



Introducing the Colorado Disability Bar Association

BY GABRIEL KALOUSEK

We, the Colorado Disability Bar Association (CDBA), are here for you. To the attorney with hearing loss who is denied a request asking to have court participants talk into a microphone. To the juror who is dismissed due to an ADHD diagnosis, despite indicating a willingness to serve if she could just take notes. To the law clerk who has difficulty working onsite due to depression. To the law student with a churning stomach and constantly intruding “what if” thoughts. To the parents who do not understand why their 2-year-old is not speaking or interacting with other children. To

the professional who is asked to speak about disabilities, but at an inaccessible forum. To the legal professional who wants to learn how to be inclusive to those with disabilities. We are here for you.

The CDBA is a new specialty bar in Colorado. It is the brainchild of two current Colorado judges: Judge Anita Schutte of Colorado’s 2nd Judicial District and Judge Sueanna Johnson of the Colorado Court of Appeals. Both have disabilities: Judge Schutte has bilateral hearing loss and Judge Johnson is visually impaired. Both experienced challenges practicing law in the Colorado courts. And, as a result of these

challenges, both wanted to create a specialty bar that represents the interests of individuals with physical and mental disabilities. The CDBA does just that. It also serves as a resource for allies of those with disabilities and community members who interact with the Colorado court system.

Prevalence of Disability in the United States

In 2020 alone, about 21% of US adults experienced mental illness.¹ That is about 52.9 million adults. “Often, people avoid or delay seeking treatment due to concerns about being treated differently or fears of losing their jobs and livelihood. That’s because stigma, prejudice and discrimination against people with mental illness is still very much a problem.”² Some have described the consequences of mental health stigma as “worse than those of the condition itself.”³

In 2023, 12.1% of US adults describe themselves as having a mobility disability.⁴ “[M]obility disability is nearly five times as common among middle-aged (45- to 64-year-old) adults living below the poverty level compared to those whose income is twice the poverty level.”⁵ Additionally, 6.1% of US adults are deaf or have serious difficulty hearing.⁶ And 4.8% of US adults have a vision disability with blindness or serious difficulty seeing.⁷ “[A]dults with vision disability report the least access to health care.”⁸

The Mission of the CDBA

The CDBA seeks to increase awareness of the issues facing people with disabilities who work in the legal profession, parents of children with disabilities, spouses with disabilities, as well as supporting clients, community members with disabilities, and non-disabled allies. The CDBA strives to lessen the historical stigma attached to disabilities and assist in increasing access to the court system for those with disabilities of any kind.

As part of its mission, the CDBA emphasizes the people first, not their disabilities. Individuals with abilities and talents, who also happen to have a disability, should be able to express their thoughts without fear. The diversity of opinion, insights from experience, and appreciation of differences benefits us all.

An Emphasis on Strengths

The CDBA is acutely aware that individuals with disabilities have unique and important strengths. Some of these strengths include empathy, adaptability, perseverance, and creativity. The CDBA seeks to facilitate the exchange of ideas between its members and the legal profession. This will allow the Colorado bar to benefit from the strengths and unique perspectives of the CDBA members.

For instance, one member of the CDBA has obsessive-compulsive disorder, anxiety, depression, and attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder. Despite uncomfortable intrusive thoughts, a churning stomach suggesting something is always wrong, and an occasional bleak view of life, he is much more than the diagnoses. His experiences living with and managing his diagnoses have helped him develop a great deal of compassion. He is sensitive to the struggles of others and easily identifies when someone is in distress, even when it is not obvious to others. He now appreciates small acts of kindness and understands that such kindness can help others. He knows that difficult weeks, months, and years do not last forever, and he learned that difficult times give rise to a new sense of peace. This member has much to offer but is reluctant to share his struggles with others. He now has a place to talk about his disability, which in turn will benefit others in the specialty bar and the Colorado bar as a whole.

We Are Here to Support You

The CDBA is here to help the Colorado bar and its members overcome the historical stigma associated with disabilities, and to help members with disabilities overcome access issues. To all Colorado bar members who have a disability of any kind, to citizens with disabilities interacting with the Colorado judicial system, to parents of a child with disabilities who need a voice, and to those interested in the strengths people with disabilities possess, whether as a legal professional or non-disabled ally: we are here for you.

To learn more about the Colorado Disability Bar Association, please contact us at codisabilitybarassn@gmail.com.




Gabriel Kalousek is a Colorado assistant attorney general in the human services unit, where he provides general counsel on behavioral health issues. Previously, he was an assistant county attorney representing Weld County on all mental health and substance use cases. He is the current president of the Colorado Disability Bar Association.

NOTES

1. National Alliance on Mental Illness, <https://nami.org/Home>.
2. American Psychiatric Association, "Stigma, Prejudice and Discrimination Against People with Mental Illness," <https://www.psychiatry.org/patients-families/stigma-and-discrimination>.
3. "The Health Crisis of Mental Health Stigma," 387 *The Lancet* 1027 (Mar. 12, 2016), [https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lancet/article/PIIS0140-6736\(16\)00687-5/fulltext](https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lancet/article/PIIS0140-6736(16)00687-5/fulltext).
4. Disability Impacts All of Us Infographic, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, <https://www.cdc.gov/ncbddd/disabilityandhealth/infographic-disability-impacts-all.html>.
5. "CDC: 1 in 4 US Adults Live With a Disability," Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (Aug. 16, 2018), <https://www.cdc.gov/media/releases/2018/p0816-disability.html>.
6. Disability Impacts All of Us Infographic, *supra* note 4.
7. *Id.*
8. "CDC: 1 in 4 US Adults Live With a Disability," *supra* note 5.

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