

Defending Civil Rights at the Intersection of Disability and Immigration Under Escalating Federal Enforcement

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Immigrants with Disabilities and the Future of Independent Living

- CILs exist to remove barriers to independent living, not to screen people for political comfort.
- Immigrants with disabilities are disabled people.
- If a disabled person cannot access information, services, housing, transportation, legal support, access to healthcare, family stability, or safety because of immigration enforcement, that is an Independent Living issue.
- The IL movement has always been strongest when it challenged systems, not when it waited for permission.



What immigration enforcement does to disabled people and families

- Escalating immigration enforcement
- Fear and isolation in immigrant communities
- Disabled people and families losing access to care, safety, and services
- CILs have a strong role to play in protecting rights



Immigration Enforcement is a Disability Justice Issue

- It disables people.
- It deepens existing disabilities.
- It separates people from care.
- It creates fear as an access barrier.
- It excludes disabled immigrants from services and safety.



Core values of the Independent Living Movement

Independent Living is about:

- Self-determination
- Community living
- Peer support
- Access
- Systems advocacy
- Freedom from segregation and institutional control



Who do we recognize as “*our community*”?

- Disabled people who speak English?
- Disabled people with documentation?
- Disabled people who know how to find us?
- Disabled people who trust service systems?
- Or all disabled people in our communities?



Serving immigrants with disabilities is not mission expansion.

It is mission correction.

When CILs serve immigrants with disabilities, we are not stepping outside the Independent Living mission. We are returning to it. We are asking whether our promise of community living applies only to the disabled people who are easiest to reach, or whether it applies to disabled people pushed to the margins by language, race, poverty, immigration status, fear, and state violence.



What We Heard Through our Webinar Series

Webinar 1: Our Core Argument

- Immigration enforcement as a disability justice issue
- Civil rights violations
- Movement silos

Webinar 2: Family Impacts

- Family separation
- Care disruption
- Fear
- Community harm



What Immigration Enforcement Disrupts

- Caregiving
- Medication and treatment
- Communication access
- Housing stability
- Transportation
- Income
- Legal support
- Education
- Family integrity
- Healthcare Access
- Trust in public systems



Fear as an Access Barrier

Fear can prevent people from:

- Seeking services
- Going to school
- Accessing health care
- Reporting abuse
- Requesting accommodations
- Appearing in court
- Calling emergency services
- Participating in community life

A CIL that wants to serve immigrant communities has to address not only physical access or program access, but also trust.



Family Separation as a Disability Justice Issue

Family separation can mean:

- Loss of caregivers
- Loss of income
- Loss of transportation
- Loss of communication support
- Loss of emotional regulation support
- Crisis for disabled children, parents, and elders
- Increased risk of institutionalization or neglect



Disabled Parents, Disabled Children, and Mixed-Status Families

Impacts appear across the family as:

- Disabled parents afraid to seek services
- Disabled children losing caregivers
- Disabled elders losing support
- U.S. citizen children affected by a parent's detention or deportation
- Mixed-status families navigating impossible choices



Detention as an Access Crisis

Immigration detention raises disability concerns around:

- Physical access
- Medical neglect
- Mental health trauma
- Communication access
- Reasonable modifications
- Isolation
- Legal participation
- Continuity of care
- The loss of any of these rights has cost disabled lives



Civil Rights Do Not Disappear During Immigration Enforcement

We are not providing legal advice today. But we are grounding this conversation in disability civil rights principles that matter whenever disabled people interact with public systems, federally funded systems, enforcement systems, courts, detention, and services.

Immigration status is often used politically to justify exclusion. But disability does not disappear in enforcement contexts. Access needs do not disappear. Communication needs do not disappear. The need for reasonable modifications does not disappear.



Civil rights frame: ADA, Section 504, and disability discrimination

These laws create disability access obligations in many contexts, including public entities and federally funded programs.

Disability rights principles include:

- Equal access
- Reasonable modifications
- Effective communication
- Nondiscrimination
- Accessible programs and services
- Protection from disability-based exclusion



The Immigration System Is Often Built Against Disabled People

Disabled immigrants may face barriers related to:

- Medical inadmissibility frameworks
- Poverty and sponsorship requirements
- Language access
- Legal complexity
- Trauma
- Detention conditions
- Lack of accommodations
- Ableist assumptions about dependency and worth



War, Migration, and Disabled Bodies

Disability and migration are shaped by:

- War
- State violence
- Poverty
- Climate disaster
- Political instability
- Dangerous migration routes
- Detention and confinement
- Labor exploitation
- Lack of access to care



Why Our Movements Have Worked in Silos

Disability justice and immigrant justice have often been separated by:

- Funding structures
- Different policy languages
- Lack of shared relationships
- Race and language barriers
- Service eligibility confusion
- Fear of political risk
- Narrow definitions of “disability issues”
- Narrow definitions of “immigration issues”



The Cost of Working in Silos

When we work in silos:

- Disabled immigrants remain invisible
- Immigrant organizations lack disability access support
- CILs miss entire communities
- Families fall through gaps
- Advocacy campaigns are weaker
- Systems avoid accountability



Common Concerns from CILs

CILs may ask themselves:

- Are we allowed to serve undocumented people?
- What if we do not have immigration expertise?
- What if we do not have language capacity?
- What if funders question this work?
- What if this feels too political?
- What if we are already stretched thin?



CILs do not have to do everything. But CILs can do something.

Starting points:

- Build partnerships
- Remove unnecessary barriers
- Improve language access
- Learn referral pathways
- Support disability accommodations
- Show up in coalition
- Make welcome visible



The question is not whether this work feels risky. The question is who carries the risk when we do not act.

It may feel risky for organizations to talk about immigration enforcement. But the risk already exists. Disabled immigrants carry it. Families carry it. Children carry it. People in detention carry it. People afraid to seek services carry it.

If CILs define safety as silence, then we have to ask: safety for whom?



Playing It Safe Has Never Built Justice

The disability rights movement was built by people who challenged:

- Institutions
- Segregation
- Inaccessible public systems
- Paternalism
- Exclusion
- Low expectations
- Rules designed without us



What CILs Can Bring to This Work

CILs bring:

- Disability access expertise
- Peer support
- Independent living skills
- Systems advocacy
- Benefits and services navigation
- Community transition knowledge
- Accommodation advocacy
- Local relationships
- Credibility as disability-led organizations

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What Immigrant Justice Partners May Bring

- Community trust
- Language capacity
- Legal referral knowledge
- Know-your-rights infrastructure
- Cultural knowledge
- Rapid response networks
- Family preparedness tools
- Organizing experience



Models That Are Already Possible

1. Partnership and referral model
2. Disability access support model
3. Family stability model
4. Know-your-rights accessibility model
5. Emergency planning model
6. Coalition advocacy model

There is no single model every CIL has to adopt. Rural CILs, urban CILs, border-state CILs, and CILs in states with different political climates may begin differently. But there are clear entry points.



Examples from the Field

- Cross-training between disability and immigrant rights organizations
- Accessible know-your-rights events
- Emergency plans for disabled family members
- Referrals between CILs and legal service providers
- Multilingual outreach
- Disability access consultation for immigrant-serving groups
- Coalition advocacy on detention, family separation, language access, and public benefits



What CILs Can Do in the Next 30 Days

- Identify three immigrant-serving organizations in your area
- Review intake forms for unnecessary immigration-related questions
- Add welcoming language to your website and materials
- Create a basic immigration legal referral list
- Ask partners what disability access barriers they see
- Identify top community languages
- Train staff on fear as an access barrier



What CILs Can Build in the Next Year

- Build formal partnerships
- Host cross-trainings
- Translate core materials
- Develop emergency planning tools
- Include immigrants with disabilities in strategic plans
- Apply for funding focused on underserved communities
- Join immigrant justice coalitions
- Recruit immigrant disabled leaders into advisory spaces



Reflection Questions for the Audience

Ask yourself:

- Who is not finding our CIL?
- Who does not trust us yet?
- What communities have we treated as outside our mission?
- What barriers are we creating without realizing it?
- What partnerships do we need?
- What risk are we avoiding, and who pays the price?



Immigrants with disabilities are not outside our mission. They are a test of whether we mean what we say.

The Independent Living movement has always insisted that disabled people belong in the community. But community includes people who are undocumented. It includes mixed-status families. It includes people afraid to open the door, afraid to go to court, afraid to take their child to school, afraid to seek medical care, afraid to ask for help.



If our movement is only visible to disabled people who already trust systems, speak English, have stable documentation, and know how to find us, then we are not reaching the whole community.

Immigrants with disabilities are not outside our mission. They are a test of whether we mean what we say.

The next chapter of Independent Living must be multilingual, multiracial, cross-movement, and brave enough to confront the systems that disable and disappear our people.

They are already our people. The question is whether our movement will meet the moment and act like it.



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