

Allie Cannington

Allie Cannington, Manager of Advocacy and Organizing at The Kelsey, a non-profit that pioneers disability-forward housing solutions that open doors to homes and opportunities for everyone, was first drawn to organizing and the political landscape after accessing information highlighting the vibrant and diverse disability community. Allie joined the Independent Living Movement in 2011 (originally informally formed by a group of students in Berkeley in 1962) which has led the way for people with all types of disabilities to live with dignity in more accessible spaces, with greater inclusion, and equity. Aware that she was part of something larger, she says, “disability connects me and 61+ million other people across the country in a struggle against ableism, which is the oppression against people with disabilities which links and reinforces all forms of oppression.” Involved in the disability rights movement and organizing alongside people with all different disabilities for the past 10 years, she heard time and time again that a top barrier they faced was housing.



The Kelsey

At The Kelsey, Allie appreciates how they use what they learn on the ground to inform field building and policy change. “For me,” she says, “it’s really important to follow the lead of those most impacted by an issue.” The organization is based in the Bay Area and has 240 homes in the current pipeline, including multi-family housing policy and pilot programs. While their advocacy and field building work occurs mostly at the state level, The Kelsey is also gaining momentum on a national level, focused on building a groundswell of support for affordable, accessible, integrated, and inclusive housing. Since much of the funding for housing happens at the federal level, they are taking their place at the table as an entity that is actually developing the type of housing that needs to be more common around the country.



The Kelsey

The Challenge

As a nation and a state, Allie noted that we are falling short in terms of equitable access to housing for people with disabilities alongside so many other marginalized groups. While the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) provided people with disabilities with the protected right to live in integrated settings with needed services and support, to this day there’s not enough disability-forward housing options in communities where people with disabilities cannot just survive but thrive with services in their own homes. Consequently, people with disabilities face the current reality that their only option is to live in segregated institutional settings where there are limitations that challenge their autonomy and freedoms. The pandemic shined a harsh light on that reality as we see a disproportionate number of people dying in congregate settings. Allie comments, “Everyone needs their own home so that they can have autonomy over how they maintain their health and safety.” We still do not have the infrastructure, both on the services and the housing side to support our communities in a way where people can live and stay as healthy as possible in their own homes.

The lack of affordable housing is particularly difficult when a disproportionate percentage of people with disabilities rely on social security as their sole source of income. “We have yet to create enough deeply affordable housing that is actually affordable to someone whose sole source of income is SSI,” says Allie. Making matters worse is the fact that less than 5% of the housing stock is accessible to people with mobility and sensory related disabilities. From Allie’s perspective, it is imperative that California continue funding affordable housing, especially deeply affordable housing, but acknowledges that such funding is tied to federal advocacy.

Beyond the funding, she calls for cultural change. People who produce housing must understand and embrace accessibility, for the need to not just focus on compliance, but on using accessibility requirements as a starting point and going beyond the minimum requirements to benefit all.

At The Kelsey, they are looking at ways to incentivize the affordable housing field to reserve homes for people with disabilities who need home and community based services (HCBS) in order to live and thrive in their own homes. While such a government program exists to support this effort, it is severely underinvested. Thus, we must continue to highlight the housing needs of people with disabilities and build the infrastructure to produce, protect and preserve affordable housing, centered on the intersections of disability access and inclusion, and racial and economic justice. Building this infrastructure requires raising public awareness and leveraging political will to change the status quo. Increasing awareness depends on storytelling that helps people relate and understand how they must be a part of the solution.

Narrative Work

Allie conveys that the narrative must help people understand the proximity they have to disability either currently or in the future. The majority of people will experience disability in their lives so we need to move them on a given issue to realize how this work benefits their self interest. For example, after people with disabilities took hammers to sidewalks to demand accessibility, we now see curb cuts everywhere, which benefits a wide variety of community members beyond those with disabilities.



Photographer: Tom Olin

Part of this narrative work means deconstructing some of the harmful stereotypes around people with disabilities. Beyond white people in wheelchairs, we need a real picture of disability that is more diverse and centers communities of color who disproportionately experience disability. More authentic images of disability should be repeated and amplified as much as possible for the public to understand the challenges and solutions regarding disability rights that affect us all. Furthermore, we must shift and invest more in disabled leadership development in the housing field, especially with regards to disabled leaders of color in housing. We must share their stories and involve them in the policy decisions that their stories are impacting. On that note, she highlighted a project that The Kelsey will be launching soon regarding multi family [housing design standards for access and inclusion](#). Bringing together architects and designers with and without disabilities, the goal is to create the LEED equivalent for cross-disability accessibility in multifamily housing. The aim is to create expectations around access and inclusion that are intersectional and represent many types of accommodations. With over 300 different elements created, it will help developers, architects, policy makers, and advocates dream big around creating multifamily housing that supports people's health and well-being by providing the opportunity to achieve maximum accessibility and inclusion for everyone.

Strategic Collaboration

In expanding their collaboration with partners, Allie and The Kelsey have appreciated the relationship with Housing California. The Kelsey has been a critical partner in a variety of spaces, which includes embedding disability inclusion in the Roadmap Home 2030 and at Housing CA's Virtual (Un)Conference. Housing California hosted a Disability Accountability Session for the Roadmap 2030, where Disability advocates shared their experiences and their visions for what needs to be in the overall plan. Allie shared, "this was really the first time that a major player in the affordable housing space embedded disability as a key component in proposed solutions that were included in Roadmap Home, and it's just the beginning." In addition to working with partners like Zella Knight of Residents United Network and Navneet Grewal of Disability Rights California, to ensure disability-forward solutions were in the Roadmap, Allie has also been excited to support and see Housing California increase access for disabled leaders to attend the annual conference. Housing California provided scholarships and, at the conference, offered ASL and live captioning services. Ultimately, there are people at all levels of power who are living with disabilities, but we need them to make it a part of the lens they use to make decisions. Together, we can create greater consciousness around the topic of disability, bringing it into the mainstream of how we understand the state's housing crisis and bring solutions that will impact all of us.

Learn more about [Allie](#).