



2025 DISABILITY LEAD

IMPACT REPORT

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EMILY BLUM AND CHAD TURNER

Dear Friends,

2025 was a milestone year for Disability Lead in every sense. We marked our 10th Institute, officially launched our Southwestern Pennsylvania chapter, strengthened our leadership team, and—most importantly—watched our Network of disabled leaders move into roles of power and influence across Chicago and beyond. This annual Impact Report is our opportunity to reflect on what we built together.

At our annual board retreat, we did something we had not done since our founding: we crafted new vision and mission statements. The original statements reflected who we were as a new organization incubated through ADA 25 Chicago and focused on emerging leaders in the Chicago region.

A decade later, we are ready for a bolder declaration.

Our new vision: People with disabilities lead with power, influence, and authenticity.

Our new mission: To elevate and connect a network of leaders with disabilities who shift power, transform systems, and redefine leadership.

These new statements reflect not just where we have been, but where we are going. These words are not aspirational but describe the true characteristics of our current Network.

2025 also marked a pivotal year on the path to replicating and expanding our model. In July, Disability Lead officially launched its Southwestern Pennsylvania (SWPA) chapter. And by December, the momentum continued with the announcement of the inaugural SWPA Institute cohort. The SWPA chapter represents progress toward a future where the Disability Lead model is no longer a Chicago story alone, but a national one. We have an ambitious goal to operate in 10 cities by 2040, and the work underway in the SWPA chapter is laying the foundation.

Internally, 2025 was a year of organizational strengthening. The Board approved several strategic moves to better equip the organization for opportunities, including internal promotions and board additions. Our Board and staff are stronger, deeper, and more aligned than at any point in our history.

None of this happens without you. The Members who donate, mentor, connect, advocate, and show up. The partners who open doors. The funders who believe in the power of disabled leadership while the rest of the world is still learning. At a time when diversity, equity, and inclusion commitments are under pressure across the country, we are more certain than ever that the voices, lived experiences, and leadership of disabled people are exactly what our communities need. We are not retreating. We are expanding.

As we celebrate a decade of impact and look ahead to 10 cities by 2040, we thank you for being part of this movement. The best is ahead.

With gratitude,



Emily Blum
CEO



Chad Turner
Board Chair



STRATEGIC PRIORITIES

Model Replication and Expansion

Disability Lead’s unique model of empowering disability leadership in civic and professional spaces is one that can be adapted in communities across the nation. Through strategic planning, Disability Lead identified expansion as both a goal and an ongoing area of focus, recognizing that other geographies need leaders who can bring perspectives spanning the rich diversity of lived experiences. The successful launch of the Southwestern Pennsylvania chapter demonstrates that the model translates beyond Chicago, taking root in a new region with new leaders and partners. ***By 2040—the 50th anniversary of the Americans with Disabilities Act—Disability Lead aims to establish a presence in ten regions.***

Disability Leadership Summit

The second annual Disability Leadership Summit was held on February 25 and 26, 2025, ***with attendance growing 25% from the prior year’s convening***, and bringing together disabled leaders and allies from across sectors and geographies. Designed by disabled professionals to support the advancement of disabled professionals, the two-day Summit was organized around distinct themes: “Empowering Disabled Leaders” on day one and “Strengthening Inclusive Workplaces” on day two. Day one opened with a keynote from Rachel Arfa, Commissioner of the City of Chicago Mayor’s Office for People with Disabilities, followed by sessions on personal branding, leadership journeys, disability rights in the workplace, and authentic storytelling.

Day two featured a keynote from disability advocate and Blindish Latina founder Catarina Rivera, who shared her personal journey navigating hearing loss and Usher Syndrome, offering practical strategies for building inclusive workplaces. Her keynote was followed by sessions on neuroinclusion in the workplace, executive buy-in for disability inclusion, technology and disability rights, and building sustainable employee resource groups. ***The breadth of speakers and topics reflected the Summit's core conviction: that when disabled leaders are equipped and visible, workplaces and communities are stronger for it.***

Staff and Board Development

The Board approved the promotion of Emily Blum from Executive Director to Chief Executive Officer, and the promotion of four staff members: Jenn Jones to Director of Operations and HR, Clare Killy to Director of Programs, Anne Renna to Director of Development, and Risa Rifkind to Chief Strategy Officer. Disability Lead also welcomed new board members Ana Monga, a 2023 Fellow who leads Future of Work policy at Google, and a new Board Treasurer, Arnesa Omeragic, a Vice President at Associated Bank and a financial services executive with two decades of experience.





ORGANIZATIONAL GROWTH

Institute

2025 marked Disability Lead’s 10th Institute, bringing together a remarkable cohort of 19 Fellows from across the Chicago region. Reflecting the growing diversity of the applicant pool, 85% of applicants identified with a disability other than physical—including a rising number of Autistic leaders—and 60% identified their sexuality as other than heterosexual. In mid-2025, recruitment began for the 2026 Institute, marking the first time applications were accepted from disabled leaders living and working in both Chicago and Southwestern Pennsylvania.

Southwestern Pennsylvania Chapter

In 2025, Disability Lead officially launched a Southwestern Pennsylvania (SWPA) chapter. This milestone marked the culmination of years of planning, collaboration, and support from more than one hundred local stakeholders. Since then, Disability Lead has recruited a first cohort of Fellows, welcomed established disabled leaders to the Network, and formed an Executive Committee to guide the local chapter.

Chapter Launch

At Pittsburgh’s Energy Innovation Center in July, Disability Lead unveiled a bold vision for disability leadership in the region. Attendees included advocates,

non-profit partners, business leaders, and funders. Guests had the opportunity to commit to investment in the community, pledging support as champions, builders, and connectors to create a strong foundation for the new chapter. The program also spotlighted the induction of the chapter's very first Members. The launch marked the largest single investment in disability leadership in the region's history, with backing from FISA Foundation, the Heinz Endowments, Henry L. Hillman Foundation, and Staunton Farm Foundation.

Growing Membership

Through community outreach, relationship building, and referrals across sectors, fields, and levels of government, Disability Lead steadily grew the SWPA network of leaders with disabilities. By December, the inaugural cohort of 13 Institute Fellows was selected and announced. The selection committee was comprised of Chicago and SWPA Members. This dynamic group of disabled leaders represent a range of fields, holding roles in various organizations deeply rooted in SWPA communities. ***Disability Lead ended the year with more than 25 new Members in the chapter.***

Network

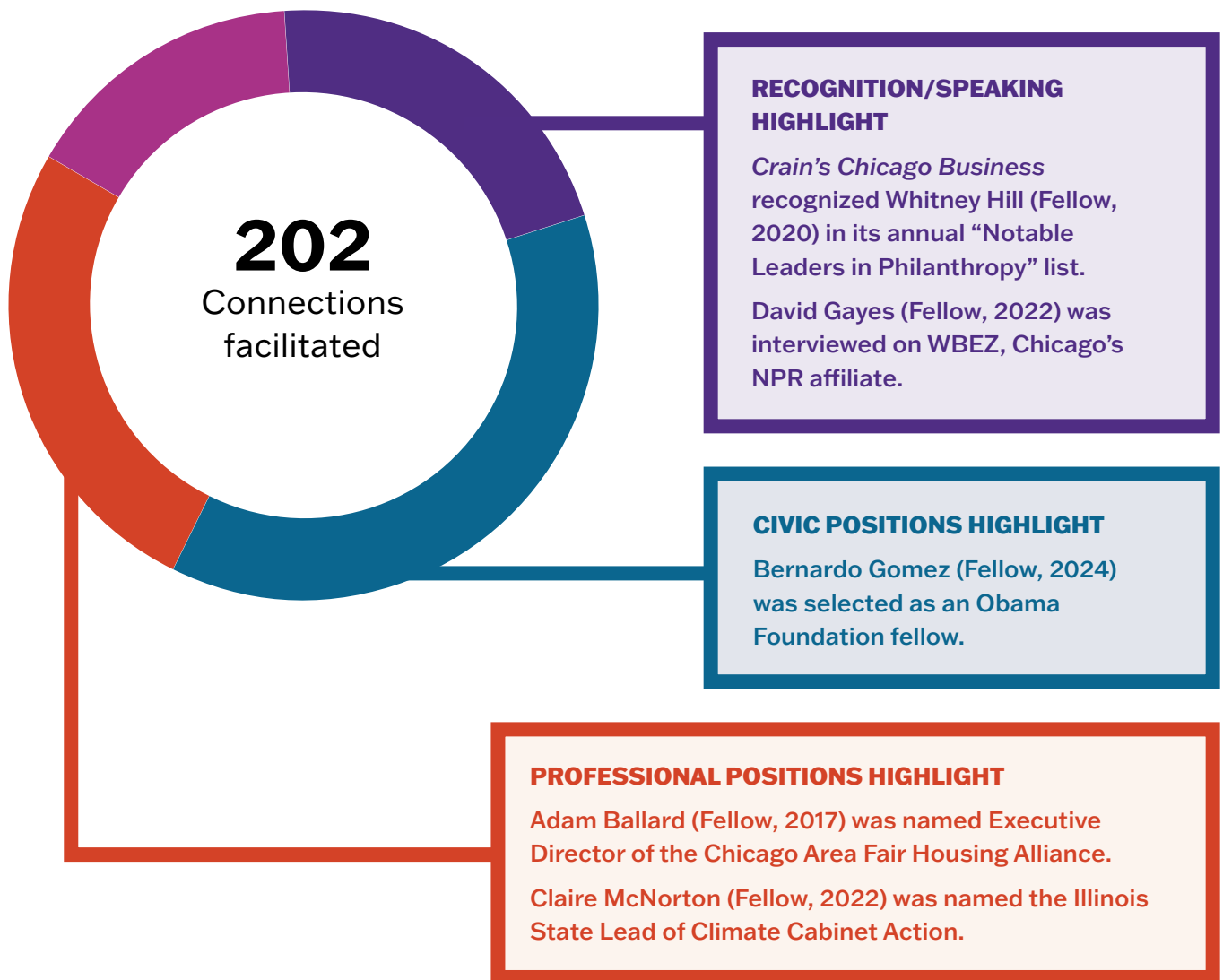
Throughout 2025, the Disability Lead Network—***now more than 300 positive disruptors strong***—remained active, connected, and growing through a robust calendar of programming. A regular in-person networking opportunity, Exchange, brought Members together in the spring and fall. A summer celebration, Ignite, convened Members and supporters to celebrate Disability Pride Month. Other Member-exclusive events included a virtual conversation with Eric Ward from Race Forward, and a presentation on cultivating meaningful connections.

Three Disability Power Series events also brought Members and the broader disability community together for critical conversations, including a session on taking mental health from awareness to action with Vesper Moore; a presentation on emotional intelligence by Dr. Mary “MJ” McConner; and a discussion on representation in healthcare featuring Members Dr. Lisa Meeks of Docs with Disabilities, Katherine Vakil, Kruti Shah, and Dr. Zoie Sheets, highlighting the importance of disabled representation for the future of inclusive healthcare.

Additionally, two public storytelling events, following in the tradition of Alice Wong, provided Members with a platform to share authentic stories. These events underscored the power of storytelling to disrupt myths and build connections. The summer event, “Our Stories: Turning the Page,” featured Members Chaitanya Manchanda, Laura Isaacs, and Tina Lowry, and the fall event, “Our Stories: Reclaiming Power,” featured 2025 Fellows Sydney Barta, Guadalupe Pinzon, and Allaina Humphreys.

CONNECTIONS

In 2025, Disability Lead Members continued to take on consequential roles across governmental, non-profit, and private sectors. In total, Disability Lead facilitated 202 connections. Disability Lead Members, occupying pivotal leadership positions, influence policies and practices that profoundly affect society.



43 Recognitions and Speaking Engagements **75** Civic Positions

53 Professional Positions **31** Networking Opportunities



MEMBER HIGHLIGHT

LEADERSHIP MULTIPLIES

How Our Members are Bringing Disability Leadership to More Rooms

At Disability Lead, disability is a strength, an asset to leadership. Disabled leaders can and do create solutions to society's most intractable social challenges, because these challenges are inherently disability issues. By connecting disabled leaders to civic engagement opportunities and supporting continued leadership development, network growth, and platform building, Disability Lead expands prevailing perspectives on leadership. Members carry the skills they have sharpened through Disability Lead programs into new spaces. When Disability Lead connects its Members to opportunities, they bring their disability-centered leadership with them, transforming not only the spaces they are in, but communities beyond their own.

Across the Network, ***Disability Lead Members participate in some of the nation's most prestigious and competitive leadership programs.*** Since joining the Network, many have strengthened their authentic leadership style rooted in disability identity, lived experience, and professional expertise.

Here are eight examples.



Bernardo Gomez (Fellow, 2024)
Obama Foundation Fellows

Bernardo Gomez has built his career around giving back to the Chicago communities that shaped him. As the Policy Advisor for the Mayor’s Office of Community Safety and Chair of the City of Chicago’s Disability Employee Resource Group, Bernardo leads public safety initiatives and community engagement—work that reflects both his expertise and his roots. In 2025, he was selected as an Obama Foundation fellow, a civic leadership fellowship that supports innovative civic leaders working on the front lines of change in their communities. On his leadership journey and time as a Fellow, Bernardo reflects, “Disability Lead absolutely helped shape the path that led me here. Before joining the fellowship, there were moments where I viewed disability as something I needed to work around professionally instead of recognizing how much it shaped my perspective, empathy, and leadership style.”



Tayler Mathews (Fellow, 2024)
92NY Women inPower Fellowship, the Neurodivergent Leader Cohort

“Disability Lead has consistently shown me that I’m a respected member of the community and supported me in my professional journey.”

Tayler Mathews is a Black Feminisms and Disability Politics scholar whose work centers on Black women and girls, and justice for survivors of gender-based violence. Her resume includes economic justice research and advocacy work for disabled people, and implementation support for the Dignity in Pay Act in partnership with the Illinois Council on Developmental Disabilities. In 2025, Disability Lead nominated her for the historic 92nd Street Y’s Women inPower fellowship, the neurodivergent leader cohort, a dedicated leadership development program for neurodivergent professionals.



Gizelle Clemens (Fellow, 2023)
Willie's Warriors at the Chicago Foundation for Women

“Disability Lead helped me think more expansively about leadership, access, coalition building, and systems change.”

Gizelle Clemens has built a career on bringing marginalized voices, “from the margins to the center.” Her varied professional, personal, and philanthropic endeavors demonstrate her commitment to equity and supporting leadership. In 2025, Gizelle participated in Willie's Warriors, a leadership program named in honor of trailblazing Texas legislator Wilhelmina Delco, and designed to develop the next generation of women leaders committed to advancing gender equity and dismantling systemic barriers.



Guadalupe Pinzon (Fellow, 2025)
EmpowHer Expressions Program

In 2025, Guadalupe Pinzon participated in the Disability EmpowHer Network, a community dedicated to advancing the leadership, visibility, and power of disabled women and femmes. Their EmpowHer Expressions Program supports participants in using storytelling, advocacy, and creative expression as tools for leadership and social change. Guadalupe's path to disability leadership has been shaped by deep personal experience and a desire to be the mentor she needed growing up. Combining lived experience with certifications in Early Childhood Education, Guadalupe's resume includes mentoring children with Spina Bifida. Currently, she is focusing on becoming an effective advocate and leader for individuals with disabilities across the lifespan. “I stepped into this program with a clearer sense of direction and a stronger understanding of the impact I want to make. Through Disability Lead, I had access to mentors who shared guidance and feedback that helped shape how I approach leadership in a more intentional way.”

Change Collective Fellowship

Two Disability Lead Members were selected for the 2026 Change Collective fellowship, which supports emerging social change leaders who are driving equity and justice in their respective fields and communities.



Elon Sloan (Fellow, 2025)

Elon Sloan is a Black and queer consultant, facilitator, and artist whose work is rooted in post-colonial epistemology, constructivist pedagogy, and popular education. Simply put, Elon focuses on how knowledge is shaped in communities and not just institutions, using hands-on learning and community-based teaching. Their experiences include non-profit programming, namely at Lurie Children's Hospital and the Poetry Foundation. When reflecting on their time as a Fellow, Elon found the connections to other disabled independent consultants and conversations they had with their assigned mentor informed the next phase of their leadership journey and their Change Collective project. "It's been really liberating to think about this as something I have been so passionate about, and it is my niche, and if I keep working at this, my niche can become my work. And that is something I didn't have a lot of confidence in before the Disability Lead fellowship."



Jasmine S. Deskins (Fellow, 2025)

Jasmine Deskins is a public health professional whose work advances racial, health, and disability equity for marginalized communities. The Indiana native is growing her network in Chicago, where she wants to engage on topics related to her areas of expertise in research, program management, evaluation, and stakeholder collaboration. Her public health resume includes CDC-funded research on chronic illnesses and disease, and she is interested in "creating intentional spaces for Black women living with chronic illness and pain, a community [she is] part of." When reflecting on her experience with the Change Collective, Jasmine said, "I'm grateful for [Disability Lead's] introduction, because I immediately recognized it as something aligned with both my values and where I'm headed."

Leadership Greater Chicago

Two Disability Lead Members were also selected for the 2025 Leadership Greater Chicago (LGC) cohort. LGC brings together executives from business, government, non-profit, and philanthropy to build the relationships, skills, and shared understanding needed to address the region's most complex challenges.



Carol Lipari (Member, 2025)

Carol Lipari (경서미) is the Director of Culture & Strategy at Access Living, where she is responsible for implementing the organization's disability justice strategy. Her resume includes multiple degrees, including a Ph.D from Vanderbilt University, and she holds several health-related board and committee memberships. Her leadership is a blend of her expertise and lived experience as a disabled, LGBTQ+, Asian American woman who was born with Infantile Facioscapulohumeral Muscular Dystrophy. When reflecting on her LGC fellowship experience, Carol shared on LinkedIn that she is "so lucky to benefit from my cohort's expertise, insights, curiosity, and kindness; my work is enriched, and so am I."



Christina McGleam (Fellow, 2018)

"My experience at Disability Lead and the experience I gain each day as a Deputy Commissioner at MOPD supported me in understanding that both my professional and lived experience as an individual with a disability provides a valuable and often unique perspective in leadership programs, and I was proud to be able to share this as part of the LGC Signature Class this year."

Christina McGleam serves as Deputy Commissioner of the City of Chicago Mayor's Office of People with Disabilities (MOPD). She was appointed to the role in 2021 by another one of Disability Lead's Members, Commissioner Rachel Arfa. In this role, she manages employment training and youth initiatives, serves as the MOPD's access officer, represents MOPD on the Regional Transit Authority Eligibility Review Board and the Accessible Airport Advisory Committee, and is a member of the Chicago Cultural Access Sub-Committee. Her resume includes a certification in Accessibility Core Competencies, and her career reflects a commitment to making Chicago more accessible, equitable, and just. The LGC fellowship is a natural extension of Christina's civic impact and recognition from Chicago's leadership community as a trusted leader in disability equity at the highest levels of city government.

These eight leaders show how Disability Lead programs, which offer connections, confidence, and direction, can serve as a launch point and carry disability leadership into some of the most prestigious and competitive spaces in the country. When disabled leaders recognize their disability as an asset rather than something to work around, perspectives expand and systems shift. Ultimately, a pattern develops: Disability Lead Members go out, seize opportunities, and turn each one into more skills, deeper networks, and greater impact.





FUNDER HIGHLIGHT

MACARTHUR FOUNDATION

Disability Lead has been fortunate to count the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation as a partner since our founding

As one of the nation’s largest philanthropies, MacArthur supports creative people and effective institutions committed to building a more just, verdant, and peaceful world. In Chicago, that mission takes shape through the Foundation’s Chicago Commitment—an enduring, place-based investment program with a deep and unwavering focus on the city where Disability Lead was founded. The Chicago Commitment is dedicated to investing in people, places, and partnerships to advance racial equity and build a more inclusive Chicago, with areas of focus spanning civic partnerships, vital communities, culture and the arts, and advancing leadership. Disability Lead is proud to be among the organizations MacArthur has recognized as essential to that vision—because disability leadership is inseparable from any genuine commitment to equity and inclusion.

That commitment extends to the very top of the Foundation. In March 2025, MacArthur President John Palfrey assumed the role of Co-Chair of the Presidents’ Council on Disability Inclusion in Philanthropy, a peer network of foundation leaders convened by the Disability & Philanthropy Forum. The Presidents’ Council is committed to advancing disability inclusion, rights, and justice—pledging to disrupt ableism, support movements led by disability communities, amplify the leadership of disabled people in the philanthropic sector, and foster a culture of inclusion within their foundations.

Palfrey has been clear about the stakes. “In these unprecedented times, this is the moment to stay the course,” he said upon taking the role. “We all have an important role to play in making the world more inclusive and accessible. Being part of the Presidents’ Council has encouraged me and many other philanthropic institutions to do more to advance disability inclusion, rights, and justice.” For Disability Lead, having a funder whose president not only expresses that sentiment but also acts on it, matters enormously.

MacArthur’s support has been consistent and sustaining across Disability Lead’s first decade. In 2025, that commitment deepened in a meaningful way. Recognizing both the moment and the organization’s growing needs, MacArthur provided an additional \$25,000 grant specifically to invest in professional development for staff and for Members, increasing the Foundation’s total support over the years to \$865,000. That kind of targeted, trust-based investment reflects exactly how the Director of MacArthur’s Chicago Commitment, Tara Magner, thinks about what good funding looks like.

“Strong organizations are built on strong people,” said Magner. “When we invest in the growth of leaders—in their skills, their connections, and their sense of community—we’re investing in the long-term impact of the work. Disability Lead has demonstrated, year after year, that its leaders are ready to grow. Supporting that growth is exactly what a funder committed to equity should do.”

The grant put real opportunity in motion. Staff used the funds to attend two national convenings, the Social Innovation Summit and the Disability:IN conference, connecting with peers, partners, and ideas from across the field and bringing those insights back to sharpen Disability Lead’s work. For the 2025 Institute, the investment took a different yet equally powerful form: an outdoor retreat atop Chicago’s Old Post Office Building, organized in partnership with SUM, which uses time in nature to build community and develop collective leadership. Getting our Fellows outside, together, away from screens and agendas, created space to deepen connections and reflect on their time in the Institute, a year-long leadership development fellowship. Clare Killy, Disability Lead’s Director of Programs, observed what the outdoor experience made possible,

“There’s something that happens when you get out of the Zoom room and into the same physical space—conversations deepen, connections solidify, and people have a chance to reflect on what they’ve built together. The SUM experience gave Fellows that before stepping into what’s next.”

We are grateful to MacArthur and to the entire Chicago Commitment team for seeing the full picture of what it takes to build a lasting organization: not just funding programs and outputs, but also investing in people.

DONOR / BOARD / STAFF LIST

Thank you to our generous funding partners who helped Disability Lead fulfill our mission to elevate and connect a network of leaders with disabilities who shift power, transform systems, and redefine leadership.

Corporations, Foundations, Governments, and Organizations

AARP	Heinz Endowments	Polk Bros. Foundation
Albert Pick Jr. Fund	Henrietta Lange Burk Fund	Rudd Resources
Bally's Corporation	Henry L. Hillman Foundation	Sprout Social
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Brookfield Properties	Kessler Foundation Inc	The Chicago Community Trust
CDW Inc.	Microsoft Corporation	The Field Foundation of Illinois Inc.
Debicki Foundation	Morningstar, Inc.	The May and Stanley Smith Charitable Trust
FISA Foundation	Northwestern Medicine	W.K. Kellogg Foundation
Google	Opportunity Fund	
Health Care Service Corporation		

Individuals

Kym Abrams	Emily Blum*+ and Neal Kleemann+	Keidra Chaney*
Azeema Akram*+	Barbara Blum+	Etahn Cohen
Sergio Alfaro*	Amelia Boomker	Barbara Cohen
Katie Anderson	Rebecca Brasfield*	Emily Culbertson and Harold Rees
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Francine Bell*		

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Blair Findlay*	Lora Laverty	Arnesa Omeragic
Joseph Fitzgerald	Caitlyn Lee*	Julee Opel
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Rebecca Williford*
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Atta Zahedi*

** Denotes Disability Lead Member*

+ Denotes Changemaker Circle recurring donor

Disability Lead makes every effort to ensure the accuracy of this listing. Please contact Anne Renna at info@disabilitylead.org if your name was omitted or there was an error in your listing. Thank you.

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** Denotes Disability Lead Member*

In Memoriam

Disability Lead, the Network, and the broader disability community lost two important leaders and Members in 2025: **Tuyet Le** and **Peter Berg**.



Tuyet led a strategic planning process for Disability Lead, guiding the organization to coalesce around three central questions rather than a formal plan—an approach that ultimately resulted in the launch of the Southwestern Pennsylvania chapter and the Disability Leadership Summit.

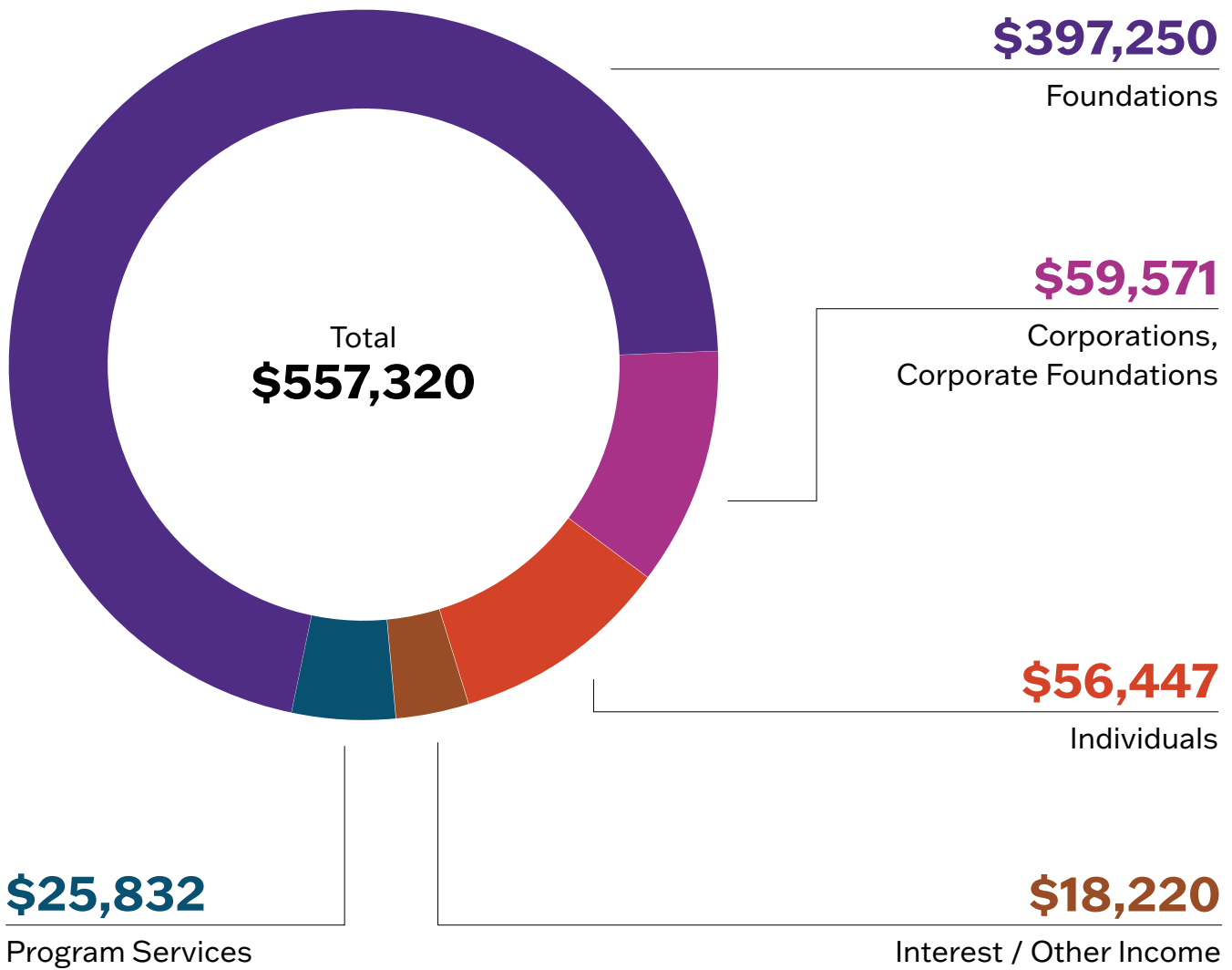


Peter was a highly respected, nationally recognized expert on the Americans with Disabilities Act and played a critical role in advising Disability Lead on accessibility best practices.

Graphic Design: Sarah Sommers Design, sarahsommersdesign.com

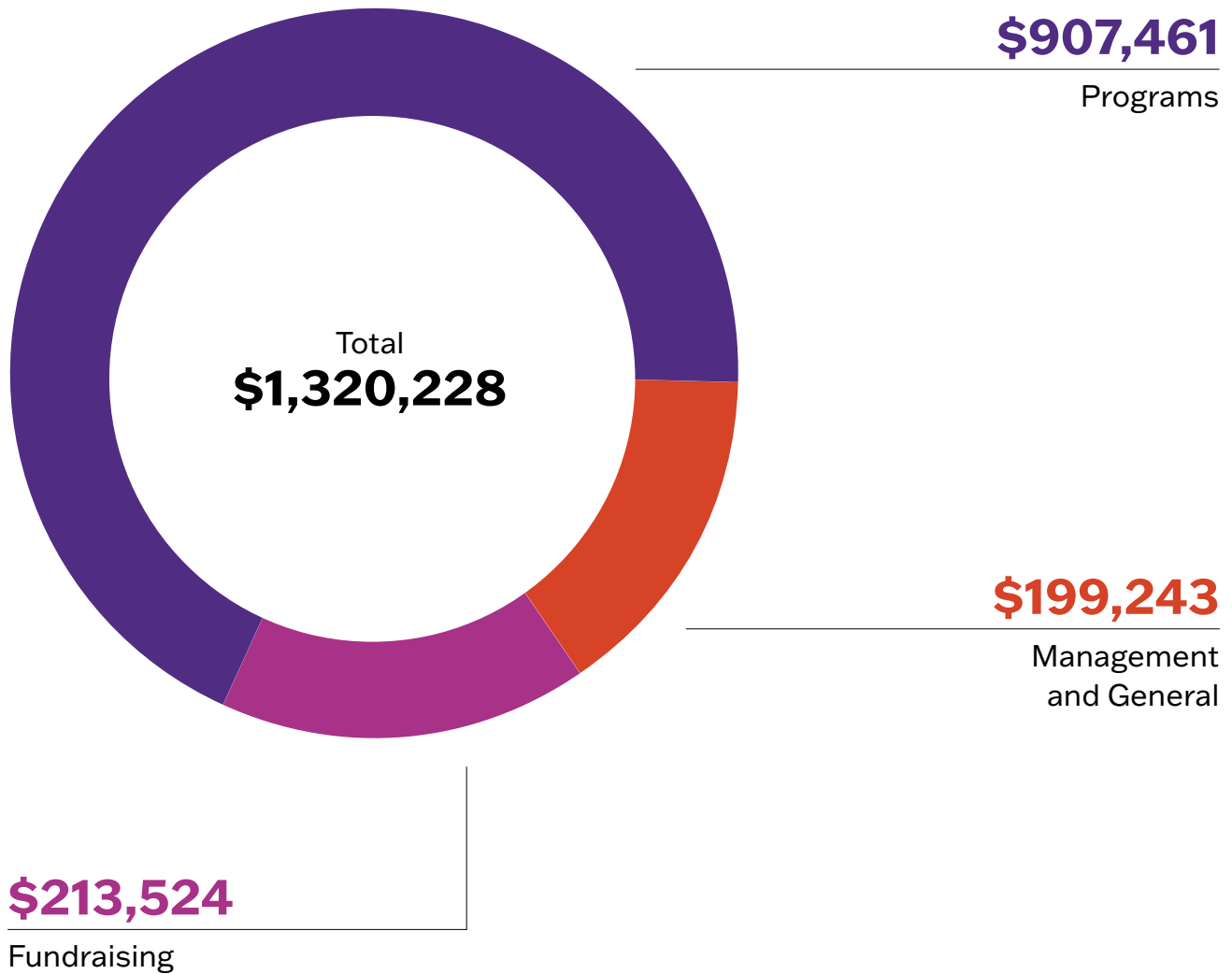
FINANCIAL SUMMARY

Income



FINANCIAL SUMMARY

Expenses



Disabili+y Lead

Power. Influence. Change.

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