

May, 2019 (5 minutes) - Opening Doors

My name is Eric Harris. I am a legislative advocate Disability Rights CA.

DRC is the California protection and advocacy agency for the state and the largest disability rights advocacy organization in the nation. We assist thousands annually in a myriad of disability related issues including, education, developmental disabilities, mental health, health care, civil rights, housing, immigration and accessibility through multiple avenues such as individual representation, litigation, and legislation.

It is important that persons with disabilities are represented in law schools, in the bar and on the bench because our experience and point of view matter.

According to the U.S., Census Bureau, about **19% of the population had a disability in 2010**. There are 3 main issues involving disability diversity in the law. **First**, we have a pipeline problem, where individuals with disabilities are less likely to apply and be admitted to law school. Only 12.3% of working age persons with disabilities held a Bachelor's degree or higher, compared to 30.6% of non-disabled persons. **Second**, there is also a strong disability-poverty correlation. Many individuals with disabilities are not able to finance law school at all. **Third**, the number of lawyers with disabilities is hard to determine. Unlike race, gender, ethnicity and, more recently, sexual orientation, there is little reporting on disability statistics.

Past ABA President, William Neukom stated in his president's message, that although it is difficult to determine the exact degree that the disability community is underrepresented in the legal community, it is evident that "lawyers with disabilities, too, have greater difficulty getting a job after law school and have higher rates of unemployment than lawyers who do not have disabilities." Many lawyers with disabilities still end up where they always have: channeled toward government work, advocacy organizations or solo and small-firm employment, often with disability-related practices. Old attitudes and perceptions of people with disabilities have been slow to change.

Additionally, DRC advocates for increasing the number of judicial appointments of people with disabilities in CA, so that the bench can be better reflective of Californian's population of persons with disabilities.

While there has been improvement in ethnic and other diversity groups, that is not true of persons with disabilities.

- There are 13 total judges or 2% of all of California judges who have identified with having a disability.

Lawyers and judges are **change agents for entire communities**. People with disabilities bring a perspective, an outlook that is unique and important. They can also enhance the environment through others and help work through the pipeline of law school, the bar exam, the legal profession and the judiciary.

My experience, I am Rare – African American Lobbyist in Wheelchair
My law school had approximately 500 students. I was the only individual who used a wheelchair at the law school.

Law school as we all know, is challenging on its own. Reading and analyzing cases doesn't exactly come naturally. I also had to deal with the added stress or burden of being the "disabled representative" or person with the "ADA perspective". I did not have colleagues that I could share the experience with.

It was difficult for me to navigate through law school without other students and faculty who had similar experiences as me. Adding to my obstacle course that is disability, I am an African American male. The intersectionality of disability and race can add even more challenges.

This space was difficult to undergo while in law school. I mostly had to stay connected with my family and friends. It was a real challenge to make myself feel more comfortable while in law school. As an African American male with a disability, I have learned how to make discomfort actually comfortable for me. However, we should not let the next set of law students of color with disabilities have to do the same.

California should treat people with disabilities as if we are important. We hope the state will be as welcoming and understanding of people with disabilities as it can and consider thinking outside of the box.

At DRC, we seek to address ongoing biases for persons with disabilities with the specific goal of broader inclusion in communities, both professionally and personally. The legal profession has a long way to go.