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Civic Leadership by People with Disabilities

Now as perhaps never before, Americans are recognizing heroes in everyday life. From “the Greatest Generation” of World War II to the firefighters of the New York City Fire Department, we are recognizing the extraordinary contributions which citizens make to their communities and to our nation. People with disabilities are among the contributors. The World Health Organization’s new *International Classification of Function, Disability and Health* (ICIDH) recognizes the importance of their contributions – to themselves as well as their communities. It identifies participation in community life as a critically-important outcome and specifically highlights participation in civic and political affairs (ICIDH-2, 2001 Chapter 9 - Code d950).

Civic and political participation is the cornerstone of our Republic (deTocqueville, 1864). If representative democracy is to work, citizens must represent their values and those of their neighbors at every level. Significant values and interests frequently clash in the political arena, so this task isn’t easy – it requires fortitude and skill.

There are 2,308 non-metropolitan counties and 33,324 communities with populations of 10,000 or fewer in the United States. A typical *county* has at least three elected commissioners, and approximately five to seven standing committees focusing on roads, environment, buildings and codes, health and human services, and other concerns. Each committee has about five appointed citizen leaders. A typical *city* has three to five commissioners and a committee structure similar to that of a county. Using these numbers in combination with McNeil’s estimate (1993) that 8% of the U.S. adult population has a severe disability, we can estimate the number of rural Americans with disabilities involved in civic leadership (see table below). We estimate that 13,884 elected and 71,264 appointed civic leaders with disabilities serve rural communities.

Estimated Number of Civic Leaders with Disabilities in Rural America

	Total Units	Members in Units	Estimated Leaders with Disabilities
County Commissions	2,308	6,924	554
County Committees	11,540	57,700	4,616
City Councils	33,324	166,620	13,330
City Committees	166,620	833,310	66,648
Total	213,792	1,064,554	85,164

The National Institute on Disability and Rehabilitation Research (NIDRR) long-range plan calls for research into the societal roles assumed by people with disabilities. Our civic leadership research has a *strengths* orientation, which psychologists refer to as “positive psychology” (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). Designing research that asks positive questions about people with disabilities casts disability in a new light that can transform people’s perspectives about disability.

Research Goal and Research Issues

The goal of this project is to explore civic leadership roles and opportunities for people with disabilities in rural communities. The often partisan nature of public debate in the political process presents challenges to conducting research in this area. As we study the processes, impacts, and consequences of others’ civic involvement, we must avoid becoming entangled in partisan issues. This isn’t a new concern for applied researchers, but it is particularly important in studying civic leadership.

Next Steps

We have recently completed a series of interviews with elected and appointed leaders from around the U.S. and our analysis of this data will be used to develop a broader survey.

References

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