

Content notes: state violence, anti-Blackness, racism, ableism, audism, police brutality, incarceration, murder, white supremacy

Disability Solidarity

Completing the “Vision for Black Lives”

Harriet Tubman Collective

Comprising no less than 20 percent of the United States population, people with disabilities are the largest “minority” group in the nation. Notably, among differing socially constructed racial categories, the Black community has the highest prevalence of disability—with almost a full quarter of the Black population having some form of a disability.

And yet, on August 1, 2016, the Movement for Black Lives (the “Movement”) released a groundbreaking policy platform outlining the Movement’s idea of what is required to build a more just world for “all Black people” that did not once mention disability, ableism, audism, or the unspeakable violence and Black death found at the intersection of ableism, audism, and anti-Black racism. The six-point platform, which was supported or endorsed by more than fifty organizations from across the country, stated, in part:

We believe in elevating the experiences and leadership of the most marginalized Black people. . . . We are intentional about amplifying the particular experience of state and gendered violence that Black queer, trans, gender nonconforming, women, and intersex people face. There can be no liberation for all Black people if we do not center and fight for those who have been marginalized. It is our hope that by working together to create and amplify a shared agenda, we can continue to move towards a world in which the full humanity and dignity of all people is recognized.

The platform goes on to propose many crucial changes to the ways in which the government and its institutions treat Black people, providing a framework to combat many systems of oppression experienced by Black people in the United States and abroad.

Many, however, were left wondering why disability was erased, and ableism and audism omitted from this platform—especially considering the critical role ableism and audism play in *every* institution named by the Movement as a purveyor of violence against Black bodies and communities. Specifically, many were confounded as to how a movement whose primary focus is ending police brutality, could outright ignore the violence experienced by Black Disabled and Deaf people when statistics prove that at least 60 to 80 percent of the people murdered by police are, in fact, Disabled and/or Deaf people.

The following are a few more of the many ways in which Black Disabled people are disproportionately impacted by state violence:

- People with disabilities are twice as likely to live in poverty because poverty operates as a cause and consequence of disability;
- Children with disabilities enter the juvenile legal system at five

- to six times the rate of youth who do not have disabilities, with 65 percent of boys and 75 percent of girls in juvenile detention having at least one mental illness, and up to 85 percent of children in juvenile detention having at least one disability; and
- 55 percent of male state prisoners and 73 percent of female state prisoners have a mental health condition, with just 1 in 3 state prisoners and 1 in 6 jail inmates receiving treatment for their illness since being admitted.

Within each of the above-provided statistics, Black people and other negatively racialized individuals are grossly, disproportionately represented. Indeed, ableist social norms often criminalize the existence of disabilities such as schizophrenia, autism, oppositional-defiant disorders, and developmental and intellectual disabilities. To be sure, Black people with these and other disabilities are particularly vulnerable to unjust encounters with school officials, police officers, and the criminal legal system.

Many Black Deaf/Disabled leaders—especially those who have given their time and talent to the Movement for Black Lives—have noticed this deficit and believe that it reflects much larger problems with ableism and audism in the Movement. We, the undersigned, united under the coalitional name the Harriet Tubman Collective, are here to remind the Movement that liberation will never come without the intentional centering of Black Disabled/Deaf narratives and leadership. We know this because it never has.

We understand, based on our communication with some of the Movement's drafters, that at least one person whom the Movement identified as disabled was at the table when drafting this policy platform. However, the Movement did not connect with self-identified Black Disabled/Deaf advocates, community builders, or organizers

who have been on the ground and actively engaged in truly intersectional anti-violence work to support in the drafting process. This led to the Movement's overall failure to adequately address the disparities and specific violence and oppression that exist at the intersection of Blackness and Disability/Deafness.

This absence and erasure of the Black Disabled/Deaf experience was apparent within critical foci of the platform, including ending the war on Black people, reparations, invest-divest, economic justice, community control, and political power. The lack of understanding about the Black Disabled/Deaf experience was further seen with the use of the term "differently abled," which is considered offensive within disability communities. The phrase "differently abled" suggests that we are the locus of our disability when we are, in fact, disabled by social and institutional barriers. Not only is this term offensive, but it also reifies the marginalization that Black Disabled/Deaf people face on a regular basis by and within our own communities and oppressive state institutions.

If a staunch political stance is going to be taken about the Black experience, it is a grave injustice and offense to dismiss the plight of Black Disabled and Black Deaf communities. This platform and work is wholly incomplete if disability is not present. To be sure, no successful movement has existed without our leadership, and no movement will be successful without us.

Any movement that seeks to end police violence has no choice but to work to undo the racism *and* ableism and audism which, together, make Black Disabled/Deaf people prime targets for police violence. For instance, Darnell T. Wicker, a Black deaf veteran, was killed by police officers in Louisville, Kentucky, on August 8, 2016 (note that the lowercase *d* indicates that Darnell Wicker was deaf, not culturally Deaf). Body camera footage shows officers shooting Darnell Wicker multiple times within one to two seconds of issuing verbal orders on

a dark night. However, Darnell Wicker relied on speech-reading to communicate. His family asserts that he likely never heard or comprehended the officers.

The circumstances surrounding his murder made clear the critical importance of naming Darnell Wicker's deafness and Blackness as having been criminalized by police officers. Yet still, no national coalition, network, cohort was found to have even made mention of Darnell Wicker's deafness during their physical or online actions "in his name." One all-volunteer national Deaf/Disability Justice organization issued a powerful statement in American Sign Language, Spanish, and English calling for Disability Solidarity with Black Lives Matter in response to unrelenting police brutality against Deaf/Disabled people, including the murder of two D/deaf men last month alone. This sort of intersectional approach is sorely lacking in national organizations, networks, and coalitions that claim to fight for racial justice, disability rights, and deaf rights. This lack of intersectionality leads to yet more Black, Deaf, and Disabled people being killed by the police.

The Harriet Tubman Collective submits that any struggle against white supremacy must also address all of its interrelated flaws—including ableism and audism.

It is disingenuous, at best, and violently irresponsible at worst, to claim to want justice for those who have died at the hands of police, and neither name disability nor advance disability justice. We call upon organizations that label themselves "intersectional" to truly embrace that framework, and we remain as a resource and network of support to any who seek this end. We demand a centering of the Black Disabled/Deaf narrative, as this narrative represents 60 to 80 percent of those murdered by police—including all of those names that the Movement continues to uplift whilst erasing and dishonoring part of their humanity:

Tanisha Anderson

Quintonio LeGrier

Sandra Bland

Kyam Livingston

Miriam Carey

Symone Marshall

Michelle Cusseaux

Laquan McDonald

Ezell Ford

Natasha McKenna

Shereese Francis

Stephon Watts

Korryn Gaines

Darnell Wicker

Eric Garner

Mario Woods

Freddie Gray

And countless other Black

Milton Hall

Disabled/Deaf victims of
police brutality

We will not be martyrs for a movement that denies our humanity. We demand that "social justice" coalitions, networks, and organizations end the violent erasure of disability from these and all other narratives of the victims of police violence and murder. We further call for an end of the stigmatization of Black Disabled and Black Deaf people by those who claim to fight for us.

We are not an afterthought.

We are here.

We are fighting for all of our lives.

We are Black. We are Disabled. We are Deaf.

We are Black.

Our Black Disabled Lives Matter.

Our Black Deaf Lives Matter.

In Solidarity,

Party Berne

Kylie Brooks

Neal Carter

Patrick Cokley

Candace Coleman

Dustin Gibson

Timotheus Gordon Jr.

Keri Gray

Christopher DeAngelo Huff

Cyree Jarelle Johnson

Lorrell D. Kilpatrick

Carolyn Lazard

Talila A. Lewis

Leroy F. Moore Jr.

Vilissa Thompson

Alexis Toliver

Heather Watkins

Content notes: sexual assault, intimate partner violence, abuse, trauma

Time's Up for Me, Too

Karolyn Gehrig

Last year, when I most needed my voice, a blood blister grew in the back of my throat, making it harder to speak. New bones grew in the floor of my mouth, crowding my palate, further exacerbating the issue. I often ran my tongue over them to keep from biting.

Last year I went on dates with people who said, "You're hot," like it was some sort of flattering problem or puzzle; they were trying to figure out how to separate my attractiveness from my disabled body.

Sometimes on these dates I ran my tongue over my new bones, usually when dates got lazy enough to ask me to solve their sex puzzle for them. They'd lean in conspiratorially, eyes glinting, and coyly ask, "So how does that even work?"

Recently I've been thinking about the Golden Globes and Time's Up, and how powerful it was to see the way women can come together and flood a red carpet black. How it recalled the National Mall in pink; how, in the sea of both, I could not see myself easily.