

Hand in Hand: The Domestic Employers Association Organizing within Disability Communities

Who We Are

caring communities that recognize our interdependence

Founded in 2010, Hand in Hand is a national network of employers of nannies, housecleaners, home attendants, and our families and allies. We share the conviction that dignified and respectful working conditions benefit workers and employers, and together we envision a future where all people live in caring communities that recognize our interdependence. We organize a broad range of employer communities, with dedicated attention on disabled employers—including those who receive in-home support through Medicaid and Medicare, private-pay employers of personal attendants, and people who have care collectives made up of family, friends, and care workers. As a diverse network that includes disabled employers, HiH recognizes how the workers in this industry support the dignity, respect, self-determination, and independent living of disabled people*, seniors, those with chronic illness or temporary injuries—members of all our families. We know that fair labor practices, basic protections, living wages, and a deep respect for care work are critical parts of fighting for justice for disabled people.

intersecting experiences, connected communities

The media, politicians and institutional leaders often portray our communities as separate, distinct, and in opposition to one another; but we know that the experiences and identities of domestic workers and disabled people intersect. Many domestic workers become disabled on the job, by age, by lack of access to healthcare, or as a result of forced migration. Many disabled people are immigrants, people of color, women, and workers. There is often not a clear distinction between care-givers and care-receivers as well; many disabled employers of domestic workers are also care-givers for family members, partners, or members of their community. Disabled employers also have a range of different relationships to attendant services and to the care work industry, as do domestic workers. Honoring our intersections and the points of connection in who we are is a critical part of seeking justice for domestic workers in the coming years.

Our Relationship to Disability

sharing disability history, challenging institutional bias

In our work to improve employment relationships and collaborate with organized domestic workers, HiH has acknowledged the need to understand the specific histories and struggles of disabled communities. Knowing these histories gives context for disabled peoples' relationships to accessible and affordable housing, independent living, and to labor and care work in particular. Among the most pressing concerns are consistent cuts to federal and state funding—including Medicaid and Medicare. This makes it more difficult for disabled employers to afford personal assistance and direct care in their homes. Because there is no national policy for consumer-driven attendant services, disabled people are often without concrete options or resources to cover in-home services and care. This increases the likelihood that we are forced to live in institutions as opposed to self-determined living spaces in our communities. The current economic climate, in which social services and protections are less and less available to many marginalized groups, is made worse by discriminatory attitudes against disabled people. Negative cultural assumptions about our community persist: that people with disabilities are dependent, unfit to care for themselves, and are better off segregated in medical and penal settings. They rely on false perceptions of disability as an individual condition or a problem to be overcome by medical authorities or care-givers—as opposed to seeing disability as one form of human difference. Such

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assumptions tend to enforce medical models of care instead of community-based ones; they view care-giving of disabled people as an exceptional task, one to which formal employment relations do not apply. Moreover, these myths about disabled people are built into government policies and funding structures, resulting in institutional bias. This means that funding is directed towards medicalized care in institutional settings instead of towards attendant services in peoples' homes. Institutional bias continues to force many disabled people—especially those without class or race privilege, citizenship status, and other forms of access—to live in nursing homes, hospitals, and prisons.

challenging the systematic devaluing of domestic work

HiH approaches these problems disabled communities face as problems that simultaneously confront domestic workers—both disabled and nondisabled. Threats to the main public funding sources for in-home care have a profoundly negative impact on domestic workers, whose livelihood depends on a living wage. Negative stereotypes about immigrants and about women of color have led to the devaluing of labor seen as “women’s work” as well as a general failure to recognize their many, crucial contributions to this country. Racism and anti-immigrant sentiment have also justified a long series of violent attacks on unions and on immigrants, including disabled people. These prejudices have been built into the legal and judicial system in many ways, namely through the exclusion of domestic workers from labor laws. This deprives domestic workers of the most basic rights and protections; it deprives disabled employers the benefits of access to a stable, protected, and regulated workforce. It also results in obstacles to career advancement and training that is consumer directed and meets the needs of disabled employers. The systematic devaluing of care work and the related exploitation and exclusion of domestic workers is thus deeply related to the oppression of people with disabilities.

rejecting medical models of care

Disabled activists have long-resisted a medical model of care that sees disabled people and seniors as patients or victims who need help or should be managed. We challenge representations of our communities as merely consumers of services or care. Instead we point to the richness and diversity that disabled people, like domestic workers, bring to society and, indeed, to social movements. This vision of care is rooted in being able to make choices, to have good quality, affordable and sustainable models to choose from, to train personal attendants and care workers, and for disabled people to be seen as knowledge holders in that process. It also assumes that domestic workers make up a legitimate and valuable workforce, and affirms that their formal relationship with disabled and other employers should be recognized and regulated.

honoring disabled peoples' resistance

We enter national conversations about domestic workers' rights from a rooted knowledge of resistance by disabled people, domestic workers, and allies. It was within the context of civil rights struggles that the independent living movement waged a powerful battle for disabled people to have the choice to live at home and in their communities. With agitation for deinstitutionalization, the passage of federal policy, and the Supreme Court Olmstead decision, disability rights offers a long legacy of struggle for agency, independence, and affordable attendant services and care. Likewise, disabled peoples' ongoing fight for access to public accommodations and against discrimination in housing, education, and employment demonstrate the importance this community has placed on being able to work and live in self-determined ways. HiH also looks to more nascent expressions of disability justice that emphasize interdependence, coalition, and the intersecting experiences and identities that shape disabled peoples' lives. Disabled queer people of color have given critical voice to the need for building community support structures together as opposed to turning to the state as the primary solution to social problems. This politics of interdependence and collective care speaks to the reality of

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the ways we all depend on one another to thrive. It rejects ableist, racist, and classist demands to “pull yourself up by your bootstraps” and exposes the myth that anyone has ever succeeded on their merits alone. Disability justice invites us to learn about and appreciate the many ways that disabled people imagine and create diverse communities of care.

critical partners in transforming care work

Disabled communities are therefore critical partners to domestic workers in transforming what care means and how it works in this country. They are much needed allies in the struggle to pass Domestic Workers Bills of Rights across the country, and in the many efforts of the National Domestic Workers Alliance (NDWA) and other grassroots campaigns to organize and build power for nannies, housekeepers, and caregivers. Domestic workers seek autonomy and safety in their workplaces—sometimes also their homes. They seek fair labor practices and basic protections against exploitation, abuse, and trafficking. They demand the right to organize against poor working conditions and systematic exclusion, and they work to achieve visibility and recognition for their labor. These objectives value the well-being of disabled workers and resonate with some of the major goals of organized struggles for disability rights.

creating change through coalition

Because domestic workers confront multiple forms of oppression, forming coalitions across racial-ethnic groups, types of jobs, identities, and communities has been a powerful strategy for creating change. The national campaign, Caring Across Generations (CAG), offers an example of one such coalition. CAG seeks to engage domestic workers, organized labor, disabled people, and seniors as partners in transforming care through a bold policy platform: creating millions of new quality jobs, access to training and career ladders, affordability measures and other supports for individuals and families, and a path to citizenship. As a member of CAG’s leadership team, HiH affirms the vision of interdependence of these communities. We acknowledge our reliance on each other to achieve true change for any one of us. Building on the momentum gained by recent victories for domestic workers, HiH was founded in this new moment of domestic worker organizing. We recognize that analysis of disability is sorely needed in order to build a more inclusive and intersectional politics of immigrant and workers’ rights, racial and economic justice. We also see the importance of disabled people holding leadership positions in those movements. By organizing within disabled communities in solidarity with domestic workers, HiH seeks to bring their much-needed insights, experience, and vision to the shared problems facing our communities and our movements.

Our Shared Values

recognizing our shared struggles for access

In building coalition, HiH has grown our understanding of how disabled people and domestic workers share certain historic struggles: lack of access to public services, resources, and support, and routine experiences of isolation, abuse, denial of citizenship and civil rights, and the devaluing of our work and our lives. Movements for domestic workers and disability rights both work to build strong community, develop leadership of those marginalized in mainstream movements, organize across difference, and fight for access: to jobs, income, healthcare, housing, education, and safety. Alongside both NDWA and disabled activists across the country, HiH places a high premium on autonomy and self-determination, and we are also rooted in a politics of interdependence and collective care. By insisting that the labor of attendants and in-home care workers is

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valuable and serious work, domestic workers also insist on the essential value of disabled people and seniors, affirming our demands for affordable, quality attendant services and care work in our homes.

supporting the workforce that supports us

Disabled employers thus have a vested personal interest in supporting the very workforce that supports us; domestic workers sustain disabled people as individuals and as a community indebted to the legacy of civil rights movements we hold so dear. We recognize that a highly valued and well-treated workforce is more stable and effective in their work, and would therefore provide better services to disabled people. To that end we advocate for the expansion of funding for disabled employers, based on our belief that they deserve a high quality of care and that workers deserve high quality jobs. We know that workers cannot get better jobs or higher wages if the government does not protect and expand services for disabled people and seniors. We also support the expansion of labor standards and guidelines, which would offer disabled employers tools for navigating challenging situations that arise in isolated and often intimate work settings. In addition, attendants are often disabled themselves; in improving the quality of their jobs, we support our peers.

practicing solidarity, valuing collective access

As targets of multiple forms of oppression, disabled people have much to gain by challenging the racism, sexism, classism, and ableism that devalue domestic work. We believe that freedom and independence for disabled people cannot rely on the exploitation of workers—largely immigrants and women of color—nor does it justify low-wage jobs with poor working conditions, little training, and no protections. For that reason, HiH defies the fears that there aren't enough resources to go around. We reject the argument that access for one group is more important than for another because this pits our communities against one another. Instead, HiH supports a vision of transformed community that values collective access. This means understanding the problems individuals face are part of bigger, systemic issues and that the solutions we create must be imagined and practiced together. It means accessible workplaces and homes go hand in hand with accessible jobs and care. It means acknowledging that every person needs these things in order to thrive, and that we all have a stake in building a society that cares for everyone—families, children, workers, employers, seniors, people with disabilities, and every member of our communities. It means building movements that are accessible and that act in solidarity with one another. As an organization that includes disabled employers and as a national partner to the National Domestic Workers Alliance, we seek to find and deepen our points of connection and to continue building coalition on the basis of our shared values.

Our Commitments

growing deep, transformative community

We commit to create space for multiple communities to voice their concerns and needs around attendant services and care work. In engaging our members about employment practices, we commit to listening deeply and to supporting people in improving those practices. We strive to sustain our collaborations across the many communities we organize in both moments of ease and tension. We recognize that coalition building is a long-term process, and we commit to growing deep, transformative community that cuts across individual issues and expands our vision for social change to include everyone. When domestic workers and disabled employers work together to move our communities to action around our shared struggles—recognizing our points of connection but also our experiences of difference—we are transformed by that process. HiH has learned that organizing

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within disabled communities requires us to engage difficult questions about how we do the work we do, and what kinds of access and privilege are often taken for granted in movement work. We must always consider the spaces where we meet, the language we use, the expectations we have for participation, the assumptions we make about one another, and the resources we need in order to include all our members and partners. HiH commits to continue that learning, and to look to the leadership of disabled employers in creating accessible ways to join the struggle for domestic workers' rights. In making these commitments, HiH seeks to put our shared values to work, to practice true interdependence—in our homes, our communities, and our movements.

taking action together

In our efforts to support domestic workers and improve employment relationships, HiH strives to embody a deep commitment to our shared values. We maintain our strong commitment to domestic workers' fight for inclusion in labor laws. This will provide new and innovative ways to grant domestic workers rights specific to their industry—such as an uninterrupted sleep, use of kitchen facilities to prepare meals, or alternative and community-based bargaining models. We commit to advocate for a path to legalization, for better quality jobs and higher wages, and for the passage of local and federal policy that further protects domestic workers. We also maintain our commitment to centralize the issue of affordability, naming the widespread struggle for disabled people and seniors to access sustainable, quality care. We commit to raise the issue of institutional bias and to voice our resistance to institutionalization of the most marginalized members of our communities. We commit to act in solidarity with the call from disability rights to protect and expand Medicaid and Medicare. We commit to advocate for domestic workers' rights to training and career opportunities, and to insist that such training should not require transfer into medicalized work. To that end we support disabled employers in developing and providing training to workers. In holding these commitments, we aim to honor disabled people, seniors, domestic workers, and all those impacted by the caregiving industry.

** Disability communities, and Hand in Hand members, use different language to talk about ourselves and our communities. Some of us prefer "people with disabilities," known as people first language and is common in the disability rights movement, though there are diverse preferences. This highlights the person, for whom disability is one characteristic. Others of us prefer "disabled people," which marks disability as a primary part of identity, and the basis for forming community.*

This document was written by Hand in Hand member Lezlie Frye with on-going feedback, editing and contributions from Hand in Hand members and staff involved in this work.