

# Preserving the Dignity of Clients with Disabilities

**70 million Americans report having a disability, making it the largest minority group in America. Disability Rights Wisconsin preserves the dignity of clients with disabilities while helping them through the regulatory process to attain Social Security and other benefits.**

BY AMANDA MARY-MYRIAH HALL

Thirty-five years ago, Americans were moved by images of individuals with physical disabilities climbing the (entirely inaccessible) U.S. Capitol steps to lobby their representatives on the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA). The bill focused on accessibility in public spaces, employment discrimination, and educational equity.

Unfortunately, while the ADA was a good start, individuals with disabilities continue to face structural challenges to getting an education, getting a living-wage job, developing their career, and getting married and having a family.

I work for Disability Rights Wisconsin (DRW), an intersectional social justice organization helping affect the dignity, independence, and liberation of individuals with disabilities. In my specific department I help Wisconsinites fight for their Social Security disability, Medicaid, and Medicare benefits.

What I've noted over 5 1/2 years with DRW is how our work helps people find their dignity again.

When someone has a disability, they are entitled to monthly monetary benefits to replace their wages, but first they must prove their disability(ies) to regulatory standards set by the Social Security Administration (SSA), and that is often a long and hard process.

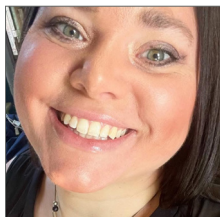
As a disability lawyer I spend most of my time focused on regulatory language, case law, and medical evidence.

As a community member, when I look at our clients, I see people facing among the most difficult seasons of their lives. Clients with sudden disabilities especially are juggling quite a bit. Winning an SSA disability claim

is a months- or years-long process, but most clients who suddenly cannot work are rightly more immediately concerned with paying the rent and feeding their children. In the current economic climate, even individuals whose disabilities have progressed slowly and who could plan for one day being unable to work, have trouble saving up much of a cushion in preparation. Some individuals also just have a really hard time asking for governmental assistance. Facing all this, for many people, challenges their identity and dignity.

It's a privilege to serve individuals in these moments. Watching them struggle while the disability determination process marches on is hard. While I'm most focused on objective regulatory and medical facts, the human element of my job infuses everything I do.

Last year I represented a man experiencing late-stage brain cancer whose case had been processing for over two years and was on its third appeal when I came aboard. By then, he knew his time was running low and he and his young daughter had had no choice but to scrape by on less and less while his case bounced around the appellate process. When I got to tell him that we'd won a fully favorable decision and he'd be getting a lump-sum payment and monthly benefits, of course it didn't somehow improve his prognosis or give him back the time it took to get the decision. But it did allow him to let go a breath he'd been holding for years. He'd found some dignity again, and that was everything. **WL**



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