

REPRESENT

Ableism in National Security Spaces

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Rebecca Cokley

Represent is a series from the CSIS International Security Program on diversity, inclusion, and representation in national security. In this piece, Rebecca Cokley addresses challenges facing people with both visible and invisible disabilities in the federal work force, particularly the SF-86, a federal form required for security clearances.

When I was recruiting for the Obama administration, I used to ask every candidate that sat across from me in the White House, “What was your call to service? What makes you want to serve your country?” And answers would vary, from individuals whose families had generations of service of various kinds; to people who felt compelled to shape America into something better, more inclusive; to those who were really excited by President Obama’s platform and priorities. And every now and then I’d have someone say, “because I can’t serve in the military, since I have a disability.” This always struck me.

30 years ago the [Americans with Disabilities Act \(ADA\)](#) committed to creating a nation where people with disabilities had full participation, equality of opportunity, economic self-sufficiency, and independent living. However, it is often stated that you cannot legislate attitudes, and the continued disproportionate unemployment of people with disabilities provides us with clear evidence. The federal government is historically [one of the largest employers](#) of people with disabilities. While many agencies have diversity statements that include disability, information about accommodation policies, or public aspirations to hit [federal hiring](#) benchmarks, true inclusion of people with disabilities in government, and especially in national security agencies, has a long way to go. Part of turning the tide on this has to do with an actual acknowledgement of ableism, or the discrimination faced by people with disabilities.

According to disability scholar, T.L. Lewis, [ableism](#) is:

“A system that places value on people’s bodies and minds based on societally constructed ideas of normalcy, intelligence, excellence and productivity. These constructed ideas are deeply rooted in anti-Blackness, eugenics, colonialism and capitalism. This form of systemic oppression leads to people and society determining who is valuable and worthy based on a person’s appearance and/or their ability to satisfactorily [re]produce, excel and ‘behave’.”

Ableism in the national security space appears in different ways. For years there was significant fear of the federal government’s security clearance background form, the [SF-86](#). Up until 2016, the form included a broad question tied to an applicant’s mental health and whether they had sought help or treatment for their mental health over the past seven years. This could be assumed to mean any number of things, from seeing a marriage counselor, to seeking mental health treatment after the loss of a loved one, to seeking treatment for substance misuse. Any or none of these could have an impact on how you perform an essential function of a job, which is what matters according to the ADA.

In 2016, the SF-86 underwent dramatic changes to include more specific questions, such as whether you are currently undergoing treatment, have been hospitalized, have been declared incompetent, or are refusing to comply with current medical/mental health advice. Regardless of the intention behind the changes, the questions still put up a glaring red “NO ENTER” sign for people with disabilities. These questions imply that you cannot be trustworthy if you are one of [46.6 million people with mental illness](#) in this country, and are therefore less than everyone else.

This attitude takes on particular meaning now with the global coronavirus pandemic. Shortly after the pandemic began, in May of 2020, the military moved to be able to prevent survivors with coronavirus from serving, making coronavirus an [official disqualifying condition](#) but later [reversing the decision](#). Stay at home orders and social distancing have also had a significant impact on the national discourse on mental health and mental illness. The stress of the ongoing global pandemic has contributed to higher diagnoses of mental health conditions or exacerbated the symptoms of those already living with mental illnesses. Access to mental health care was limited even prior to the onset of Covid-19 and many have cited [growing concerns about lack of funding, lack of culturally affirming care, and lack of peer and community-based programs as failures of the existing system](#). This lack of access to existing treatments magnifies inequalities and can lead already marginalized people to fall further through the cracks. While [tele-mental health](#) has been proposed as a possible solution, a lack of adequate insurance coverage, the enforcement of privacy protections, and accessibility concerns all contribute to the precarious nature of this means of treatment.

According to the [Center for American Progress](#), among many other organizations, COVID and the accompanying recession and social unrest, are contributing to an increase in feelings of trauma and loss. And yet the mental health system that currently exists is not prepared with the necessary funding, infrastructure, or culturally responsive frameworks. In some ways I hope we will look back at this period of time as one when mental illness gained significant acceptance because of how impacted the world has been by these circumstances.

A variety of other barriers continue to affect the national security sector. A [2018 report](#) from the Rand Corporation looking at disability employment in the civilian workforce showed that lack of awareness on behalf of managers about expedited hiring authorities, lower rates of promotion (than their non-disabled colleagues), and lack of information by prospective employees about opportunities within DoD that all factor into lower representation of people with disabilities.

People with disabilities sometimes need to take time off to address their health needs, much like any other employee might take leave due to illness or personal reasons. However, disabled employees are sometimes [penalized](#) for doing so. Gaps in a resume resulting from disability-related time away from the workforce can lead employers to make inaccurate assumptions about a prospective employee. In 2020, Rep. Joaquin Castro introduced legislation, the [Promotion Accessibility Act](#) to create a more equal playing field for disabled Foreign Service Officers hoping to advance in their careers.

Advocates like [Keith Nolan](#) and others have been working to push the military to accept deaf enlistees, arguing that deaf personnel could contribute in non-combat roles.

People are policy. It matters who is at the table. And disabled people still have a long way to go to get to that table.

Author

Rebecca Cokley is the founding Director of the Center for American Progress' Disability Justice Initiative, the first disability policy project to be housed inside of a major national progressive organization. From 2013-17, served as the Executive Director of the National Council on Disability, an independent agency charged with advising Congress and the White House on issues of national disability public policy. Prior to leading NCD, Rebecca served 4 years in the Obama Administration at the Departments of Education, Health & Human Services, and a successful stint at the White House where she oversaw diversity and inclusion efforts. Rebecca started in advocacy at the Institute for Educational Leadership where she was responsible for youth development/leadership programming. Rebecca serves on the board of directors for Common Cause, Rockwood, and the ACLU of DC. In 2017 she and her family were featured as part of CNN's #ToBeMe series and she's appeared on Vox/Netflix series "Explained," "Last Week Tonight with John Oliver" and NPR. She is the 2020 Richman Distinguished Fellow for Public Life for Brandeis University. In 2015 she was inducted into the inaugural class of the Susan M. Daniels Disability Mentoring Hall of Fame and was the recipient of the Frank Harkin Memorial Award by the National Council on Independent Living. She is a Rockwood Leading From the Inside Out Fellow (2016-17). Rebecca has a B.A in Politics from the UC Santa Cruz, is the proud spouse of Patrick and mother of 3 and is currently working on her first two books.

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