

Poverty compounds challenges facing people with disabilities

SPEAKERS

Nushrat Rahman, Pat Batcheller

Pat Batcheller 00:00

More than 70% of Detroiters with disabilities live in poverty. That means they have trouble affording basics such as food, housing, health care and child care. Journalist Nushrat Rahman wrote about the problem for the Detroit Free Press and Bridge Detroit. She tells me transportation is a challenge for people with disabilities, regardless of their income.

Nushrat Rahman 00:20

I spoke with one disability rights activist, her name is Jaime Junior. You know, one of the main challenges that she was currently facing when I spoke to her was trying to get a wheelchair- accessible van, but the cost for that is steep, it's around \$50,000 for a used one. So that alone is a barrier trying to get your own transportation within your budget. In the meantime, she's been using paratransit services. She's been finding that she has to wake up pretty early ahead of her work schedule to try to make it to the bus or to the to the paratransit. And then she has to wait in transit afterwards too. And so it's just that instability of working around another schedule that was one of the barriers that advocates spoke about. The city of Detroit says that it's going to be bringing paratransit services in house from a third party vendor. And so the hope is that the city, or at least the Detroit Department of Transportation, that, you know, service will be better. But disability rights advocates are currently kind of in a situation where the transportation, at least public transportation isn't as reliable as they want it to be.

Pat Batcheller 01:31

Your reporting also highlighted a problem for working people with disabilities. On the one hand, it's hard just to find a job when you have a disability. Those who do work, have more income, but if they earn too much, they can lose benefits to buy necessities they might not be able to

afford otherwise. And they may feel like they're stuck on a cliff. Can you explain that benefits cliff for us?

Nushrat Rahman 01:52

Yeah, yeah. So this is kind of a, it was pretty interesting to begin to dive into this, because it can be a little bit complicated, I guess. But just to summarize it, it's the so-called benefits cliff, it's when you know, it's when wealth building is limited, and it can keep families in poverty, according to advocates. This is when employment income increases, but benefits begin to phase out or go away. But the issue is that a lot of the services that folks with disabilities need requires a lot of money, right. And so you're kind of in this in between period of, you're making more money, but you need a lot more to be able to get a wheelchair-accessible van, for example. And so one disability rights advocate I spoke with, you know, she spoke about having to live, you know, with roommates for the majority of her adult life, just because she required, you know, services that would be more affordable for many people to kind of shoulder together. And so it's just the cost of living that is more accessible or more expensive. And so you know, when you work, you may lose your benefits, but you also need those benefits to be able to afford the increased cost of living.

Pat Batcheller 03:05

What else would you like readers and listeners to note from your reporting?

Nushrat Rahman 03:09

I think the main thing with this reporting is that this is, I guess, a broad level overview of the various challenges that folks with disabilities and barriers, that many face. You know, living in poverty or just struggling to afford the basics is not, you know, just a blanket statement. There are so many factors that contribute to that. I could do a whole story on disability challenges alone, I could do a whole story about the housing challenges alone. And so it's all of these compounding factors that contribute to, you know, the struggles that many individuals face. And one common thing that I heard over and over again, is, "Our stories aren't being heard. Our stories aren't being heard." And so that was kind of the impetus for this first story, at least, is that like, you know, get those personal narratives out there. One quote stuck out to me from Dessa Cosma, she's a disability rights advocate. She said, "You know, disability is not a place of deficit." And this

quote really stuck to me. She said, "They're really important essential parts of who we are and places of power for us."