

From following rules to creating access:

How Public Health - Seattle & King County is making public health better for people with disabilities

For many years, health departments focused on complying with disability laws and regulations. This work was important. It helped make sure people could ask for support and accommodations when they needed them.

Leaders at Public Health - Seattle & King County learned that following the law alone was not enough. Many people with disabilities still faced barriers when trying to get information, use services, or take part in community programs. Individuals with intellectual disabilities faced even more barriers because of their race, income, language, gender, or where they lived. The health department wanted to create programs and services that worked better for everyone.



Local health departments, such as Seattle & King County, had already spent many years working to make services fairer and more welcoming. In 2008, King County started efforts to enhance fairness and opportunity for all. Over time, leaders realized that disability was an important consideration for healthcare professionals. The coronavirus pandemic (COVID-19) and racial justice movements highlighted the importance of including disability in this work. Community members and advocates raised concerns about barriers with local health departments. During the pandemic, the health department received funding to improve accessibility and outreach, leading to the hiring of a staff member to assess accessibility

across programs and services. The department hired staff members to review how accessibility was being handled across programs and services across government agencies.

The review found that some teams had strong accessibility practices aligned with the Americans with Disabilities Act, while others needed more support. Disability-related work was happening *across the department*, but no single program was leading the effort. Because of these findings, the health department created a permanent Disability Equity and Americans with Disabilities Act Program within the Office of Equity and Community Partnerships.

Blayne Amson, the Disability Equity and Americans with Disabilities Act Program Manager, explained that following the Americans with Disabilities Act is important, but it is only the first step. The larger goal is to ensure that people with disabilities can fully participate in public health programs, services and community life.

How the Program Works

Public Health - Seattle & King County does not treat disability access as the job of just one office or one person. Instead, the health department works to make accessibility part of everything it does. The Disability Equity and Americans with Disabilities Act Program works with many teams across the department. Together, they look for ways to make programs, services, meetings and information easier for everyone to use.

The program starts by helping staff understand where barriers exist. Staff review programs, policies and everyday work to see what is working well and what needs to improve. Then they create practical tools, provide training and work with teams to make changes. Instead of waiting until someone asks for help, staff learn to plan ahead and include accessibility in the health department's work from the beginning.

The program also works closely with department leaders. This helps make disability access a shared responsibility across the organization. Leaders encourage staff to think about accessibility whenever they create a new program, hold a meeting, or provide a service. Over time, these small changes become part of the department's everyday work.

The goal is to create lasting change instead of one-time fixes. The department continues to learn from staff, community members and people with disabilities. It reviews its work, makes improvements, and builds accessibility into new programs and services. This approach helps create a public health system that is more welcoming, more inclusive and easier for everyone to use.

Making Disability Access Part of Leadership

One important part of the King County model is where the work is located. Instead of placing disability work only in a legal office or human resources department, the Disability Equity and Americans with Disabilities Act Program works closely with the Office of Equity and Community Partnerships and department leaders. This structure helps make disability access a responsibility across the entire department. Leaders wanted disability access to be part of how the department works, part of efforts to make sure everyone has a fair chance to be healthy and part of how the department serves the community.

The department's long-term plan also includes the agency's goals related to disability access, belonging and staff development. Leaders want staff to learn how to create services, programs and workplaces that are welcoming and accessible to everyone.

The Disability Equity and Americans with Disabilities Act Program works with many parts of the health department, including teams who:

- Prepare for emergencies in the community
- Create communications
- Support the health department staff
- Create a plan for the rules of the health department and community
- Provide support services
- Help with medical services in emergencies
- Help with health services in jails
- Monitor diseases and the environment
- Help with community health clinics

Because the program operates across many teams, it can support changes throughout the department rather than just in one area.

Moving Beyond Following Rules Toward Lasting Change

The department's goal is not only to respond to accessibility problems when they happen. Instead, leaders want accessibility to be part of everyday work so barriers can be prevented before they occur.

During its first year, the program focused on improving:

- Accessibility
- Communication
- Staff knowledge
- Disability-related practices

To support staff, the department created:

- Accessibility guides
- Communication tools
- Training resources
- Planning tools
- Opportunities for collaboration

One important resource is the [Community Guide to Accessible Events and Meetings](#). This guide helps staff think about accessibility before meetings and events begin. It encourages people to:

- Use microphones
- Make space for wheelchair users
- Provide clear information
- Create welcoming spaces for everyone

The goal is to plan for accessibility from the beginning, rather than waiting until someone asks for help.

The department also helps staff learn more about disability and accessibility. Many employees once thought disability work was only about ramps, elevators, or accommodations. The program helped people understand that disability can affect many parts of a person's life and health.

Looking at the Whole Person

A key part of the King County approach is recognizing that people have diverse life experiences.

A person may have a disability, but they may also experience barriers because of their race, language, income, gender, sexual orientation, or where they live.

Because of this, the department works to understand how multiple barriers affect people all at once. The disability program is connected to other efforts focused on:

- Making sure people are treated fairly regardless of race
- Helping people get information in the language they use
- Building strong community partnerships
- Improving health for people who have often been left out

The department is also working to collect better information about disability to help staff and community advocates make informed decisions. Better information helps leaders understand who is being left out and where improvements are needed.



Changes Inside the Workplace

Although the program is still new, leaders have already seen important changes.

One of the biggest changes is that more employees are talking openly about disability. After trainings and presentations, some staff shared that they had disabilities and had never felt comfortable discussing them at work before. Others said they felt seen and included for the first time.

Leaders also found that accessibility improvements helped everyone, not just people with disabilities. Staff reported:

- Clearer communication
- Better meetings
- Easier-to-read materials
- Stronger understanding of barriers

Leaders emphasized that these changes happened because department leadership supported the work and kept it visible.

Challenges, Accountability and Lessons Learned

The Disability Equity and Americans with Disabilities Act Program continues to grow. Leaders say there is more work to do before disability access is fully built into all parts of the department.

One area where the program has already made a difference is Jail Health Services. The program helped staff create clearer ways to:

- Document requests
- Track requests
- Respond to requests from people with disabilities

These changes helped make services more consistent and easier to access.

Like with many other areas of the department, the program also faces challenges, including:

- Limited funding
- Limited staff time
- Competing priorities
- Need for ongoing training

Leaders stressed that meaningful change requires real resources. Staff need training, support and time to improve accessibility and inclusion. Strong relationships across teams are also important.

The department wants accessibility to become a shared responsibility across the organization. . The goal is for all staff to consider accessibility in their daily work rather than relying on a single person or office.

The department is also creating better ways to track progress and measure success. Leaders believe clear expectations and good systems are important for long-term change.

They also emphasized that organizations need a strong foundation before making large changes. Important building blocks include:

- Supportive leaders
- Accessibility tools
- Trained staff
- Clear guidance
- An inclusive workplace culture

What Other Health Departments Can Learn

The King County model shows that disability access is about more than following laws or responding to accommodation requests. It is about creating programs and services that work better for everyone.

The initiative shows that disability-focused work can help improve:

- Public health programs
- Workplace practices
- Community partnerships
- Service delivery

The initiative also offers lessons for other health departments:

- Start by following disability laws and accessibility requirements
- Build accessibility into everyday work
- Work closely with people with disabilities and disability organizations
- Give staff practical tools and training
- Connect disability work to other efforts that help create healthier and fairer communities
- Provide staff and resources to support the work
- Make accessibility part of leadership priorities
- Talk openly about disability and inclusion
- Treat disability access as ongoing work, not a one-time project

King County leaders know they are still learning and growing. However, their work shows how public health agencies can begin creating programs, services and workplaces that are more welcoming, accessible and responsive to people with disabilities and the communities they serve.

