

TO: CNN
FROM: The American Association of People with Disabilities (AAPD)
RE: Disabled Voters Are Ready for an Accessible Debate
DATE: June 11, 2024

Dear CNN Debate Team,

On behalf of the American Association of People with Disabilities, the National Association of the Deaf, and the collective of undersigned national, state, and regional disability organizations, we are reaching out to CNN to urge you to ensure that the upcoming June 27, 2024, Presidential Debate is accessible for disabled viewers and includes information relevant to this critical voting bloc.

People with disabilities make up almost a [quarter](#) of the American public, and there are nearly 40 million eligible voters with disabilities whose lived experiences as disabled people inform their needs and priorities as voters in various ways. In 2022, [15.8 million people with disabilities](#) voted in the United States midterm elections, a [1.6 percentage point increase from 2018](#).

During the 2024 presidential election cycle, and in every election cycle, the media plays an essential role in helping voters make informed decisions. Presidential debates are a long-standing tradition within U.S. elections and provide a vital opportunity for voters to learn about candidate's approaches to key policy issues. Historically, televised presidential debates have not included ASL interpreters in the primary broadcast, have experienced problems with captioning, and have neglected to incorporate disability-related topics in questions asked to candidates. CNN can make history by presenting the June 27 debate with accessibility in mind and including the disability community. Disabled voters deserve access to the same information that nondisabled voters are receiving.

In this letter, we have three recommendations and are including guidance on each:

- 1) Ensure Disabled Voters Can Access Your Information
- 2) Ensure Disabled Voters Can Make Informed Decisions
- 3) Follow Inclusive and Respectful Best Practices

ENSURE DISABLED VOTERS CAN ACCESS YOUR INFORMATION

I. Content Accessibility

- A. Ensure effective communication by including visible qualified American Sign Language interpreters (preferably certified Deaf interpreters), either through on-stage visibility or a Picture-in-Picture interpreter ratio of at least 16:9, as well as accurate live captioning on all livestreams.
 1. This includes ensuring that interpreters and captions are displayed on the main screen view and are integrated so as not to block other important information, such as name cards of candidates speaking, timer display, or other critical on-screen text.
- B. Ensure that reissued clips on social media include "open captions" (captions that remain visible on the screen for all). Open captions remain with content no matter which platform it is shared on. You can also have your digital media staff add captions to a video before it is uploaded.

- C. In addition to captions, ensure that reissued clips on social media include video descriptions and full transcripts. If the clip is posted on a web page or in an article, the video description and transcript can be linked to a separate page or to the bottom of the page. If the clip is posted on social media, the transcript and video description can be pinned in the comment section of the post.
- D. Ensure that online written coverage has high-quality alternative text on all images and that web pages are accessible to people using screen readers and other assistive devices. [Click here to read AAPD's guide to writing alternative text.](#)

ENSURE DISABLED VOTERS CAN MAKE INFORMED DECISIONS

Most disability advocates and organizations will agree: every issue is a disability issue. The disability community is incredibly diverse and is represented in every single community across the United States. Yet, coverage of various issues – from the economy to climate change – often does not include the impact on or perspective of disabled people.

We recommend and respectfully request that CNN's debate facilitation and coverage:

- I. Include disabled voters in profiles you are writing of American voters this cycle
- II. Cover and ask candidates questions about issues relevant to the disability community that are on the ballot in 2024. These include, but are not limited to:
 - A. Healthcare for People with Disabilities** – Disabled people are one of the most medically underserved populations in the country. Widespread stigmas and systemic ableism are prevalent within our nation's healthcare systems. Access to quality, affordable healthcare is crucial for people with disabilities who tend to rely more on health services and pay [5-6 times more for healthcare services than nondisabled people.](#)
 - B. Home- and Community-Based Services** – [Home- and Community-Based Services](#) (HCBS), funded by Medicaid, provide support for tasks of daily living, like eating and dressing, and are essential to preventing the segregation and institutionalization of people with disabilities. These services, used by everyone from young children to aging adults, help older adults age in place, help families stay together, and help people with disabilities thrive in our communities. There is a dire shortage of care workers and direct support personnel to assist individuals with disabilities and [long waiting lists for services](#), leaving many who could otherwise live at home if their HCBS was funded with no choice but to go into a nursing home.
 - C. Voting Rights** – In 2020, people with disabilities voted at a [7% lower rate](#) than people without disabilities of the same age. This lower turnout gap is influenced by many factors, but especially a high [rate of inaccessible polling places](#) – a 2016 GAO study found [83% of U.S. polling places had one or more impediments to voting](#). In 2024, disabled voters could face even greater inaccessibility, as many states have enacted restrictions on absentee voting, mail-in voting, and who is eligible to assist disabled voters in filling out their ballots, based on false and disproven claims about the 2020 election.
 - D. Reproductive Rights and Bodily Autonomy** – [Bodily autonomy is a core principle of the disability rights movement.](#) Policies that restrict access to abortion can drastically exacerbate previously existing threats to the autonomy, health, and overall well-being of disabled people. Nationwide, about [55 percent of low-income disabled women of reproductive age](#) live in states with restrictive abortion law.
 - E. COVID-19** – Despite the end of the Public Health Emergency, the pandemic continues. Disabled people who face greater health risks from COVID-19 must make a difficult choice of taking on risks to access care in settings where others are not masking, or reducing their COVID risk by forgoing important care. Meanwhile, [1 in 13 adults](#) in the U.S. is experiencing disabling symptoms from Long COVID, and

at least [18% of people with Long COVID are unable to return](#) to the labor workforce after one year.

- F. Criminal Justice** – People who are incarcerated at state and federal facilities are [2.5 times more likely](#) to report a disability than non-incarcerated Americans, and many are [denied their rights to basic accommodations](#). Additionally, encounters with law enforcement can be disproportionately dangerous for people with disabilities: Despite representing only 20% of the population, [people with disabilities make up 30-50% of individuals subject to police use of force](#). An estimated [one-third to one-half of people killed by police](#) are people with disabilities.
- G. Employment and Financial Security of People with Disabilities** – The disability community faces disproportionately high rates of unemployment and under-employment. [According to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics](#), in 2022, the unemployment rate for people with disabilities was 7.6%, more than two times higher than the 3.5% unemployment rate for people without disabilities. Additionally, it remains legal for people with disabilities to be paid subminimum wages solely on the basis of their disability status. Recent data found many disabled employees who worked under 14(c) certificates earned [an average of \\$3.34 an hour](#), with many disabled workers earning far less. Many vital programs that disabled people rely on, such as Supplemental Security Income (SSI), Social Security Disability Income (SSDI), and Medicaid have [outdated restrictions that discourage and penalize work and saving for beneficiaries](#), forcing many disabled people to live in poverty. People with disabilities want and need to work without jeopardizing their SSI or Medicaid, which pays for disability-related expenses that private insurance does not.
- H. Education for Youth with Disabilities** – The [Individuals with Disabilities Education Act \(IDEA\)](#), passed in 1975, was intended to cover up to 40% of the costs needed to make education accessible for students with disabilities. As of 2017, the federal government is only covering [14.6% of the cost](#), leading to students with disabilities not having equal access to education. While Vocational Rehabilitation programs, local education agencies, and students with disabilities and their families should be planning together for postsecondary transition to employment or higher education, this often does not happen due to gaps in coordination, leading to less than ideal outcomes for students.
- I. Affordable and Accessible Housing** – Rising housing costs have impacted both homeowners and renters, and there is currently a housing shortage. In addition to affordability, many with disabilities also struggle to find housing units that meet their accessibility needs. People with disabilities have the right to live in the most integrated or accessible-dedicated setting of their choice.
- J. Accessible Transportation** – [25 million Americans](#) with disabilities reported difficulty accessing the transportation they need, and over 3 million were housebound as a result. Our nation's dependency on vehicles and highways as well as a lack of affordable, accessible, and reliable public transportation impacts people with disabilities' education, employment, and quality of life. 34 years after the ADA, when mass transit does even exist for communities, an estimated [25% of mass transit stations are not accessible](#). The Inflation Reduction Act made a historic investment in accessible transportation with money for localities to make accessibility upgrades to their transit systems, and continued improvements are desperately needed.
- K. Accessible Technology** – Digital access is a key requirement of full participation in the modern world. People with disabilities must have equal access to websites and web applications, broadband internet, and assistive technologies that connect them to the digital world. The advent of artificial intelligence platforms presents the risk of disabled people being discriminated against by AI platforms that could be used to make hiring or benefit decisions. Additionally, autonomous vehicles are becoming

more feasible. These emerging technologies must keep accessibility at the forefront of every stage of their development.

- L. Climate change and emergency preparedness** – People with disabilities are disproportionately impacted by disasters, during which they are [two to four times more likely to die or be injured](#). Additionally, many disabled people have complex, [additional needs related to emergency evacuations and forced displacement](#).

For additional information about the above topics, [AAPD's Disability Presidential Candidate Questionnaire](#) may also be useful. Disability advocates are available to meet to discuss or provide additional information about any section of this memo, and AAPD is happy to coordinate those meetings.

FOLLOW INCLUSIVE AND RESPECTFUL BEST PRACTICES

In addition to your own newsroom's guidelines for covering disability, we recommend the following resources:

- [Center for Journalism and Disability](#)
- [Center for Disability Rights Media Guide](#)
- [Americans with Disabilities Act National Network Guidelines for Writing About People With Disabilities](#)

The undersigned disability organizations are always creating new resources for external partners, and always excited to hear about disability-specific resources that would be useful to our partners. If specific guidance on a topic would be helpful to CNN, please do not hesitate to let us know.

Contact

If you have questions or wish to discuss any of the recommendations in this document, AAPD is available to you. Please contact AAPD President and CEO Maria Town at mtown@aapd.com and Civic Engagement Manager, Dewayne Johnson, djohnson@aapd.com.

Signed,