disaster planning, emergency systems become more accessible, community resilience strengthens, and disabled people are able to exercise agency and experience joy. Rather than viewing disability as a vulnerability to be managed, participants emphasized disability as a source of expertise that should shape climate planning and policy. In this section, I first present findings related to the structural neglect of disabled people in climate emergency planning. Then, I present findings about the types of change that would reverse such structural neglect and the different arenas where this change can happen.

Structural Neglect: Disabled People are Treated as Expendable

A recurring theme that emerged from my analysis was the need for disabled people to be part of the policy-making process. Currently they are at the will of a broken system that neglects the needs of folks with access and functional needs. This finding aligns with that of Read et al. who, in their examination of the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on disabled people's mental health and sense of social isolation, show that this neglect is not isolated to natural disasters:

A central experience from participants was that disabled people did not have a significant voice or representation in Coronavirus-related decision-making and so, at times, felt silenced and powerless. In particular, participants felt as though disabled people and carers had largely been ignored and segregated by government and organisations in response to the Coronavirus pandemic.”⁵⁰

⁵⁰Stuart Read et al., “Disabled People’s Experiences of the Coronavirus Pandemic: A Call to Action for Social Change,” *Social Inclusion* 11, no. 1 (2022), 41 <https://doi.org/10.17645/si.v11i1.5721>.

My interview participants all reflected the same point—not a single participant said that disabled people’s needs and safety are adequately accounted for during emergency evacuation. This finding suggests that meaningful disability inclusion must extend beyond consultation after policies are drafted. Disabled people must be active participants in shaping emergency planning from the outset, ensuring that policies reflect lived experience and address access needs before disasters occur. Rather than describing isolated policy failures, interviewees framed these shortcomings as evidence of systemic neglect. As one interviewee explained, "The plans do not include the needs of people with access and functional needs." Reflecting on both the COVID-19 pandemic and the Eaton and Palisades Fires, he described how disabled people were repeatedly made to feel expendable because emergency systems were not designed with them in mind. As he stated, “there's a failure, and we die, and we are expendable.” In fact, over half of the people who passed in the Eaton Fire were disabled or older adults.⁵¹

Participants consistently described this expendability as a consequence of exclusion from emergency planning rather than an unavoidable outcome of disasters. When disabled people are not considered before disasters occur, evacuation becomes uncertain, support systems such as stable housing and access to food break down, and preventable deaths become normalized.⁵²

COVID-19 was a mass disabling event and public health emergency. Pulling from previous literature about the impacts of the pandemic on disabled people, we can see a strong correlation with my findings; disabled people are excluded from emergency planning opportunities and treated as expendable. A study conducted by Kavanagh et al in 2022 found that disabled people have reported poorer mental health as a consequence of the Covid-19 pandemic. Studies also found that there was significant anxiety regarding the impact Covid-19 was

⁵¹ “Despite Three 911 Calls, Two Homebound Disabled Men Died In Eaton Fire | KQED.”

⁵² “Leave No One Behind | Human Rights Watch,” accessed August 21, 2026, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2022/11/07/leave-no-one-behind>.

continuing to have on disabled people's lives as well as feelings of social isolation and abandonment by the UK government.⁵³

The "feelings of social isolation and abandonment by the UK government" speak to the systemic neglect that disabled people face during times of crisis. The article goes on to state "Participants suggested that this lack of representation could be attributed to at best, ignorance from government and organisations regarding the importance of making reasonable adjustments for disabled people, or at worst, viewing disabled people's lives as lacking in worth."⁵⁴ Clearly, governmental policy holds health and worth closely. This is due to the deeply ingrained medical model view of disability as something to "fix."

Exclusion from Decision-Making Weakens Emergency Planning

Nearly every interviewee emphasized that disabled people are routinely excluded from emergency management and disaster planning spaces. Participants argued that this exclusion is one of the primary reasons existing evacuation policies fail to meet disabled people's needs. An emergency preparedness coordinator I interviewed summarized this issue directly: "The biggest problem of all is that people with disabilities are not in emergency management spaces."

Rather than viewing disabled people solely as recipients of emergency services, interviewees argued that they should be recognized as experts in accessibility. Their lived experiences provide knowledge that emergency managers often lack, including practical barriers related to transportation, communication, medical equipment, caregiving networks, and shelter

⁵³ Read et al., "Disabled People's Experiences of the Coronavirus Pandemic," 39.

⁵⁴Ibid 41

accessibility. Participants consistently argued that planning for disabled people *without disabled people* produces ineffective and inequitable emergency responses.

Structural Neglect Produces Hopelessness and Fear

Another recurring finding is the emotional impact of inaccessible emergency planning. Participants frequently discussed fear and hopelessness as consequences of knowing that evacuation systems are not designed for them.

Several interviewees noted that disabled people are largely absent from the committees responsible for developing evacuation plans. This lack of representation reinforces the expectation that their access needs will continue to be overlooked. As a result, many disabled people approach climate emergencies with uncertainty about whether they will be able to evacuate safely, creating a profound sense of hopelessness surrounding emergency preparedness and evacuation.

Interviewees also described a broader hopelessness stemming from the cyclical nature of disasters. As one interviewee explained, while communities often mobilize to provide immediate relief, “people do not sustain the effort.” Once the immediate crisis passes, attention shifts elsewhere, leaving the structural barriers that place disabled people at greater risk unresolved. This pattern signals to the most vulnerable communities that their lives and well-being are not a lasting priority.

Multiple interviewees emphasized that hope is an essential component of climate emergency planning. When disabled people see their experiences reflected in policy and witness sustained commitments to accessibility, trust in emergency systems can begin to grow. That trust

is essential for effective policy, as people are more likely to engage with and rely on emergency planning when they believe their needs have been genuinely considered.

In his article, Stein et al. states: “The so-called vulnerability of people with disabilities to climate change is a result of stigma, discrimination, and structural, institutional, and socioeconomic barriers that undermine both disability and collective societal climate resilience.”⁵⁵ One interviewee highlighted the structural and institutional barriers disabled people face during emergency preparedness, saying “people are responding to the immediate crisis without sort of looking at the underlying issues.” Hopelessness and fear are produced as a result of a system you can not rely on to rescue disabled individuals. One interviewee talked about how some disabled people “give up” because emergency preparedness is inaccessible. This finding suggests that inaccessible emergency planning not only limits practical preparedness but also erodes trust in public institutions, discouraging participation in preparedness efforts and reinforcing the very vulnerabilities that emergency planning is intended to reduce. One way interviewees talked about combating hopelessness is through taking action to create change. As I explore below, this action can take many forms including being a community advocate and/or engaging in legislative and/or judicial action. When disabled people feel they have agency to participate in policy discussions, joy and community resilience improves.

Types of Change - Community Voice and Participation

In contrast to the structural neglect described above, participants emphasized the transformative impact of including disabled people in policymaking. Rather than viewing

⁵⁵Penelope J. S. Stein et al., “Advancing Disability-Inclusive Climate Research and Action, Climate Justice, and Climate-Resilient Development,” *The Lancet Planetary Health* 8, no. 4 (2024): e242–55, [https://doi.org/10.1016/S2542-5196\(24\)00024-X](https://doi.org/10.1016/S2542-5196(24)00024-X).

disabled people solely as recipients of emergency services, interviewees argued that they should be recognized as experts whose lived experiences strengthen disaster planning.

The emergency preparedness coordinator I interviewed illustrated this expertise through a story about advocating at the California state capitol on behalf of friends who relied on ventilators. Power shut offs were posing risks to disabled people. Thus, she met with legislators, utility representatives, and PG&E (one of Northern and Central California's energy providers) to advocate for a safer and more just solution. Her work helped lay the foundation for advocacy efforts that gained momentum following Hurricane Katrina by supporting evacuees and providing equipment.

In addition to demonstrating the importance of supporting disability-led organizations as a critical resource in climate emergency planning, her story demonstrates that disability advocacy is often rooted in collective responsibility rather than individual self-interest. This emphasis on collective care reflects the disability justice principle of interdependence or a state in which two or more people rely on each other for success. Participants repeatedly described advocacy as a communal effort in which people leverage their own access, resources, and political power to support others whose needs may be overlooked. Rather than speaking for disabled communities, they described speaking with one another, recognizing that no single person's experience represents the diversity of disability.

Several interviewees further challenged the idea that disabled people are primarily those who need to be rescued by describing disability-led organizations as first responders during disasters. They described their work with disability-led organizations as often possessing established networks, knowledge of access needs, and relationships within disability communities that emergency agencies may lack. These insights reframe disability from a

condition that creates vulnerability to a source of expertise and community resilience. Disabled people's role during disasters therefore extends beyond receiving assistance—they actively provide assistance, organize resources, and support community members. Recognizing these organizations as part of the emergency response infrastructure could fundamentally change how policymakers approach disaster preparedness.

Taken together, these findings suggest that including disabled people in emergency planning and climate policy-making is not simply a matter of equity or compliance. It is a strategy for producing more effective and resilient disaster systems. Disabled people bring expertise developed through navigating inaccessible systems, anticipating barriers, and building networks of collective care. Their participation can therefore shift emergency planning away from a model that asks, “How do we rescue vulnerable disabled people?” toward one that asks, “How can we build emergency systems in which disabled people are equipped and supported to protect themselves and one another?” As Angela Fredrick write in her book *Disabled Power*:

Vulnerability is the unwelcomed side of a cultural binary. On one side there are those with capacity, those autonomous, independent agents who constitute mainstream society. On the other side, the “vulnerable” are understood to be wholly dependent, passive and interchangeable...cultural beliefs about vulnerability render disability a totalizing identity, a proxy for complete incapacity. It is also falsely understood as a static identity.”⁵⁶

My findings underscore the importance of this shift, which is critical to developing climate disaster policy that recognizes disabled people not as passive recipients of aid, but as active agents in building collective resilience.

Types of Change - Legislative Action

⁵⁶Angela Fredrick, *Disabled Power: A Storm, A Grid, and Embodied Harm in the Age of Disaster* (NYU Press, 2025) 12.

Policy change work is an important tool used by disability rights groups to reverse the structural neglect of disabled people in climate emergency planning. These tools not only won huge victories but also helped disabled changemakers realize their own power. Interviewees emphasized that meaningful policy change occurs when disabled people are involved not only in implementing emergency plans but also in drafting the legislation itself. Rather than treating accessibility as an afterthought, disability-led policy making prioritizes access and accountability mechanisms of public policy from the outset.

For example, the Partnership for Inclusive Disaster Strategies has been collaborating with Senator Blumenthal (D-CT), Congresswoman Dingell (D-MI), and Congressman Panetta (D-CA) on the Real Emergency Access for Aging and Disability Inclusion (REAADI) for Disasters Act and Disaster Relief Medicaid Act (DRMA). The proposed REAADI Act exemplifies how legislation can be used to hold systems accountable. Developed through collaboration with disability advocates, emergency managers, and organizations for aging populations, the legislation seeks to institutionalize disability inclusion across all phases of disaster management. The bill would require state and local emergency planning processes to include people with disabilities and older adults, establish a network of Disability and Aging Technical Assistance Centers, improve accessible communication and evacuation planning, and ensure that federal disaster funding supports inclusive preparedness and recovery efforts.⁵⁷

Several interviewees pointed to the REAADI Act as evidence that disabled people are not simply identifying gaps in existing policy—they are designing practical solutions. Their lived experiences inform legislative language that addresses barriers often overlooked by traditional emergency planning, including accessible transportation, durable medical equipment, backup

⁵⁷“REAADI for Disasters Act & DRMA,” REAADI for Disasters Act & DRMA, accessed July 5, 2026, <https://reaadi.com/>.

power for life-sustaining devices, communication access, and continuity of personal care services. By centering these realities during the drafting process, disability advocates shift policy from reactive accommodation to proactive inclusion.

The REEADI Act and similar policies suggest that legislative action serves as an important mechanism for challenging the structural neglect of disabled people in climate emergency planning. However, the significance of legislative advocacy extends beyond the adoption of particular policies. Participants described policymaking as a site where power can be redistributed, particularly when disabled people are involved in drafting legislation rather than simply consulted after decisions have already been made. This finding challenges traditional approaches to emergency management, which position disabled people primarily as vulnerable populations in need of protection. Instead, disability-led policymaking recognizes disabled people as experts whose lived experiences can identify gaps in emergency systems and inform more effective policy solutions. Applying an epistemic justice framework here, we can identify the value that lived experiences offer. One participant longingly talked about her desire to have more disabled policymakers. Disabled people have long been discounted in political and social contexts but have knowledge that able-bodied peers can learn from. Participants talked about their ability both to collaborate and to work independently as strengths gained from their disability. REEADI is a landmark piece of legislation because it inherently incorporates interdependence, a core tenet of disability justice.

The proposed legislation, developed through collaboration among disability advocates, emergency managers, and organizations assisting aging populations, seeks to institutionalize disability inclusion throughout disaster preparedness, response, and recovery. Among other provisions, the legislation would strengthen the participation of people with disabilities and older

adults in emergency planning, establish Disability and Aging Technical Assistance Centers, improve accessible communication and evacuation planning, and direct federal disaster resources toward more inclusive preparedness and recovery. The REAADI Act therefore demonstrates how the experiences of disabled people can be translated into concrete policy mechanisms rather than remaining at the level of recommendations for individual emergency managers.

The REAADI Act is a manifestation of the social model of disability. The barriers participants identified are not inherent to disability itself; rather, they emerge when emergency systems fail to accommodate different bodies, communication needs, and ways of navigating the world. From this perspective, disability vulnerability during disasters is produced in part through policy decisions about infrastructure, transportation, communication, energy, and emergency services. Legislative action becomes one way of addressing these structural sources of vulnerability rather than simply attempting to provide individualized assistance after a disaster occurs.

Types of Change - Judicial

Interviewees also emphasized that when governments fail to include disabled people in emergency planning, legal action can become a necessary mechanism for change. Disability rights litigation can compel public agencies to recognize their legal obligations and develop more inclusive emergency policies.

Following the September 11 attacks, Hurricane Katrina in 2005, and several California wildfires, emergency management agencies across the United States began reevaluating disaster preparedness. Like most disasters, Hurricane Katrina left disabled people, older adults, and people without access to transportation to face disproportionately high rates of injury and death.

These events highlighted that emergency plans often assumed everyone could receive warnings, evacuate independently, and access shelters without accommodations. Against this backdrop, disability advocates examined Los Angeles' emergency plans and found significant gaps. The City had not developed adequate procedures to ensure that disabled residents could safely receive emergency information, evacuate, access transportation, or use emergency shelters. Although the City had general disaster plans, they largely failed to address the specific needs of people with mobility, sensory, cognitive, or other disabilities.⁵⁸

And so, in 2009, Communities Actively Living Independent and Free (CALIF) filed suit against the City of Los Angeles. It was a class action lawsuit brought by disability rights organizations and individual plaintiffs alleging that the City of Los Angeles failed to adequately prepare for and respond to emergencies affecting people with disabilities.⁵⁹ The lawsuit argued that emergency plans did not provide equal access to evacuation, transportation, shelters, communication, and other essential services, placing disabled residents at disproportionate risk during disasters. The case ruled the City violated the ADA by failing to account for people with mobility, vision, hearing, cognitive, and mental disabilities in its emergency plans. The court ordered the City to revise its disaster preparedness program. Additionally, the County later entered a settlement. This settlement affected roughly 1.3 million disabled residents in Los Angeles City and County.⁶⁰

Other examples of lawsuits being used to enact change for emergency preparedness and evacuation are California Foundation for Independent Living Centers (CFILC), et al. v. City of Oakland, et al. in 2010 and Brooklyn Center for Independence of the Disabled (BCID), et al. v.

⁵⁸“Communities Actively Living Independent and Free (CALIF), et al. v. City of Los Angeles,” *Disability Rights Advocates*, n.d., accessed July 5, 2026,

<https://dralegal.org/case/communities-actively-living-independent-and-free-calif-et-al-v-city-of-los-angeles/>.

⁵⁹ Ibid

⁶⁰ Ibid

Mayor Bloomberg, et al. in 2011. The settlement from the Oakland case created several concrete changes, including: identifying 20 accessible emergency shelters; assigning a Shelter Functional Needs Coordinator at each shelter; ensuring emergency notification systems are accessible to people with hearing, vision, mobility, and other disabilities; and creating a Geographic Information System (GIS) tool to help first responders identify residents who may require accessible transportation or other assistance during evacuations.⁶¹ The Brooklyn case was a historic emergency preparedness case. The case was prompted by the City's inadequate response during events such as Hurricane Irene and was reinforced by the systemic failures exposed during Hurricane Sandy. In November 2013, Judge Jesse Furman ruled that New York City had violated Title II of the Americans with Disabilities Act and the Rehabilitation Act by failing to provide people with disabilities meaningful access to its emergency preparedness programs. This was the first federal trial to hold that inadequate disaster planning constituted disability discrimination.⁶²

Together, these three cases establish a consistent legal principle: local governments violate disability rights law when they fail to incorporate disabled people into emergency planning, and meaningful reform requires both accessible infrastructure and ongoing participation by disabled communities in developing emergency policy. By taking the state to court, disabled advocates challenged the assumption that they should have to adapt themselves to emergency systems designed around non-disabled people. Instead, the case established that emergency systems themselves must change. This reflects a broader shift from understanding disability as an individual vulnerability to understanding disability-related vulnerability as

⁶¹“California Foundation for Independent Living Centers (CFILC), et al. v. City of Oakland, et Al.,” *Disability Rights Advocates*, n.d., accessed August 21, 2026,

<https://dralegal.org/case/california-foundation-for-independent-living-centers-cfilc-et-al-v-city-of-oakland-et-al/>.

⁶²“Brooklyn Center for Independence of the Disabled (BCID), et al. v. Mayor Bloomberg, et Al.,” *Disability Rights Advocates*, n.d., accessed August 21, 2026,

<https://dralegal.org/case/brooklyn-center-for-independence-of-the-disabled-bcid-et-al-v-mayor-bloomberg-et-al/>.

something produced through inaccessible social and institutional structures, again reflecting the social model of disability.

Joy and Community Resilience

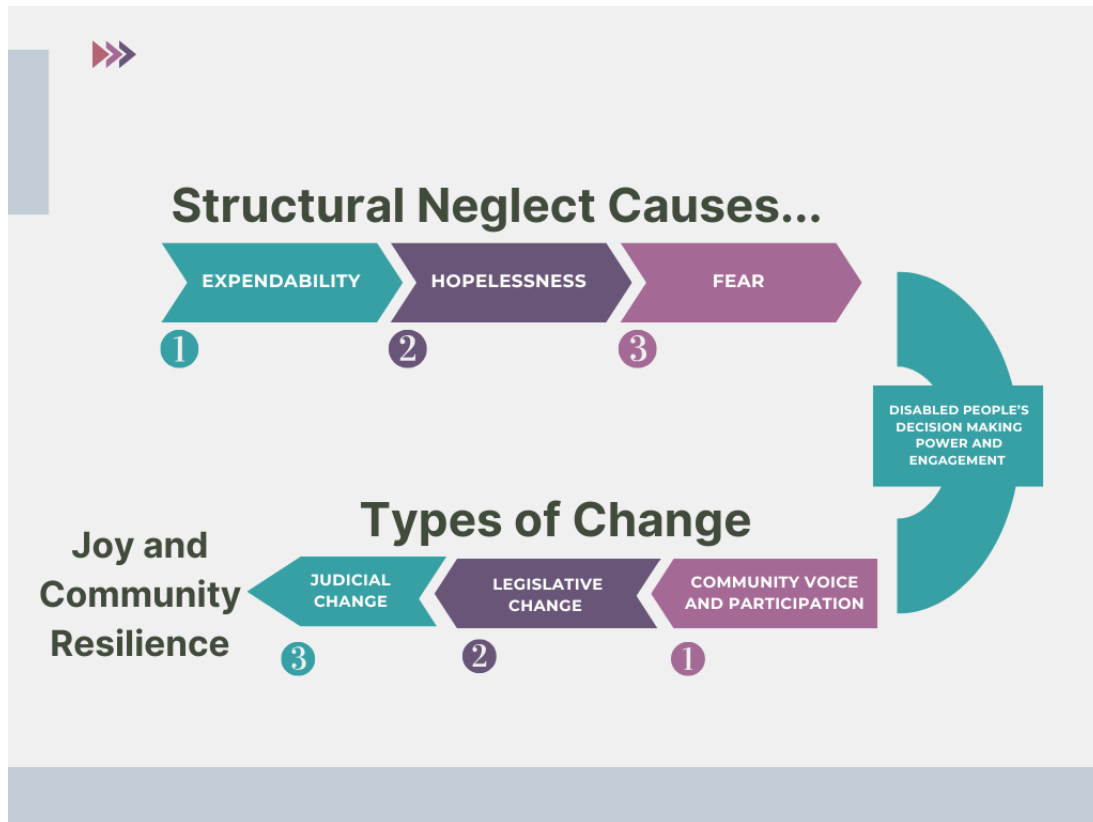
As my and others' research demonstrates, when disabled people are engaged in the decision-making process, they feel less expendable, and hopelessness and fear are alleviated. In turn, community voice and participation through legislative and judicial action increase, leading to greater joy and community resilience.

My interviewees talked extensively about how they envision a resilient community. They spoke about how disabled people are creative in times of crisis. One spoke of how disabled people used medical supplies such as adult diapers when the pipes froze during the 2021 Winter Storm Uri. Used to navigating a complex and unjust medical system, disabled people's adaptability and flexibility reveal themselves as critical tools in times of crisis.

When asked what brings her back to this difficult work, one interviewee said "finding the joy in the work, too, right? There's a term, joyful justice, and really, that's what it's like, is that there can be moments of joy." Joyful justice holds complexity; it is difficult to be disabled, and yet there are also beautiful moments of resistance and joy.

In conclusion, despite facing structural neglect that causes hopelessness and fear, disabled people maintain a communal desire to create change, whether it be through collective action, legislative policy, or legal advocacy. My interviewees talked about the importance of joy to sustain the work of creating a more accessible and just evacuation system. This leads me to my framework to understand the cause and effect of disability inclusion in emergency preparedness:

Figure 3: Causes and Effects of Disability Inclusion



The culmination of my findings can be found in Figure 3. As the figure shows, structural neglect has three big effects: increased feelings of expendability, hopelessness, and fear. However, when disabled people are engaged in the decision-making process, three types of change can be realized: increased community voice and participation, legislative change, and judicial change. When these changes are made, joy and community resilience thrive.

To summarize, I found that disabled people are routinely excluded from the emergency planning process despite having lived expertise. Despite this, I found that disabled community members routinely organize around emergency preparedness and evacuation. Additionally, joy and community resilience increase as participants feel included during the decision-making process. By taking ownership of their safety as a community, disabled people are challenging

common narratives that they are dependent on others for saving.

Recommendations

Given the findings from this project, I present four recommendations on ways to make evacuations more equitable for disabled people.

1. Expand funding to establish an Access and Functional Needs (AFN) Coordinator in every city in the State of California.

AFN coordinators ensure that people with disabilities, older adults, children, and others needing extra assistance are fully integrated into emergency preparedness, disaster response, and recovery plans. Currently, only a handful of states have an AFN coordinator. In California, Vance Taylor serves as the state's AFN coordinator under the California Governor's Office of Emergency Services. I propose expanding funding to establish an official AFN coordinator in every California city.

Having local emergency governance will ensure that emergency services can respond quickly and effectively to the needs of disabled residents. City coordinators should work closely with local agencies, including Centers for Independent Living, disability-led organizations, public health departments, fire departments, emergency management agencies, and transportation providers, to coordinate the health and safety of disabled residents before, during, and after an emergency.

Having a designated AFN coordinator would also create a clear point of accountability for disability access within local emergency management. Rather than relying on individual agencies or disabled community members to identify gaps after a disaster occurs, coordinators could proactively identify barriers and ensure that accessibility is incorporated into emergency

preparedness plans. Their responsibilities could include reviewing evacuation plans, coordinating accessible transportation and communication systems, identifying backup power resources, supporting accessible emergency shelters, and developing relationships with disabled residents and community organizations.

Importantly, AFN coordinators should not make decisions about disabled communities without their involvement. Coordinators should establish ongoing partnerships with disability-led organizations and create opportunities for disabled residents to participate directly in emergency planning. This would allow local governments to draw on the lived experience and expertise of disabled people when identifying gaps in existing emergency systems. The state should provide dedicated funding, training, and standardized guidance for city-level AFN coordinators while allowing communities to adapt their programs to local needs. Establishing an AFN coordinator in every city would create a consistent structure for disability-inclusive emergency planning across California while ensuring that local knowledge and community expertise remain central to preparedness and response.

2. Require meaningful representation of disabled people in emergency planning

Emergency management agencies should require disabled people and disability-led organizations to have a formal role in developing, reviewing, and updating disaster preparedness and evacuation plans. Rather than treating disabled people solely as recipients of emergency services, policymakers should recognize them as experts whose lived experiences can identify barriers that may otherwise be overlooked. This could include establishing permanent disability

advisory committees, requiring disability representation on emergency planning committees, and compensating disabled community members for their participation.

This recommendation addresses one of the central problems identified in my research: *policies are often created for disabled people without disabled people*. Meaningful representation would help ensure that evacuation routes, transportation systems, emergency shelters, communication systems, and power restoration plans account for diverse access needs before a disaster occurs.

3. Strengthen enforcement and accountability for disability access in emergency planning

Federal, state, and local governments should establish clear accessibility standards for emergency preparedness and create mechanisms to hold agencies accountable when those standards are not met. Although the ADA and other civil rights laws require public entities to provide meaningful access to emergency services, my research demonstrates that legal protections alone do not guarantee accessibility in practice. Emergency management agencies should therefore be required to conduct regular accessibility audits of evacuation plans, shelters, emergency communications, transportation systems, and disaster recovery programs. These audits should be conducted before disasters occur, with findings made publicly available and corrective actions required when barriers are identified. Funding could also be tied to compliance with accessibility requirements, creating an incentive for local governments to address access barriers proactively rather than waiting until a disaster exposes them.

4. Build a “Disability in All Policy” framework

The American Public Health Association's Health in All Policy framework encourages policymakers to consider the short- and long-term health impacts of all policy. The collaboration between urban planning, housing, and public health agencies has resulted in increased positive health outcomes.⁶³ The same could be true for disability more specifically. When housing, transportation, and health care entities collaborate on policy, there is an opportunity to shape the way cities run. A Disability in All Policy framework would call for disability to be a focal point in all policy conversations, prioritizing accessibility and ensuring disabled representation in policy conversations.

⁶³“Health in All Policies,” accessed August 21, 2026, <https://www.apha.org/topics-and-issues/health-in-all-policies>.

Conclusion

In the context of the disproportionately harmful impact of climate change-related disasters on disabled people's health and wellbeing, this project examined the ways that disabled people's lived experience and expertise can inform just and accessible evacuation policy and planning. The research found that disabled people are consistently excluded from policy-making conversations, leaving them without meaningful opportunities to shape the policies that directly affect their safety and survival. The findings demonstrate that the disproportionately negative impacts disabled people experience during disasters are not simply the result of individual impairments or inherent vulnerability. Rather, they are produced and intensified by inaccessible infrastructure, inadequate emergency planning, communication barriers, and the exclusion of disabled people's knowledge from decision-making processes. Additionally, when disabled people are involved in such policymaking and planning whether it be via community advocacy, legislative action, or legal action, disabled communities fare better.

As climate change continues to increase the frequency and severity of disasters, creating equitable emergency systems will become increasingly important. Policymakers must move away from approaches that treat disability as an individual problem and instead address the structural barriers that make disasters more dangerous for disabled people. Centering disabled people's lived experiences and expertise can help create emergency policies that are not only more accessible, but more just and effective for entire communities. Ultimately, disability-inclusive disaster policy is not simply about protecting a vulnerable population—it is about building systems that recognize the knowledge, agency, and resilience of disabled people and ensure that everyone has the opportunity to survive and recover from climate-related disasters.

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