

Disability Justice and Social Justice: Entwined Histories and Futures

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By Alice Wong

As Americans take time to reflect on the work of Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. this year, some will spend their day serving the community, some will tweet or post something on Facebook as a sign of solidarity...and some will sleep in, enjoying their day off.

Just as Dr. King and the many activists involved in the civil rights movement were influenced by Gandhi and Thoreau's use of civil disobedience, leaders of the disability- rights movement witnessed first-hand the power of non-violence in the 1950s and 1960s.

Similarities exist among the [Montgomery bus boycott](#), the [Birmingham campaign in 1963](#), and actions taken by disabled activists in the 1970s. [Section 504 of The Rehabilitation Act](#) prohibits discrimination against people with disabilities from participating in any program or activity receiving federal funds based on incapacity.

Secretary of Health, Education, and Welfare Joseph Califano refused to sign regulations related to Section 504. On April 5, 1977, non-violent protests and demonstrations began nationwide. A group of disabled activists began a sit-in at the San Francisco offices of HEW, the longest such demonstration ever undertaken. [Kitty Cone](#), one of the demonstrators at the 504 sit-in, recalls:

“At every moment, we felt ourselves the descendants of the civil rights movement of the '60s. We learned about sit-ins from the civil rights movement, we sang freedom songs to keep up morale, and consciously show the connection between the two movements. We always drew the parallels. About public transportation we said we can't even get on the back of the bus.”

On April 28, 1977, Califano signed the regulations and the historic protest ended. Section 504 codified [civil rights for people with disabilities](#) and the notion that people with disabilities are a distinct minority group and protected those individuals from discrimination.

Dr. King might be best known for his “I Have a Dream Speech,” but I will re-read his [1963 Letter from Birmingham Jail](#) this MLK Day.

“Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere. We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly.”

I interpret it as Dr. King's response to criticisms for his participation in the Birmingham campaign. Numerous injustices cross lines of race, of ethnicity and of disability, the list of which includes the following:

- Disparities in school suspension and expulsion rates

Studies suggest that students of color and students with disabilities are funneled into the [school-to-prison pipeline](#) at disproportionately high rates...with even greater representation by disabled students of Color.

- Voting restrictions

[Voter ID laws or restrictions](#) in the 2012 election resulted in long lines across our nation. Historically used as a method of suppressing the Black vote, these circumstances create barriers for many [voters with disabilities](#) and older adults who cannot stand in line for hours or who may not have a current driver's license. In addition, many voters with disabilities must navigate inaccessible polling sites and voting procedures.

- Police brutality

Just this week, a deaf man in Oklahoma, allegedly, was beaten for seven minutes because he did not respond the questions that state troopers asked him. (Follow the line below.) My friend Leroy Moore writes extensively about police brutality against disabled people of Color [here](#) and [here](#).

<http://reason.com/blog/2014/01/15/oklahoma-state-troopers-allegedly-beat-u>

Social movements influence each other in myriad ways. On this MLK Day, I ask these questions to people who care about social and racial justice:

- What do you know about disability justice and the history of our people?
- How can people from multiple communities organize in a cohesive manner to bring about systemic change?
- How does dismantling the structural oppression of one group harm, marginalize, or affect other groups?
- What are own failings when it comes to -isms?
- How do we embrace diversity without resorting to tokenism?

As Dr. King reminded us, each of us must look beyond the injustices we experience and realize that other injustices are intertwined with ours.

[Click here to sign a petition asking American Girl to create a disabled doll.](#)

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