

Accessibility considerations for resuming in-person conferences

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U.S. DEPARTMENT OF
ENERGY

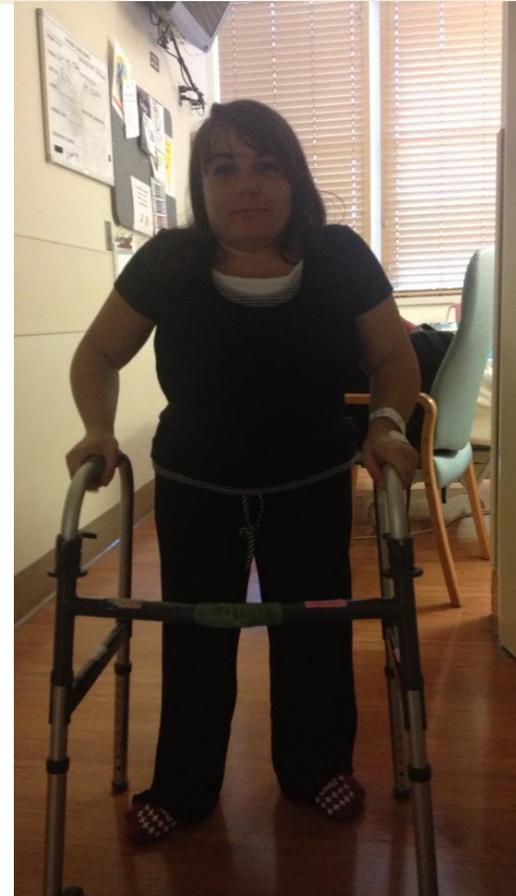
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A bit of context about your presenter



- Lead Scientist at SLAC, working on Fermi-LAT and LZ Dark Matter experiment
- Born in Italy, educated in Italy and France (moved to the USA in January 2006)
- Skeletal Dysplasia diagnosis:
 - Very short stature
 - Severely limited mobility
 - 13 surgeries and counting
 - Sporadic cane/walker user



Remote Conferences during the Pandemic



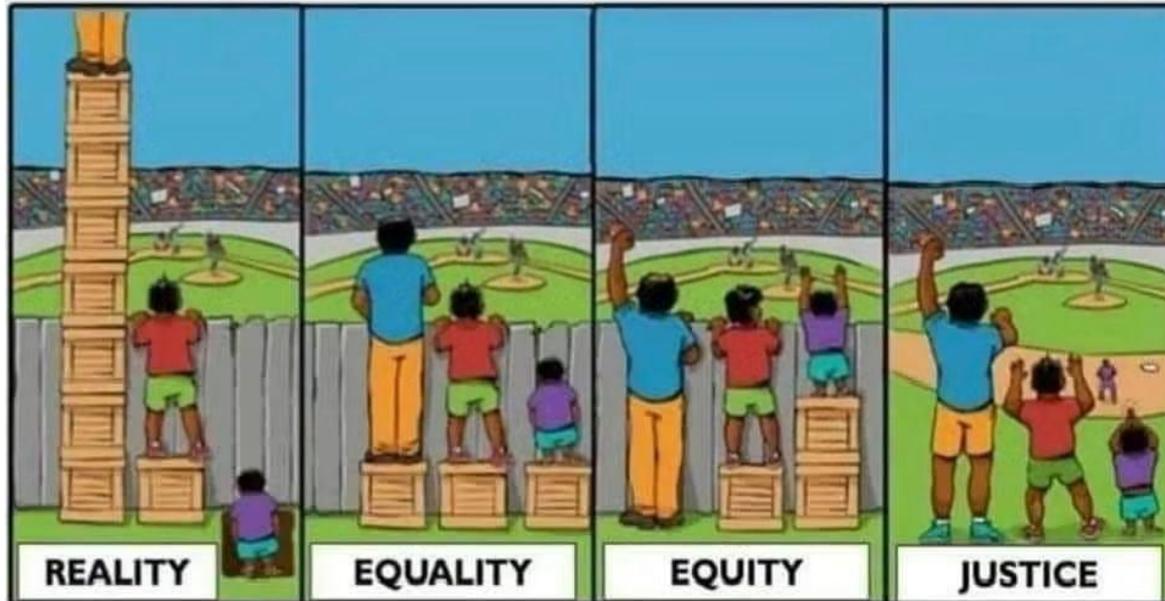
- Travel restrictions hindered all in-person interactions
- Increasing the isolation of disabled folks, who were already cutoff from services and (re)habilitation facilities
- However, lack of travel has made it a lot easier to attend conferences, meetings and workshops all over the world

Why should we care if we are not disabled?



- For starter, all humans experience “disability” in the first couple of years of their lives (they cannot walk, talk, eat or get dressed on their own, etc.)
- Most humans experience illness and disability towards the end of their lives. Many physicists are still actively doing science when this happens
- 26% of adults in the US experience some type of disability (specifically, 13.7% are mobility impaired)

Another way of looking at it...



One gets **more than** is needed, while the other gets **less than** is needed. Thus, a huge disparity is created.

The assumption is that **everyone benefits from the same supports**. This is considered to be equal treatment.

Everyone gets the support they need, which produces equity.

All 3 can see the game without supports or accommodations because **the cause(s) of the inequity was addressed**. The systemic barrier has been removed.

Accessible spaces make the experience more enjoyable for everyone

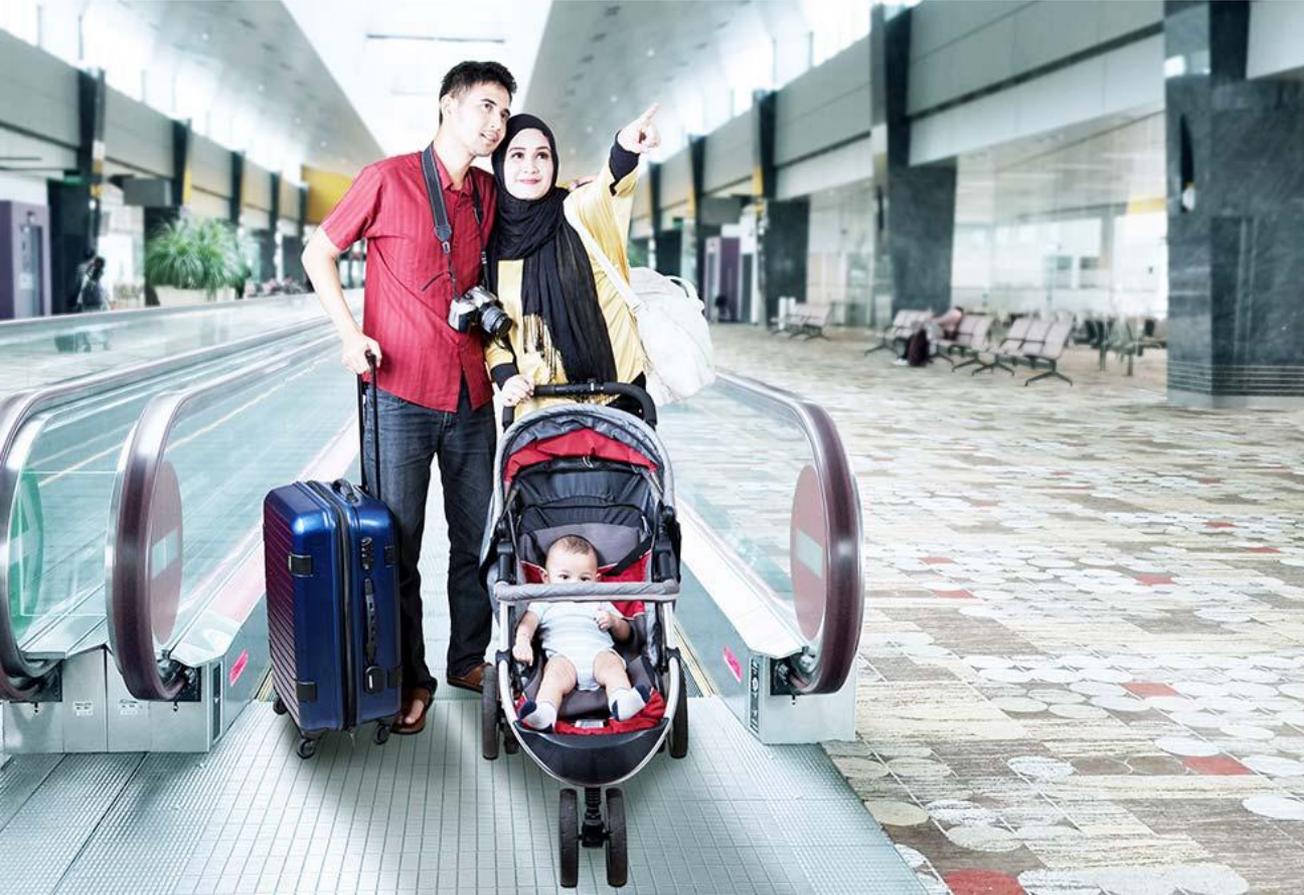
Accessible spaces are for everyone!



**US airports are
ADA compliant!**

Accessible spaces are for everyone!

SLAC



Accessibility in Snowmass: Survey (2020)

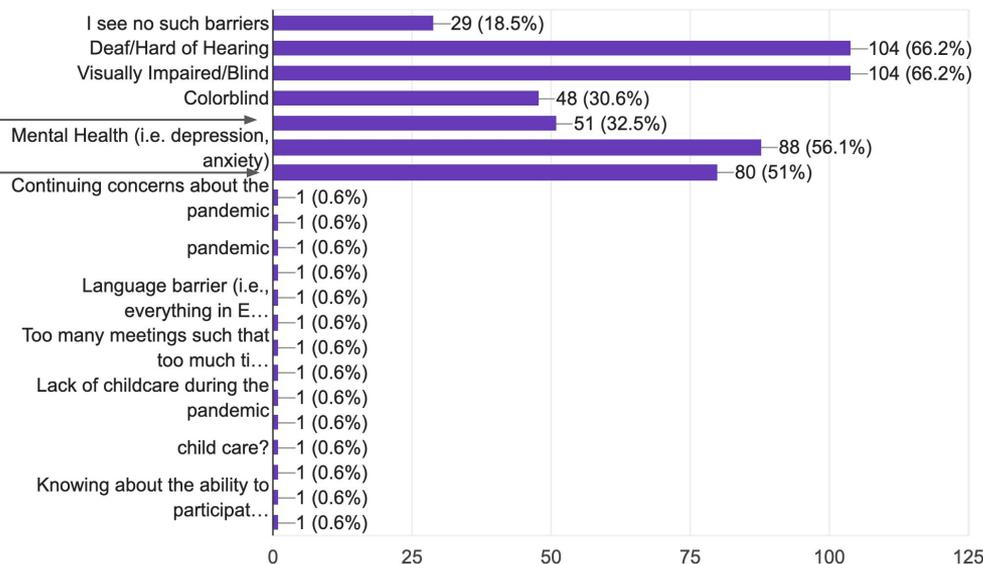
- Survey organized by Community Frontier, DEI subgroup

Physically impaired
Lack of financial support

- 157 responses collected through August 1, 2020
- Full results and recommendations available [at this document](#)

Is there a particular accessibility issue that you think can create a pragmatic barrier to participation in snowmass? [NOTE : This is a gener... the process, not asking necessarily about *you*.]

157 responses



Doesn't the ADA solve all accessibility issues?

- *“Every event ends up being different, which is quite a challenge. Even domestic events, which nominally should conform to ADA requirements, sometimes do not have (and/or are not willing to acquire) funds to support necessary accommodations, requiring bailouts from the employing institution, larger organizations or funding agencies, or the supervisor's private research funds. International events are more consistent in being unwilling to provide funding for accommodations.”* (from a survey respondent)
- So, although the ADA is a great achievement for the US, in our community it does not always come to bear in the way that one would hope it should.
- Moreover, **there are many types of physical disabilities beyond those that involve the use of a wheelchair.** We must take into account the needs of those including, but not limited to:
 - People who use wheelchairs
 - People who are limited in their walking speed or distance
 - People for whom standing for long periods is not possible
 - People who, due to chronic pain, require different seating than standard furniture
 - People who have short stature
 - People who are have upper-extremity disabilities, making it difficult to lift or carry objects

Conference attendance: a personal perspective



- Most receptions are “stand-around and mingle”. This is a no-no for wheelchair users (lack of conversation at eye level) and limited-mobility folks (we need sit down at some point and end up spending the evening alone in a corner; likewise for people with upper-extremity disabilities).
- We can hire a bus to ferry people around, but if I have to call someone asking to schedule a ride for me at a certain hour, there is extra work that I have to do to attend a session. The barrier for being driven around should be comparable to the barrier for just walking over there.
- People tend to be gracious if I ask them to skip in line at lunch or to hand me something I can’t reach. But not everyone is comfortable asking, and the whole point of accessibility is that it’s a human right, not a favor.

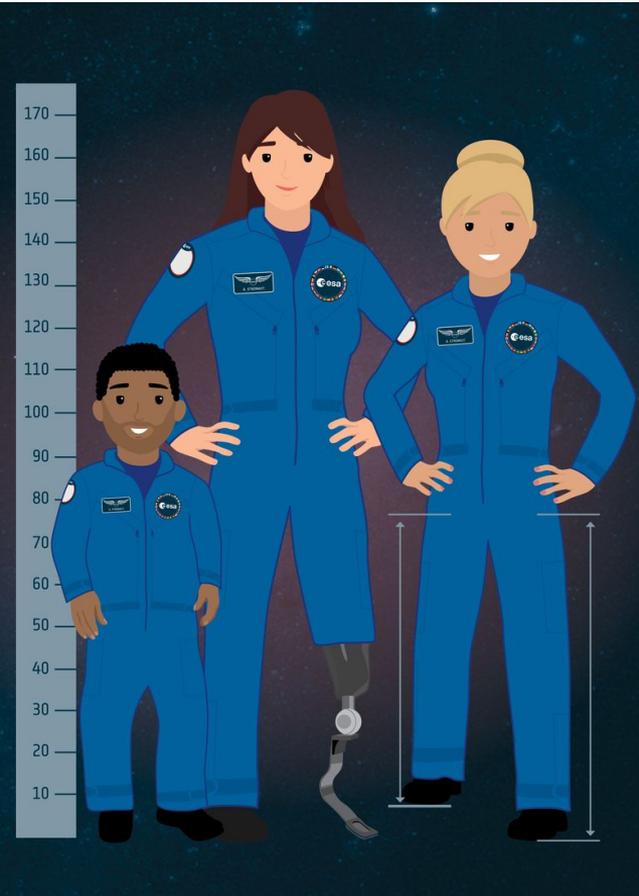
Event recommendations: meeting rooms

- Meeting room layout:
 - Arrange seating within rooms such that bags and coats can be placed without blocking the aisles.
 - Survey participants ahead of time about their needs for modified furniture and organize the provision of this furniture.
 - Provide at least a modest amount of seating with desks/tables in each room, reserved for those who need it most.
 - Set up a designated chat-with-the-speaker-after-their-talk area with seating just outside each meeting room, and have it be the norm that discussion happens seated in that area.
- Moving around during the event:
 - As much as possible, having conference events at a single building.
 - Have a bus always available to transport people between events; next best is to have a convenient app for summoning a bus; the worst is to have to step out of the session to call for a bus on the phone. The bus needs to be a kneeling bus.
 - Accessible paths can be sometimes much longer than non-accessible paths: survey accessible paths and accommodate the event schedule to allow ample time for transfers using the longer accessible paths.
- Survey the event location multiple times:
 - During the room-booking and agenda-setting process: ensure that accessible paths exist, make maps of these paths to post to the website and to distribute to attendees, and make estimates of the transit times needed to get between events.
 - Ahead of the event (weeks to days): ensure that building entrances, hallways, internal doorways, and door-opening buttons are functioning correctly, and are not obstructed by furniture or construction work; post additional signage.

Event recommendations: lines, meals, and hotels

- Lines at check-in, coffee, and meals:
 - It's good to have lots of stations rather than a small number of long lines.
 - Having seating in the waiting area is helpful for people who can't stand for a long time.
 - For coffee and meals, there should be one or more “accessible” line (with low tables etc.).
 - Having a designated handicap line can be helpful, but others might prefer not to use such a line.
- Meals, coffee breaks, reception:
 - Food should be catered or available in an in-house food court, not requiring walking to restaurants.
 - Buffet-style food should be served from multiple stations (see above), or food should be served at tables.
 - At least some seating should be available at all breaks and social events.
 - At the reception/dinner, have things arranged and spaced well enough that people in wheelchairs or with mobility restrictions can move around to at the very least their table, the restroom, and places to get food.
- Hotels and on-site accommodations:
 - Make sure there are rooms available with beds accessible to people with short stature and people in wheelchairs (e.g., not most dorm beds). Make sure this is advertised appropriately at the time of registration.
 - If possible, have hotel rooms available within walking distance of the main conference site. The next best option is to have shuttles available on-call, and the next best option after that is to have them at scheduled times.

Conclusions and acknowledgements



- Accessibility is not rocket science, but just in case...
 - The [Inspiration4 mission](#) (scheduled for September 2021) will bring a cancer survivor with an artificial joint to space
 - ESA is currently recruiting the first ever astronaut class to include people with disabilities ([parastronaut feasibility project](#))
 - If we can bring disabled folks to space, we can certainly organize fully accessible scientific events
 - This is not just a matter of justice and equity, but is a favor to our future selves (who will want to attend conferences in their 70s)
- Acknowledgements:
 - These slides are based on my personal experience and several inspiring conversations with: Sam Meehan, Elise Novitski, Amber Roepe, Giordon Stark, Lauren Tompkins, Sarah Tuttle, Ruth Van De Water and the DPF Ethics Advisory Committee