



Increasing Access and Opportunity through Disability Inclusion

The problem

Lifeworks has identified that **businesses, healthcare providers and general support services are not meeting requirements outlined in the Minnesota Human Rights Act (MHRA) for the 1 in 4 Minnesotans who have a disability** (CDC, 2024). As an organization, Lifeworks is uniquely situated to validate this insight. It works with over 600 business partners and more than 3,000 people with disabilities.

Regardless of how a disability was acquired — whether through aging, accident, illness, or someone born with a disability — **all Minnesotans have the right to live dignified lives free from discrimination**. While the MHRA is in place, **support is needed to make one of the strongest civil rights laws in the country a day-to-day reality**. Lifeworks knows firsthand Minnesotans with disabilities this year experienced:

- Termination from their job due to lack of accommodations.
- Asked to leave public recreation areas.
- Denied annual healthcare screening due to inaccessibility.
- Turned away from their community center.

Lifeworks want to support each community in striving to create accessible spaces for all Minnesotans. We particularly want to achieve this in rural and tribal communities, where disabled Minnesotans have historically received the least support.

In 2024 Lifeworks conducted community conversations, listening sessions, surveys, and disability inclusion trainings. Over 4,000 people were heard and over 1,200 people were educated on disability inclusion. Lifeworks learned: (Lifeworks, 2024)

- Rural Minnesotans feel left behind. Lack of education, services & providers, transportation, and technology accumulate massive barriers for people looking for support.
- The disability community, family, caregivers, and case managers/service providers all want more education. What services are available and how to access them is a significant barrier, particularly for children and elders.
- Community members experience a lack of dignity through their interactions with healthcare providers, businesses, community spaces, and the social service system. De-stigmatizing disability was discussed each time.

Increasing access and opportunity for the 25% of Minnesotan adults with disabilities is imperative for the health and wealth of our communities. Citizens are asking for more education and resources to ensure the inclusion of themselves and their family members in businesses, healthcare, and community spaces. Lifeworks believes Minnesota has the values to include all abilities — we want to provide the tools to make it a reality.

The solution

Evidence shows that **disability inclusion trainings are catalysts for real change** and make the world more welcoming to people with disabilities. Lifeworks has seen firsthand how education on **disability inclusion can unlock opportunities for people with disabilities that were previously unattainable**.



In the past year, Lifeworks trained over 1,200 people. One business began hiring people with disabilities as soon as two weeks after their education session. Collectively participants reported 54% growth in their comfort level in supporting colleagues or neighbors with disabilities and 31% increase in their knowledge of disability inclusion. The results are promising, but **to achieve an inclusive Minnesota for all people with disabilities, Minnesota needs to invest in these efforts.**

With \$4,000,000 in legislative support, we will launch a 2-year statewide disability inclusion initiative to:

- **Build capacity for state-wide services led by those who have historically been underserved by disability services:**
 - Focus on each of the [6 Minnesota Planning Areas](#) to ensure equal access of resources to rural and tribal communities.
 - In each planning area, ensure culturally specific services and supports led by rural, immigrant, or BIPOC entrepreneurs and business owners, honoring people with disabilities and older adults.
 - Pilot support services requested by the community in each area. Common requests are in-person Day Support Services, Centers for Disability Inclusion, Career Navigation, Career Development Services, and Disability Inclusion Training and Coaching.
- **Launch a statewide “Disability Inclusion” assessment and associated technology solution for businesses and other community spaces.**
 - Empower businesses to enhance physical, sensory, and social accessibility factors.
 - Enable citizens with disabilities know where physically and sensory accessible spaces exist and staff have been trained on disability inclusion.
 - Educate on the Minnesota Human Rights Act and disability
- **Educate and coach businesses on the benefits and practice of inclusive employment**
 - Inclusive workplaces have 2x more economic profit than those who aren’t inclusive (Accenture, 2023).
 - Coach businesses through affordable accommodations.
- **Train and educate Minnesotans with disabilities and their families on practical steps to disability inclusion at work and in the community, including navigating services.**

Lifeworks will use funds to build out our disability inclusion division, including coaches and trainers to connect with thousands of people with disabilities, families, businesses, and community organizations statewide. Lifeworks believes in hiring people with lived experience in the community, so the people we hire will be people with disabilities who live in the different areas we are targeting. We will invest in community outreach staff who are culturally affirming to begin conversations around disability and start people on a path toward the services and resources available across Minnesota.

Additionally, **we would develop an innovative web-based or mobile tool that allows people with disabilities to choose “disability friendly” businesses in their communities** – from coffee shops to concert venues to ride share services to employers to doctor offices. **This assessment tool will go beyond current ADA standards and include aspects of disability that are not currently considered.**

With this ambitious work, Minnesota will see more people with disabilities and older adults access the services for which they qualify and decrease the bias and stigma that creates barriers across all our communities.