Disabled Americans face significant barriers to participating in our democratic process. The overwhelming majority of polling locations nationwide are inaccessible, and many states have restrictive voting laws that limit mail-in voting or ban ballot drop boxes. More than 11 percent of disabled voters reported encountering difficulties when voting in the last general election.

New Disabled South (NDS), a disability-rights and disability-justice nonprofit organization founded in 2022, is working across 14 states in the US South to eliminate these barriers. With the 2024 elections rapidly approaching and voter suppression rampant throughout the region, NDS is working on multiple fronts to ensure disabled people’s voting access so their voices can be heard on critical issues.

While 2024 marks the nonprofit’s first involvement in a general election, its leaders have deep experience in electoral politics and voting-rights advocacy. NDS cofounder, president, and CEO Dom Kelly has worked for voting-rights organizations in Georgia and served as the senior advisor for disability on Stacey Abrams’ 2022 gubernatorial campaign. What he witnessed in those roles—disabled voters were disenfranchised and often overlooked, even by progressive groups—made him realize the need for a disability-led organization. He observes that it is not enough for some organizations to work on disability-rights issues if disabled people aren’t given a seat at the table. “If you don’t have that lived experience,” he says, “you’re only looking at the issues from the outside.”

One of NDS’ main objectives is combating efforts to disenfranchise disabled voters. The organization’s other priorities include improving outcomes in the legal system, ameliorating poverty, and securing access to health-care services. These priorities address issues that disproportionately affect disabled people nationwide: Disabled people face arrests, incarceration, and police violence at higher rates than nondisabled people.

Disabled people also experience poverty at a rate of more than twice that of nondisabled people. The issues are even more pressing in the South, where more than 20 percent of the population is disabled—the highest rate in the nation.

NDS hired 10 employees in its first year; its entire staff and board are disabled and have roots in the South. The organization also launched a 501(c)(4) arm called New Disabled South Rising (NDSR) in February 2023. “We recognized that if our goal was to build a political home for disabled people, we needed to be able to have the flexibility of a 501(c)(4) to do that,” Kelly says.

Philanthropic funders, including the Ford Foundation, Borealis Philanthropy, and the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, have been vital to NDS’ rapid growth. An individual donor provided seed funding for NDSR. In November 2023, Open Society Foundations awarded the organization a two-year grant as part of its mission to reduce barriers to voting nationwide.

The organization’s early efforts include partnering with Data for Progress to conduct a six-state survey on voter perceptions of disabled people and disabled people’s experiences in the South. The survey results will serve as a framework for a multistate qualitative research effort that NDS will launch this summer. NDSR was also the fiscal sponsor on an Atlanta, Georgia, ballot referendum campaign to allow voters to decide whether a $90 million police training facility should be built in the city.

Looking ahead to the upcoming general election, NDS is partnering with nonpartisan voter registration, education, and turnout efforts across the region. The nonprofit will offer guidance for “these organizations [to] bring a disability lens to their work,” NDS’ organizing director, Lila Zucker, says.

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ARTS & CULTURE

Real Estate for the Artists

CAST provides art organizations a pathway to property ownership, giving artists much-needed space to create and display their work.

BY KYLE COWARD

During the 2010s tech boom, incomes skyrocketed across the San Francisco Bay Area—but so did the cost of living. The median price of rent, for example, jumped by 24 percent over the decade. San Francisco’s arts community, in particular, felt the rent crunch: A 2015 civic survey reported that 70 percent of the city’s artists had been displaced from their homes, workplaces, or both because of higher...
costs. Local arts organizations that leased office spaces were likewise affected by the price surge. According to the data platform Statista, San Francisco-area office rents cost $79.06 per square foot, second only to Manhattan among 30 select US markets.

In 2013, San Francisco-based Community Vision (then known as the Northern California Community Loan Fund) created the Community Arts Stabilization Trust (CAST) to protect local arts organizations from being priced out of the Bay Area. The trust buys, renovates, and leases buildings below market value to small and midsize organizations. Organizations can be given the option to buy their spaces within 7 to 10 years, and lease extensions are also available.

“We are an involved, community-centered real-estate organization for culture,” says Moy Eng, CAST’s founding CEO and former executive director, who now serves as a consultant. “We steward and secure affordable space.”

The Oakland-based Kenneth Rainin Foundation provided CAST with a five-year, $5 million seed grant in 2013. Continued funding has come through public and private sources such as tax credits and grants.

CAST currently has real-estate investments in five Bay Area organizations, ranging between $1 million and $6.3 million per organization. CounterPulse, a San Francisco-based experimental arts nonprofit, exemplifies the success of CAST’s model.

Founded in 1991, CounterPulse had long made its home base in the city’s South of Market (SoMA) neighborhood. But by 2012, high rents forced the organization to look elsewhere. “We could see the writing on the wall that we would not be able to renew our lease at the favorable rates that we had before the tech boom,” says CounterPulse executive director Julie Phelps.

The following year, a consultant connected CounterPulse to the newly formed CAST, which at the time had purchased and was renovating a building in the nearby Tenderloin neighborhood for $1.3 million. CAST offered CounterPulse a 10-year lease on the property with an option to buy.

CounterPulse signed a lease on the building in 2015 and opened in the space the following year. The organization would finance renovations on the property during the term of its lease and, through fundraising, amassed $7 million to purchase the building from CAST in 2023.

Eng describes the process of real-estate transactions and development as “intensive,” which is why CAST focuses exclusively on the Bay Area. CAST’s influence is not limited, however. Stakeholders in cities around the world—from Seattle to Sydney to London—have reached out to CAST for consultation on how to stimulate community-centered real estate for artists.

“What do we want in our cities? What do we want in our neighborhoods? How do we step in to do that together?” Eng asks. “Now is the time when things are at a crisis point, and I think this is the moment where change is possible.”

KYLE COWARD is a Chicago-based communications professional and writer who has contributed to the Chicago Tribune and The Atlantic, among other publications.