

d/Deaf & Disability Equity Plan

**Fiscal Years 2025 – 2028**

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*\* Use of upper-case “D” in the plan’s title refers to the cultural communities of people who are Deaf. Lower case “d” refers to environmental or diagnostic conditions.*

**“As I see it, Government should be there to make life easier, not harder.”**

*~ Maura Healey, Governor of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts, during the 2024 State of the Commonwealth Address*

## Purpose

The Mass Cultural Council’s d/Deaf & Disability Equity & Access Action Plan proposes to strengthen and extend the work of the Agency’s equity priorities, building on its 2022 [Racial Equity Plan](https://massculturalcouncil.org/about/racial-equity-work/), to provide equitable investments, support accessibility needs, and affect systems change in the creative sector of Massachusetts. This document is a living document and as it aligns with existing and anticipated equity plans, will be revised and updated as needs are met, and challenges are identified.

The drive of this plan is to meet and exceed the basic and specific adherence to federal and state disability policies and to prioritize access in the creative sector as a fundamental human practice through the investment of human and financial resources.

Our plan recognizes the variety of social/medical/historical models of Disability. We seek to grow our understanding of the nuances within communities and have begun with the inclusion of Deaf culture as a distinction within Disability culture, conditions, and definitions.

The Agency is dedicated to advancing equity and investments and support to historically underinvested communities, and will focus on two (2) primary areas:

1. **External -** to support and encourage an accessible and inclusive creative sector throughout the Commonwealth with investments and support for creative individuals within the Deaf and Disability communities and the resources and opportunities for cultural destinations to be accessible.
2. **Internal** - to strengthen Mass Cultural Council’s operational, programming, and governance practices, policies, and procedures by leveraging the knowledge and experience of individuals from the Deaf and Disability communities, ensuring their perspectives and needs are integral to the Council's framework and approach.

## Mission

The Mass Cultural Council advances the Commonwealth’s creative and cultural sector by celebrating traditions and talents, championing its collective needs, and equitably investing public resources.

## From the Executive Director

In my own journey to learn about the strengths, needs, challenges, love, and accomplishments of the d/Deaf & Disability Civil Rights movement, I had the chance to deeply learn about the work of Judy Heumann, (aka the Mother of the Disability Rights Movement). I was also able to chat with a friend who was one of the lawyers on The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), who also fought to get closed captioning built into TVs. The conversations and learning grounded me and has inspired me to push the Agency to expand the work that it has already done.

As someone without a disability, I acknowledge my limited perspective. So, this plan is a result of collective voices, including those directly impacted by disabilities. This isn't just a compliance effort; it's about creating a culture where everyone feels valued and supported. I invite each of you to join in championing inclusivity and embracing the diverse strengths each person brings.

Let's not only meet the requirements but surpass them, creating a more accessible and welcoming space for all.

Michael J. Bobbitt

Executive Director

## From the Council Chair & Vice Chair

As Chairs spearheading this initiative, we are thrilled to unveil our d/Deaf and Disability Equity & Access Plan crafted specifically for the vibrant creative sector of Massachusetts. We've witnessed the transformative power of creativity and recognize the urgency of ensuring equitable access for all.

This plan is a collaborative endeavor, drawing upon a spectrum of perspectives and experiences within our creative community. It's a testament to our commitment to making the arts in Massachusetts a space where every individual, regardless of ability, can fully participate and thrive.

We invite each of you, fellow creators, innovators, and advocates, to join us in championing this cause. Let's collectively pave the way for an inclusive creative landscape, one that values diversity and celebrates the unique contributions of everyone working in the creative sector.

In solidarity and creativity,

Marc Carroll, Chair

Jo-Ann Davis, Vice Chair

## Disability Data for Massachusetts

1. [Disability Philanthropy](https://disabilityphilanthropy.org/foundation-giving-for-disability/key-findings/) reports only 4% of private Foundation support focuses on disability rights and social justice, defined as actions to ensure access and legal rights for people with disabilities as a group, and to challenge ableism and other intersecting systems of oppression. Human services and health are top priorities in domestic giving for disability services and support but with only 3% going to arts, culture, and media access.

MA total population: **7,029,917**

MA total people with disabilities: **803,600**

Disability prevalence: **11%**

**Statewide Disability Type**

**Statewide Disability Type – Percentage of population with:**

* Cognitive difficulty: 5.03%
* Ambulatory difficulty: 5.63%
* Vision difficulty: 1.82%
* Hearing difficulty: 3.12%
1. 16.3% of the population over age 18 in Massachusetts experiences hearing loss, according to a 2017 study by Blackwell & Norris. More information on this can be found on the CDC's website regarding health policy on disability: [CDC - Health Policy - Disability.](https://www.cdc.gov/nchs/health_policy/disability.htm)
2. A notable statistic comes from a 2011 study by Johns Hopkins, which found that one in five Americans has hearing loss. Further details are available in the article "One in Five Americans Has Hearing Loss" dated November 14, 2011, on the Hopkins Medicine website: [Hopkins Medicine - Hearing Loss Study.](https://www.hopkinsmedicine.org/NEWS/MEDIA/RELEASES/ONE_IN_FIVE_AMERICANS_HAS_HEARING_LOSS)
3. [Disability Philanthropy: Foundation Giving for Disability Report January 2023](https://disabilityphilanthropy.org/foundation-giving-for-disability/)
4. Additionally, data collected from the 2022 report, [Towards a Culture of Access](https://opendoorartsma.org/tcareport22/), recognized the need for continued education on accessible features and practices within cultural institutions across the Commonwealth.

## Mass Cultural Council Recent Grant Making Data



#

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Do you identify as Deaf/Having a disability?** | **FY22 Grants** | **FY23 Applications** | **FY23 Grants** |
| Yes | 11 | 1,023 | 895 |
| No | 89 | 6,135 | 2,863 |
| No Data | 63 | 496 | 293 |
|   | 163 | 7,654 | 4,051 |

## Following National & State Leadership Efforts

Our efforts to be an equitable Agency align with the public outcry and demand for equity. We plan to further our equity goals by developing a suite of equity plans and hope to be seen as a leader in both the creative sector and state government for these efforts.

Mass Cultural Council was further inspired by the work of other state entities:

* [Department of Public Health’s Office of Health Equity](https://www.mass.gov/health-and-disability-program-hdp?_gl=1*13fnmr4*_ga*NDg4MjI3NzIwLjE2NDg0ODM1MTk.*_ga_MCLPEGW7WM*MTcwNDQwMTI5MC41LjAuMTcwNDQwMTI5MC4wLjAuMA)
* [Working Group of Gender Equity in Disability Policies](https://www.mass.gov/event/notice-of-meeting-of-public-body-2017-12-15t223000-0500?_gl=1*1xacgw9*_ga*NDg4MjI3NzIwLjE2NDg0ODM1MTk.*_ga_MCLPEGW7WM*MTcwNDQwMTI5MC41LjAuMTcwNDQwMTI5Ni4wLjAuMA)
* [Department of Public Health’s 2023 Community Health Equity Survey](https://www.mass.gov/news/department-of-public-health-launches-statewide-survey-to-improve-community-health?_gl=1*fist95*_ga*NDg4MjI3NzIwLjE2NDg0ODM1MTk.*_ga_MCLPEGW7WM*MTcwNDQwMTI5MC41LjAuMTcwNDQwMTM0NS4wLjAuMA)

## The Process: Designing & Updating the Plan

Since 2015, the [Universal Participation (UP) Initiative](https://massculturalcouncil.org/organizations/universal-participation-initiative/) has aimed to activate the aspirations of the Americans with Disabilities Act to break down the barriers that prevent full civic participation in Massachusetts’ cultural sector. The UP Initiative supported organizational change through inclusive design practices, community engagement strategies, and peer learning networks through the Innovation Learning Network (ILN) and UP Designation. UP Designated organizations demonstrated a commitment to learn, take action, and embrace inclusivity as a core organizational value and possessed behaviors that reflected the aspirations of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA).

UP Organizations and the Up Initiative centered the following practices:

* Providing training about inclusive culture
* Engaging user/experts to inform decision making and to develop policies and programs
* Coordinating and integrating a vision of inclusion throughout the entire organization
* Innovating through creative problem solving

This work has been foundational to the agency’s learning and has shaped and influenced this plan.

Additionally, through the implementation of the [Racial Equity Plan](https://massculturalcouncil.org/documents/Racial_Equity_Plan_FY22_24.pdf), the Agency continues to expand its focus on equity to include work on **intersectionality** and decolonization, recognizing the complexity of disenfranchisement. The Racial Equity Plan developed a framework to address inequities across various dimensions such as disability, gender, sexuality, and rural communities. This commitment to inclusivity and equity leads us to the next crucial step in our journey: the introduction of this d/Deaf & Disability Equity & Access Action Plan.

This d/Deaf & Disability Equity & Access Action Plan signifies a dedicated effort to not only continue the conversation around equity but to also drive meaningful and sustainable change within disability rights and accessibility. Through this focused action plan, we aspire to bridge gaps, dismantle barriers, and create a more inclusive and accessible cultural sector for all.

In support of this initiative, the Mass Cultural Council, in collaboration [Art-Reach](https://www.art-reach.org/) and [Open-Door Arts](https://opendoorartsma.org/) has recently concluded an extensive five-month initiative of data collection and analysis. This initiative, involving close cooperation with the creative sector and the d/Deaf and Disability community, has resulted in a detailed report and a set of recommendations. These recommendations have been aligned with the Mass Cultural Council’s Strategic Plan (2023) and provide the framework for the Deaf and Disability Access Action Plan. The outcomes of the plan are designed to position the Council as a leader, innovator, and trusted partner in accessibility work across the sector while leveraging the Agency’s significant role, influence, and reach.

## The Plan

### External actions for grant applicants and grant recipients

The following action steps are designed to support those who seek and/or receive grants from Mass Cultural Council.

### Programs

To build and support programmatic practices that advance access, equity, and inclusion at our cultural institutions and to invest in creative individuals from the Deaf and Disabilities cultural communities, Mass Cultural Council will:

**FY25**

* Establish and compensate a Disability Advisory Committee comprised of individuals who identify as Deaf and/or Disabled to meet biannually with Mass Cultural Council’s leadership and staff workgroup to assess the Agency’s Equity and Access plan, systems, and services. This group will work on:
	+ Soliciting feedback (surveys, focus groups, etc.) from the d/Deaf & Disabilities creative community on their experience with the grant application process and using this data to inform ongoing improvements, annually.
	+ Shared “accessibility in the arts” language.
	+ Shared intel on generally accepted, most current, innovative practices, and evolving needs for the sector.
	+ Identifying and connecting with service organizations and other state agencies supporting accessibility work.
	+ Building a framework and educational resources for accessible and inclusive job postings (incl. [HireCulture.org](https://www.hireculture.org/)).
	+ Contribution of content to the Opportunities and Resources page with effective practices, technology innovations, professional development, as well as evolving needs language updates.
	+ Specifically setting annual benchmarks to measure progress on the goals of the Plan.
	+ Assuring that the Plan, in its aim to educate the Sector both broadly and deeply, does not result in the burden of education falling on the d/Deaf & Disabled community.
	+ Partner with the Massachusetts Office on Disabilities and other organizations supporting the d/Deaf and Disabilities communities, to develop a toolkit of useful links and learning opportunities for the sector seeking to work with the d/Deaf and Disabilities community.

**FY26**

* Conduct a comprehensive review and revision of all steps of the grantmaking process through an accessibility lens. Actions include (but are not limited to):
	+ Revising and updating the application process to integrate new accessibility technologies, reduce bias toward disability, and eradicate barriers,
	+ Annually, reviewing the current American Disabilities Act (ADA) Compliance attestation process in the grant application to reduce the complexity in understanding the pertinent state and federal obligations for Title II[[1]](#footnote-2) organizations,
	+ Revising for any Federal and State Executive Orders and legal mandates,
	+ Engaging a specialized vendor to provide technical support, as needed.
	+ Implement strategies and outreach that encourage, reduce bias toward disability, and prioritize applications from with the d/Deaf & Disabilities creative communities.

**Ongoing**

* Implement strategies and outreach that encourage, reduce bias toward disability, and prioritize applications from with the d/Deaf & Disabilities creative communities.
* Annually, reviewing the current American Disabilities Act (ADA) Compliance attestation process in the grant application to reduce the complexity in understanding the pertinent state and federal obligations for Title II organizations,
* Encouraging representation of people from the d/Deaf & Disability community to serve on Local Cultural Councils.
* Encouraging Local Cultural Councils to connect with their municipal offices on disability/aging.

###

### Sector Education, Services & Achievement

To provide, enhance, scale, and drive the development of accessibility services, Mass Cultural Council will:

**FY25**

* Collaborate with a specialized vendor, other agencies and service orgs, on the deployment, revision, scaling and launch of the Mass Cultural Council’s Universal/Inclusive Design learning program, now called the [Innovation Learning Network](https://massculturalcouncil.org/organizations/universal-participation-initiative/) (ILN), to reach hundreds of organizations and individuals in the creative sector using a universal design for learning framework and a dynamic mix of online delivery and small group/peer group discussion opportunities
	+ All Mass Cultural Council staff will be required to participate.
	+ Mass Cultural Council members will be encouraged to participate.
	+ A specific Unit and regular class agreements will focus on avoiding burdening members of the d/Deaf and Disabilities community.
	+ Participation and prioritization in the ILN and Up Designation may be considered in future grant allocations.
* Review existing organizational access self-assessment tools with the specialized vendor to start gathering information to inform our understanding of excellence in access.
* Host annual learnings/webinars with the Massachusetts Office on Disabilities for the Sector, to learn about the services they provide.

**FY26**

* Collaborate with a specialized vendor in designing and administering an access definition/rubric that sets clear, measurable criteria and benchmarks for organizations in the creative sector. This rubric may suggest progressive levels of achievement, aiding organizations in understanding auditing and improving their accessibility work.
* Work with a specialized vendor, other State Agencies, service organizations, experts, and people from the d/Deaf and Disability community to define and launch a “Distinction in Access” recognition which exemplifies innovation, advancement, stellar achievements, practices, and strategies in accessibility in the creative sector. This distinction may include components such as completion of the ILN, in-person learning and/or site visits, demonstration of deep learning and action taken, and will revise Mass Cultural Council’s badge of distinction: [UP Designation](https://massculturalcouncil.org/organizations/universal-participation-initiative/up-designation/)**.**

**FY27**

* Establish a periodic review (every two years) and report with Local Cultural Councils on understanding state and federal obligations for Title III[[2]](#footnote-3) organizations.
* In consideration of ongoing evaluation of the newly created virtual ILN, consider offering live (in person/webinar) learning alternatives (i.e.: boot camps, past ILN structure, etc.)

**Ongoing**

* Expand and deepen relationships and collaborations with at least five (5) expert individuals, organizations, and agencies supporting in the d/Deaf & Disability community, annually, including those from disability advocacy organizations, to stay updated on most current practices, new innovations and developments, outreach, and potential partnerships.
* Expand and continue to provide monthly Access Office Hours and resources for organizations to be in compliance with the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), supporting applicants for grants, navigating the ADA as grant review criteria, and maintaining established peer networks and connections. These office hours will support and supplement the revised ILN and Designation programs and will provide regular learning opportunities for improving access.
* Expand and deepen relationships and collaborations with at least five (5) expert individuals, organizations, and agencies supporting in the d/Deaf & Disability community, annually, including those from disability advocacy organizations, to stay updated on most current practices, new innovations and developments, outreach, and potential partnerships.
* Biannually 1) utilize social media posts, Artsake, Power of Culture blogs, and media alerts, etc., to amplify, showcase the exemplary accessibility accomplishments of individuals and organizations within the creative sector and 2) highlighting professional development opportunities, grants, and resources specifically designed for the d/Deaf and Disability community.
* Work with specialized vendor to update internal and external communication and engagement techniques and technologies (instructional videos, Deaf Vlogs, AI technology, infographics, illustrated guides, etc.) to ensure accessibility for individuals with various access needs and abilities.

### Internal Actions for Agency Processes

The following action steps are designed to support the internal work at Mass Cultural Council.

* **Agency Operations:** The internal operations of the Mass Cultural Council are a critical part of creating the culture of equity needed to support the field.
* **Governing Council:** Mass Cultural Council is governed by a board of private citizens appointed by the Governor for staggered three-year terms. Council members represent various regions of the state and have demonstrated distinguished service, creativity, and/or scholarship in the arts, humanities, or sciences.

### Compliance & Education

To ensure a culture of anti-ableism, diminish the potential for harm, increase accessibility in our operational practices, and support the growth and empowerment of employees with disabilities and those they work with, Mass Cultural Council will:

**FY25**

* Work with Auditors from the New England ADA Center (every three years) to prepare an ADA compliance audit on operations and governance and implement required adjustments based on its findings and develop annual workplan for FY26 and FY27 implementation as necessary.
* Develop an acknowledgement receipt of the Agency’s d/Deaf & Disability Access & Equity Action Plan for external contractors and, to the extent we can for vendors.

**FY26**

* Revise People Operations processes from postings, to expanded recruitment, to interviews, to onboarding, to requesting accommodations, and evaluations with a disability equity lens and to ensure accountability.

**FY27**

* Provide resources for the creation and sustainability of an Employee Resource Group or affinity group for employees with disabilities.
* Work with the Disability Advisory Committee, evaluate and update the d/Deaf and Disability Equity and Access Action Plan.

**Ongoing**

* As positions become available recruit and continuously work towards greater representation from the d/Deaf & Disability community in all levels of employment, the Governing Council, and taskforces.
* Continuously review and update policies to ensure they reflect current best practices in accessibility and inclusion.
* Continuously monitor, review, and update internal communication practices for accessibility.
* Provide expert bi-annual professional development for staff and council on creating inclusive work environments, effective strategies on accessible communications, events, equitable grantmaking, and understanding legal obligations related to accommodations for people with disabilities.
* Enhance employee support through the adoption and utilization of advanced technology solutions.
* Build and share a quarterly progress report with the cultural sector, and the Council.

## Legal Requirements

This plan addresses the Agency’s desire to be an equitable and inclusive state agency and to embody principles of racial equity, inclusiveness, and diversity in its operations, programming, and grant making. Notwithstanding any interpretation to the contrary of the language of the plan, nothing contained herein is meant or intended in any way to direct, mandate, suggest, or advise the Agency, its Council members, employees, or constituents to act in a manner inconsistent with the requirements of federal or state non-discrimination laws or other applicable laws or with the Agency’s status as an equal opportunity employer. The aim of this plan is to create and support the inclusion of d/Deaf & Disabled individuals and those who engage them and desire to engage them into all aspects of the Council’s activities but not to, in any way, promote the exclusion of any person or any exclusionary practice.

## Glossaries

[National Center for Disability and Journalism](https://ncdj.org/style-guide/):

[National Association of the Deaf; Community and Culture FAQs](https://www.nad.org/resources/american-sign-language/community-and-culture-frequently-asked-questions/)

[Autistic Hoya, Glossary of Ableist Phrases. Lydia X. Z. Brown](https://www.autistichoya.com/p/ableist-words-and-terms-to-avoid.html)

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**Partners**

[Mass Commission for the Deaf and Hard-of-Hearing](https://www.mass.gov/orgs/massachusetts-commission-for-the-deaf-and-hard-of-hearing)

**Mass Cultural Council’s Disability Task Force**

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1. The ADA guarantees that people with disabilities have the same opportunities as everyone else to enjoy employment opportunities, purchase goods and services, and participate in state and local government programs. The ADA is broken up into five different sections, which are called titles. Different titles set out the requirements for different kinds of organizations.

Title I: Employment.

Title II, State and Local Government, Public Transit Systems.

Title III: Businesses and nonprofits serving the public.

Title IV: Telecommunication companies.

Title V: Requirements for how to implement the law. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
2. The ADA guarantees that people with disabilities have the same opportunities as everyone else to enjoy employment opportunities, purchase goods and services, and participate in state and local government programs. The ADA is broken up into five different sections, which are called titles. Different titles set out the requirements for different kinds of organizations.

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