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WHO IS NEW YORK'S DISABILITIES COMMUNITY?

New York State Population with one or more of five disabilities 2007		
Age Group	# living with 1 or more disability	% of the group's total population living with 1 or more disability
5 – 20	252,115	6 %
21 – 64	1.3 M	12 %
65 – 74	344,872	27 %
75 and over	609,442	52%
U. S. Census Bureau, American Community Survey—1-year estimates,2007, Table B18001		

The U. S. Census Bureau measures the prevalence of five different disabilities: sensory, physical, mental, ability to go outside the home, and self-care limitations. A significant portion (14 per cent) of New York's population ages five and over, live with one or more of these disabilities. From childhood onward, there is a greater chance of incurring one or more disabilities. The elder population is much more likely to live with multiple disabilities; but in absolute numbers, there are many more children and adults (1.6M) with disabilities than elderly people (954,314).

Persons with disabilities are often viewed as homogenous categories of people rather than as individuals. However, just like those in the general population, we are each unique individuals—different in some ways and, at the same time, the same as other people in many ways. People with disabilities may have different needs, but, like others, we all have dreams, goals, and desires. We are all races and religions. We are mothers, fathers, sons and daughters, sisters and brothers. We are young, middle-aged, and we are old. We are teachers, students, doctors, nurses, lawyers, and politicians. We go to school and attend places of worship. We vote, pay taxes, get married, own homes, have children, work, and go out with friends.

Some people are born with their disability. Others have a disability as a result of an illness or an injury, and some develop a disability as they age. Some people have a disability that lasts a short time, while others have one that lasts a lifetime. Some people have a single disability; others have the complications of multiple disabilities. Older people may have multiple, chronic disabilities, as there is a relationship between advancing age and vulnerability to physical and mental impairments.

There are many different types of disabilities, and individuals with the very same one can be affected in totally different ways; they can vary in their basic functional

abilities and in their adaptation methods. For example, two individuals may have Cerebral Palsy, but one might use a wheelchair and the other may use a walker; or one may have a cognitive disability and the other may not. Just because someone has a physical disability does not mean they have a cognitive disability as well. A common experience among people with disabilities is that they face varying degrees of discrimination and a variety of barriers to participation in school and the work place, as well as in social activities.

From a variety of perspectives—human rights, civil rights, personal dignity, community growth and livability, respect for life, strengthening families, building social capital—there is a growing understanding of the inherent value to be gained when everyone has the opportunity to live his or her life to the fullest, no matter what the disability may be, when or how it was acquired, or how it affects them. Such understanding underlies the increasing attention on accessibility and universal design features, such as wider doorways, ramps, curb cuts, task lighting, accessible transportation, Braille signage, elevators, adjustable counters, walkable trails, automatic doors, and other features. There is also a growing understanding that the benefits of employing such accommodating features are important to *all* of a community's residents—whether a young person in a wheelchair, a mother with a baby carriage, or an older person carrying bags of groceries.

There is a spreading movement across the country to create "livable communities." One aspect of a livable community reflects nationwide public policy trends (including New York State) that promote the ability of people with all types of disabilities and frailties to live in conventional housing alternatives and to live their lives as an integrated part of the wider community. A livable community draws on the skills, knowledge, and resourcefulness of *all* its residents and maximizes the opportunities to take advantage of these assets—as a means of creating neighborhoods that all residents think are good places to live. People with disabilities are neighborhood members, with skills, talents, creativity, and willingness to contribute to their community's livability.

Some examples of New York's citizens can illustrate the diversity that characterizes the State's disabilities community, as well as the individuality of its members. *Who* is New York disabilities community?

- Eric lives with his older brother Derrick. They have an apartment near the local community college campus where Eric takes classes. Eric is a member of the debate team, and when he is not in class, he works part time at the grocery store. Eric has a learning disability.
- Jenny lives with her mom and her two brothers. Their house is very small and has four steps in the front, so it is very difficult for Jenny to get around without support. When she has to go to school, her mother carries her down the stairs and puts her in her wheelchair. She loves to go to school and play on the playground with her friends. Jenny has Cerebral Palsy.

- Mark is the editor of a local magazine. He has a bachelor's degree in Business. He owns a house two blocks from his office, and he drives his chair to work everyday. Mark is non-verbal; he uses a device that helps him communicate.
- James is a single father, and he takes his son, Chet, to school everyday. James is a hall monitor at the local junior high school, and he is the coach for the high school basketball team. He also likes to play basketball with his buddies from college. James is an artist; he has a Web site where he sells his paintings; and he hopes to open up an art gallery one day. James lost both his legs in a car accident last year.
- Scott is a single guy. He takes his dog to the park, and he likes to hang out with his friends and go skiing and snowboarding. He lives in the same little farmhouse he lived in when he was a kid. Scott has been a teacher for the past five years. Scott has Downs Syndrome.
- Edna is a retired teacher. She lives in a local retirement community, and she loves to garden and play with her grandchildren. Every Wednesday, Edna reads to the children at the local community center. Every Saturday, Edna goes to Bingo; and every Sunday after church, Edna teaches a ballroom dancing class. Edna has a visual impairment.
- Dick and Mary just got married. Dick is an attorney for a local law firm, and Mary is a nurse at the local children's hospital. They just bought a house near the hospital where Mary works. Dick likes to play poker with his friends from work on Saturday nights. Mary loves to knit. On Sundays, Mary and Dick get together with the other couples in their neighborhood and watch movies. Dick has polio.
- Joyce is 80 years old, widowed, and a retired factory worker. She rides with her neighbor to the local elementary school where both she and her neighbor volunteer in the local elementary school three days a week, reading to first graders and helping them with their school work and their activities. The children love her and compete for her attention. Joyce wears two hearing aides; she can no longer drive because of arthritis in her hips, and she needs a cane to maintain her balance.
- Mark is a member of the church choir. He likes to go bowling with his friends and take his girlfriend dancing. Every morning, Mark gets up, has tea, and reads the paper; then he takes his dog, Sparky, for a walk. After Sparky's walk, Mark goes to the local YMCA to work out; and every Sunday, he goes to his parent's house for a big Italian family dinner. His favorite meal is lasagna. Mark has autism.
- Mary lives with her parents, and she just started junior high school. Mary plays the flute, the drums, and the piano; and she wants to try out for the school band next year. She also likes to swim and read mystery novels. She loves

animals, and she hopes to get a summer job working at the local pet store. Mary has three dogs and a cat and she likes making brownies with her mom and going to baseball games with her Dad. Mary has Tourettes syndrome.

These individuals are not much different from other community members. They have similar goals and dreams; like others, they take the same or different paths to achieve them. Like others, they want opportunities to live in their own homes and apartments in the neighborhoods and communities of their choice. They want to work for businesses and volunteer their services to help others. They want to belong to clubs and organizations and pursue recreational and spiritual activities with friends and other people in their community. They just use different supports to do these things—a wheelchair, a walker, cane, a companion dog, crutches, a specially equipped car, a prosthetic, Braille documents, computer screen readers, sit-to-work counter space, audible safety devices, etc.

People of all abilities have a lot to offer our communities . . . a community's strength, and its livability, is measured by its ability to include the gifts and contributions of all its members. A community is strong when it offers truly productive activities and the full responsibilities of citizenship to all its members.