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## Our Approach and Commitment to Addressing Diversity in the Disability Community

### Introduction

The Institute for Disability Research, Policy & Practice (IDRPP) is committed to creating an inclusive culture that promotes equity, diversity, and inclusion (EDI) in all its operations. In support of our mission, we ensure that everyone is treated with dignity and respect, and that all employees, volunteers, service recipients, and stakeholders feel valued and appreciated. This position paper outlines our stance on EDI, and the steps we are taking to achieve our goals.

This position paper is the first of a series of documents that will be prepared by the faculty and staff of the IDRPP over the coming years. The intent of this series is to outline an organizational view of the complex issues surrounding human diversity as it pertains to our overall mission in addressing disability issues. These documents will also outline strategies and approaches to increase our understanding of diversity issues as we carry out various activities in the disability community.

### Background and Context

Early drafts of this document were developed in 2022. During that period, enormous polarization of public opinion among American citizens was occurring on a host of civic issues. The politization of core American values that will define the future of our nation have been stewing over the past decade. Citizen anger, frustration, and impatience with this process has been manifested in many ways. Many aspects of diversity, including disability, have been weaponized in the battle between extreme political positions. Key efforts that have historically been used to address *diversity* issues such as affirmative action, voting rights, and civil rights are being challenged in the courts, legislatures, and the public square.

Community division over the nature and importance of diversity is not new, is not likely to be easily resolved, and is certainly beyond the scope of this position paper. However, working towards a better understanding of human diversity and how it affects the disability community is a timely and relevant issue that needs to be addressed. Failure to increase understanding of how the complexity of *diversity* affects the life experiences of citizens with disabilities is willful ignorance of fundamental aspects of the community.

### Definitions

- **Civil Rights:** Civil rights are the legal and moral guarantees that ensure individuals are treated equally and without discrimination under the law, regardless of race, ethnicity, gender, religion, sexual orientation, or

other characteristics. These rights are enshrined in national and international laws and are interpreted and defined by the courts.

- **Disability Community:** Disability community refers to the group of individuals who have a physical or mental impairment that limits their ability to carry out daily activities and participate in society. Defining “disability” is a legal, political, scientific, and economic exercise. We rely on the definitions outlined in the Americans with Disabilities Act and that is promoted by the United Nations Convention on Disability. The disability community works towards promoting awareness, inclusion, and equal opportunities for people with disabilities, while also advocating for their rights and dignity.
- **Diversity:** The term “diversity” means the practice of including the many communities, identities, races, ethnicities, backgrounds, abilities, cultures, and beliefs of the American people, including underserved communities.
- **IDRPP:** The Institute for Disability Research, Policy & Practice (IDRPP) is Utah’s federally designated University Center for Excellence in Developmental Disabilities (UCEDD). The IDRPP is an organizational unit of Utah State University (USU). The IDRPP receives operating funding through a variety of contracts, grants, legislative authorizations, and state/university funding. The various funding sources operate with a variety of guidelines, rules, regulations, and laws. Employees of the IDRPP are responsible for carrying out funded activities under the aegis of the various funding agencies.
- **Underserved Communities:** Underserved communities refers to populations sharing a particular characteristic, as well as geographic communities, who have been systematically denied a full opportunity to participate in aspects of economic, social, and civic life. In our context, this term includes individuals who belong to communities of color, such as Black and African American, Hispanic, and Latino, Native American, Alaska Native and Indigenous, Asian American, Native Hawaiian and Pacific Islander, Middle Eastern, and North African persons. It also includes individuals who belong to communities that face discrimination based on sex, sexual orientation, and gender identity (including lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, gender non-conforming, and non-binary [LGBTQIA+] persons); persons who face discrimination based on pregnancy or pregnancy-related conditions; parents; and caregivers. It also includes individuals who belong to communities that face discrimination based on their religion or disability; first-generation professionals or first-generation college students; individuals with limited English proficiency; immigrants; individuals who belong to communities that may face employment barriers based on age or former incarceration; persons who live in rural areas; veterans and military spouses; and persons otherwise adversely affected by persistent poverty, discrimination, or inequality. Individuals may belong to more than one underserved community and face intersecting barriers.

## Disability and Diversity

The history of disabilities in the United States is marked by a long and complex journey, from marginalization and discrimination to the recognition of the rights and dignity of individuals with disabilities. The United States has struggled with dealing with human diversity from its earliest days as evidenced by the debates of the 1776 Continental Congress and the 1787 Constitutional Convention. The legal and policy framework for defining, understanding, and appreciating diversity has been and continues to be hotly debated in federal and state legislatures today. Historically, *diversity* included but is not limited to issues related to religion, race, ethnicity, gender, and sexual orientation. Disability, although a recognized element of the community since the mid-1700s, did not become a *diversity* issue until after World War I and World War II when wounded veterans began to experience employment discrimination after returning home.

In the early history of the United States, individuals with disabilities were often seen as shameful and a burden on society. Most individuals with disabilities were institutionalized or segregated from the rest of the community. This was particularly true for people with intellectual and developmental disabilities, who were often subjected to cruel and inhumane treatment, including unethical research, eugenics-related policies (i.e., involuntary sterilization), and physical and sexual abuse.

In the late 20th century, the disability rights movement gained momentum, led by families and individuals with disabilities who demanded recognition and equal treatment under the law. In the 1960s and 1970s, a number of important laws were passed that helped improve the lives of individuals with disabilities, including the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 and the Education for All Handicapped Children Act of 1975, which ensured that children with disabilities had the right to a free and appropriate public education.

The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), passed in 1990, was a landmark piece of legislation that prohibited discrimination on the basis of disability in employment, housing, and other areas of public life. The ADA was a major step forward in the fight for disability rights and helped to ensure that individuals with disabilities had access to the same opportunities and benefits as everyone else.

In recent years, advances in technology and accessibility have improved the lives of individuals with disabilities in many ways. However, there is still much work needed to ensure that all individuals with disabilities have equal access to opportunities, resources, and support. Today, the disability rights movement continues to push for greater recognition of the rights and dignity of individuals with disabilities, and for a society that is truly inclusive and accessible to all.

Although the United States has had a long struggle with assuring equality among diverse groups, it has by no means been totally successful, nor is that struggle over. At best, the issues ebb and flow along with political and economic trends. Legislatures and courts continue to engage in back-and-forth efforts to codify and interpret laws and policies to eliminate discrimination based on diverse aspects of identity. This process is imperfect, decidedly political, and subject to the whims of public opinion.

Efforts in the United States to address diversity issues are in flux. They include a complex array of laws, legal precedents, operational policies, economic sanctions, and political arguments. Civil rights have also expanded into other arenas including work, education, housing, transportation, and health care. Addressing discrimination among diverse groups is always a challenge. It becomes even more complex when disability intersects other diversity factors. In spite of history and constantly shifting dynamics, there is a clear ethical imperative to develop new and innovative approaches that address EDI to ensure that all individuals have access to the supports they need to live and thrive in our communities and workplaces.

## **Moving Forward**

We are committed to addressing diversity issues as it applies to our activities in the disability community. As a part of USU, the IDRPP is committed to working within the legal, operational, and policy framework of USU and the State of Utah. We are committed to following the extant laws, policies, and practices of USU, the State of Utah, and the United States as we carry out our various activities and responsibilities, but we also recognize that there are situations where such laws, regulations, policies, and practices fall short in addressing diversity issues, especially as they pertain to disabilities. It is the ethical organizational obligation of the IDRPP to push the envelope of our capacity to effectively address diversity issues in the disability community.

## Building Equity, Division, and Inclusion Capacity

Building organizational capacity to address EDI requires creating, acquiring, and allocating resources to support the growth and success of diverse individuals within an organization's context and culture. This includes the following:

1. **Financial resources:** Securing funding and financial support from various sources to support the IDRPP's EDI operations and initiatives.
2. **Human resources:** Developing and retaining a diverse, talented, and committed workforce by providing professional development opportunities and creating a positive, diverse work culture.
3. **Knowledge resources** that include:
  - a. Developing and sharing EDI knowledge and expertise within the organization;
  - b. Providing regular EDI training, education, and professional development opportunities to employees to increase their skills and capabilities;
  - c. Developing multimodal accessible EDI materials; and
  - d. Maximizing opportunities for diverse interactions and learning such as discussion groups, book clubs, lectures, webinars, and community-of-practices settings.
4. **Reputational resources:** Building and maintaining a strong EDI reputation and image through effective communication and stakeholder engagement.
5. **Partnerships and networks:** Developing relationships with other organizations, stakeholders, and partners to tap into their resources and expertise.

By developing these resources, organizations can increase their capacity to meet the needs of our increasingly diverse communities and organizations, while remaining competitive in their field. In fact, research over the past 20 years demonstrates that diverse and equitable organizations have a competitive edge and tend to be more effective at meeting the needs of their constituents and stakeholders.

## Our Commitment

We acknowledge we must work earnestly to create courageous and supportive environments that address the traumatic past, promote the healing of wounds created by bias and discrimination, and build an equitable and just society.

**Commitment to Equity:** We believe in treating everyone fairly, regardless of ability, race, gender, age, religion, sexual orientation, or any other characteristic that may make someone unique. We are committed to eliminating systemic barriers that may prevent individuals from reaching their full potential. This includes ensuring that all employees, volunteers, and stakeholders have equal access to opportunities, resources, and support.

**Commitment to Diversity:** We value the diverse perspectives, experiences, and backgrounds that make our organization strong. We believe that having a diverse workforce, volunteer base, and stakeholder community allows us to better serve the communities we work with and find innovative solutions to the challenges we all face. We are committed to recruiting, retaining, and promoting individuals from diverse backgrounds and creating a workplace where all employees, volunteers, and stakeholders feel comfortable bringing their whole selves to work.

**Commitment to Inclusion:** We believe in creating a workplace culture where everyone feels valued, respected, supported, and integrated. This means we will provide training and resources to help employees, volunteers, and stakeholders understand the importance of EDI and develop the skills needed to create a welcoming and inclusive environment. We will also establish policies and procedures that promote inclusivity, sense of belonging, and hold all employees, volunteers, and stakeholders accountable for creating an inclusive culture.

**Commitment to Engagement:** We engage to effect change. Broader engagement, equitable representation, and deeper connection across social, cultural, and diverse groups will be intentional and purposeful. We adhere to the principle of “nothing about us, without us.”

**Commitment to Accountability:** All employees, volunteers, and stakeholders are expected to uphold policies and create a welcoming and inclusive environment.

## **Conclusion**

The IDRPP is committed to promoting EDI in all aspects of its operations. By working together, we can create a workplace where everyone feels valued, respected, and supported, and where we can achieve our mission more effectively.