Where do we go from here?
Some Steps to Help Make Your Masjid and Community Center More Inclusive

This handout provides some guidance and resources to help improve the inclusion of Muslims with disabilities in Muslim communities and masajid. Join us at **http://improvinginclusion.blogspot.com/**, where we will have an electronic copy of this handout available, and where we will share resources, experiences, and ideas with each other on how to improve inclusion in our masajid, community centers, and communities at large. If you have any questions, contact the ISNA panel organizers at **faaida1@gmail.com**.

May Allah (swt) guide and support us in everything we do with our hands, with our voices, and in our hearts, to improve the inclusiveness of our communities and organizations for individuals of all abilities.

Increase Awareness about Disability and Tackle Stigma

What: As a community we must educate ourselves and our communities about disability: about what Islam says in regards to disability, the challenges facing individuals with disabilities, what different disabilities involve, how best to interact with individuals of different abilities, and the community's responsibilities on these issues.
How: Read some of the resources listed below to educate yourself and others. Adjust your language to make your vocabulary more inclusive (read the *Disability Etiquette* resource below). Share what you learned at the ISNA panel with those at your masjid and community center. Create seminars and khutbas on the subject of Islam and disability and the other topics listed above. Work with your community to tackle the stigma around disability and stereotypes of disabilities. Make your attitude open, welcoming, and non-judgmental.

Increase Structural and Resource Accessibility

What: Architectural barriers to accessibility often prevent persons with disabilities from safely entering a building, conveniently moving around inside it, or participating fully in its activities. These barriers typically impact those with temporary or permanent immobility, visual and hearing impairments, and those who use wheelchairs, crutches, or canes. Among structures that may need to be addressed are parking and paths; ramps and stairs; doors and doorways; worship, lecture, social and recreational spaces; bathrooms and water fountains; and elevators and lifts. Inaccessibility also exists in the absence of services and resources such as Braille materials (e.g. copies of the Qur'an), sign-language interpreters and captioning at events including Friday khutbas, and inclusive classroom teaching.
How: Help your community leadership publicly acknowledge that barriers to full participation exist. Start the process of increasing awareness about these barriers and how to remove them. Survey community members, perform an accessibility audit, and visit other accessible houses of worship to get accessibility ideas. Do some research and seek help from those who already provide accessible resources and services. Make a plan to remove structural barriers and think about how funds will be raised to do so.

Create Support Groups and Provide Resources

What: Support spaces allow individuals and families to discuss challenges that they are facing, exchange information, and provide encouragement to each other. Facing disability can often be daunting for parents, families, and individuals. Having support from others who can relate to everyday challenges often makes life easier, even if just emotionally. Providing resources and services to individuals and families within the masjid/community center also increases inclusiveness. These can include references and referrals to organizations, mental health and healthcare services, and personal assistant or childcare/respite provision.
How: Organize a support group in your masjid or community center. Reserve an accessible space and invite families and individuals to share experiences or just spend time in an inclusive atmosphere. Offer references and resources – whether in newsletters, on bulletin boards, or elsewhere – detailing other service providers and support spaces in the area. Strategize how providing Muslim healthcare and assistance services can become reality, and mobilize support and funds to make it happen.

Offer Financial Support

What: Some individuals with disabilities may not be able to afford necessary equipment (e.g. a wheelchair or accessible van), services (e.g. personal attendants), or home modifications (e.g. ramps or bathrooms). These expenses can often be overwhelming. The Muslim community should extend financial aid to members in need.
How: Set up a fund to provide financial support for those individuals with disabilities and their families who need it, whether as a recognized target of zakat funds or as a separate fund. Make these funds accessible to those in need, perhaps by publicizing this service, so that individuals who are hesitant about revealing these needs have a contact in the masjid/center whom they can reach in confidence.

Making It All Happen

Here are some general tips to help make these changes reality in your masjid or community center:

• **Commit publicly** to expanding efforts to welcome members and visitors with all types of disabilities.

• **Create a committee or task force** to examine and improve the level of accessibility in the masjid/center. Call it the inclusion or accessibility committee, disability task force, or whatever seems appropriate. Involve and solicit input from stakeholders -- especially people with disabilities and their families, and professionals. The committee will audit current barriers to accessibility, develop a plan for improvement, and motivate the congregation to take necessary steps to ensure that the masjid/center is accessible to everyone who wants to worship, participate, and serve.

• **Educate and encourage** masjid/center leadership to lead the community and organization toward disability awareness and inclusion.

• **Set up a fund** at the masjid/center for accessibility projects, like those listed in the categories above.

• **Visit another faith's house of worship** to see how they create accessibility. Adapt their best practices.

• **Involve those who have the most experience** with and knowledge of disability and accessibility issues. Our greatest resources to tackle all of these challenges are Muslims with disabilities themselves and their families, as well as professionals in our communities, from mental health practitioners to building engineers to special education teachers, who support individuals with disabilities every day.

References & Resources

Books and Publications

Accessible Faith: A Technical Guide for Accessibility in Houses of Worship, by Elizabeth A. Patterson & Neal A. Vogel (Retirement Research Foundation, 2003). (A guide to planning, designing, and funding greater access).

Disability Etiquette: Tips on Interacting with People with Disabilities. *United Spinal Association.* Available at http://www.unitedspinal.org/pdf/DisabilityEtiquette.pdf. (A guide to improving your interactions with people of different abilities).

Encyclopedia of Disability, Gary Albrecht, ed. (2005). (A collection of entries from over 500 scholars that discuss histories, rights, facilities, laws, and cultures among people with disabilities worldwide).

Loving Justice: The ADA (Americans with Disabilities Act) and the Religious Community, edited by Nancy L. Eiesland & Don E. Saliers. (National Organization on Disability, 1996). (This publication explains the relationship between ADA, other disability legislation, and the religious community).

That All May Worship: An Interfaith Welcome to People with Disabilities, by Ginny Thornburgh & Ann Rose Davie (National Organization on Disability, 1997). (A good introduction to disability awareness).

Resource Websites

ADA Basics – **http://www.adabasics.org** (for basic information on the Americans with Disabilities Act)

Center for the Study and Advancement of Disability Policy – **http://www.disabilitypolicycenter.org**

Disability Resources on the Internet – **http://www.disabilityresources.org**

Disaboom – **http://www.disaboom.com** (an online community where viewers can find and share information)

National Rehabilitation Information Center (NARIC) – **http://www.naric.com**

Pathways Awareness Foundation – **http://www.inclusioninworship.org/** (improving inclusion in houses of worship)

U.S. Department of Justice's ADA homepage – **http://www.usdoj.gov/crt/ada**

U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission – **http://www.eeoc.gov**

U.S. Government – **www.disabilities.gov** (information on the federal government's disability-related resources)

Organizations (* indicates a Muslim organization)

American Association of People with Disabilities – **www.aapd.com**

*AMHP's Disability Needs & Awareness Working Group – **http://www.amhp.us/DNAWG.asp** (American Muslim)

Autism Speaks – **www.autismspeaks.org**

*Canadian Association of Muslims with Disabilities (CAMD) – **http://www.camd.ca** (Canadian Muslim)

Coalitions of Organizations for Accessible Technology – **http://www.coataccess.org**

Disability Rights Education and Defense Fund – **http://www.dredf.org/**

*Global Deaf Muslim - **http://www.globaldeafmuslim.org/**

Independent Living Research Utilization – **www.ilru.org**

National Coalition for Disability Rights – **http://www.adawatch.org/**

National Council on Independent Living – **www.ncil.org**

National Organization on Disability – **www.nod.org**

*SMILE - **http://www.smilecan.org/** (Canadian Muslim, with focus on children)

Special Religious Development, Archdiocese of Chicago – **www.spred.org**