

# Accessibility and inclusion cannot be an afterthought

## Statement from IDA/IDDC campaign for disability inclusion in the global response to the COVID-19 pandemic

The response to the COVID-19 pandemic revealed that global, regional and national health systems were not adequately prepared. COVID-19 has touched the lives of people all over the world, but people who are marginalised or at risk of marginalisation (including persons with disabilities) have been most severely impacted by the pandemic. The lack of disability-inclusive response measures meant that many persons with disabilities were left without access to vital health information, essential support services and required levels of care. Many persons with disabilities were also subject to discrimination and mistreatment, and 'Do Not Resuscitate' orders were imposed on some persons with disabilities without their consent.

The pandemic has highlighted yet again that health systems – in particular, emergency health responses – are far beyond being inclusive of and accessible for persons with disabilities. The level of exclusion and discrimination experienced by persons with disabilities during the pandemic indicates that disabling barriers are still widespread and inclusion is far from being institutionalized. Global action on disability-inclusive COVID-19 response measures, including placing safeguards to ensure priority access to vaccinations, was too little, too late, and often taken without proper consultation with persons with disabilities and their representative organizations. There was a significant lack of accessible information, and when measures were taken to consider disability they were treated as disability-specific recommendations rather than being part of mainstream planning. Urgent action must be taken to ensure the ongoing response to COVID-19 is disability inclusive. Lessons must also be learned to ensure all future pandemic response measures and health care services are disability inclusive, particularly emergency health care.

The 2020 World Health Organization [disability considerations report](#) states that governments should: ensure public health information and communication is accessible; undertake targeted measures for persons with disabilities and their support networks, as well as disability service

providers in the community; address the higher risks of persons in institutional settings and correctional facilities; and, crucially, ensure that emergency measures include the needs of persons with disabilities.

The significant discrimination, inequality and barriers experienced by persons with disabilities must be addressed as a matter of urgency to ensure vaccine programmes and responses to future COVID-19 waves are disability inclusive. At the World Health Assembly, we ask the Director-General of the World Health Organization to make a clear statement underscoring the need for global and national vaccination plans to prioritize persons with disabilities, particularly persons with intellectual disabilities and high support needs, persons living in congregate settings, older persons and persons with health conditions that put them most at risk. Any action to combat misinformation and misunderstanding about COVID-19 vaccination side-effects must consider accessibility requirements and reach all persons with disabilities with different means of communication.

The COVID-19 pandemic will continue to affect persons with disabilities around the world for some time to come – particularly in countries affected by particular variants, or those that do not yet have access to vaccines.

We cannot undo the devastation of the past year in which a vast, disproportionate number of persons with disabilities have died as a direct result of inequality and disability discrimination. But by taking action to ensure the ongoing global response to the pandemic will be disability inclusive, we can prevent this injustice from continuing and from being repeated in future pandemics.