

## POLITICS

# 'Utterly terrifying:' Disability advocates fear rollback of DEI under Trump, Braun



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## Key Points

President Trump's executive orders banning DEI also mentioned "accessibility" programs

President Trump recently falsely blamed longstanding federal efforts to recruit workers with disabilities in the wake of a deadly plane crash

Advocates say they're concerned about how people with disabilities will be impacted by federal and state actions

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Beth Crain, a wheelchair-bound mom of three, knows diversity, equity and inclusion efforts have been maligned in Indiana and across the U.S. by Republicans including Gov. Mike Braun and President Donald Trump.

But the Monroe County woman sees DEI as something else entirely: a movement that's helped the disabled community gain critical accommodations in the workplace and society.

"None of us want to be a drain on society," she said. "We want to help our society grow and blossom and bloom to be the fullest it can. We shouldn't have to fight to live a life that everybody else lives."

Now, she fears that advancements for the disability community are slipping away through recent executive orders and rhetoric targeting DEI.

While the focus of Braun's executive order banning DEI specifically bans race- and ethnicity-based preferential treatment and doesn't mention disability, Trump's orders go further, also banning "accessibility" programs and activities across the federal government, which advocates said is a direct threat to the disability community.

"To me, they're not separable," Crain said. "People of all genders, people of all races ... have disabilities. I'm going to fight tooth and nail to keep all protections in place across all populations."

Trump also [recently falsely blamed longstanding federal DEI efforts to recruit workers with disabilities](#) in the wake of the deadly plane crash in Washington, D.C., [which is still under investigation](#).

"Making claims like these – especially with no evidence to support them – are harmful to people with disabilities, their families, and their communities," according to [a statement after the crash](#) from the Indiana Governor's Council for People with Disabilities. "Hoosiers with intellectual and developmental disabilities are contributing members of the state of Indiana. There are thousands of us working and looking for employment."

Beth Crain's son, Kaleb Crain, a 32-year-old man born with cerebral palsy, is one of nearly 500,000 working-age Hoosiers with disabilities.

He recently lost his job in the private sector at an Indiana engineering firm. It's been a dark time trying to stay on top of the news while managing the job hunt, he said. People with disabilities have [substantially higher unemployment rates](#) than those without disabilities.

"Being in the job market again in this environment is utterly terrifying and stressful, in the environment where DEI is being rolled back," Crain said. "I'm afraid because of these executive orders that companies are going to start just not even looking at me as a potential candidate for employment."

Kim Dodson, director of the Arc of Indiana, has long been an advocate at the Indiana Statehouse and at the national level for people with disabilities.

She said she's concerned about efforts to help people with disabilities being swept up in a rush to eliminate DEI.

"I'm really concerned about how broadly interpreted some of these things are going to be," Dodson said. "The disability community is not the focus ... of some of the DEI efforts, the Medicaid conversations, all of those things, but we are thrown into those conversations."

She said it's currently a "waiting game" to see how people with disabilities will be impacted by state and federal policy decisions, and that her organization remains in active communication with the Braun administration.

Braun, who has advocated for "merit, excellence and innovation" instead of "diversity, equity and inclusion" was asked by IndyStar about his views regarding DEI initiatives related to inclusion and equity for people with disabilities in Indiana. He did not directly respond to the question through a spokesperson, but intends to keep intact the Governor's Council for People with Disabilities.

## **'How do we navigate that?'**

Melissa Keyes, director of Indiana Disability Rights, is another advocate trying to navigate the recent executive orders.

She leads the statewide agency with the mission of advancing the rights of people with disabilities in Indiana. Similar organizations exist in all 50 states and are funded by federal grants. So far the 30-person Indiana agency, which has more than \$3 million in annual funding, hasn't been notified of any loss in funding.

The agency's work includes holding service providers and government agencies accountable for mistreatment of disabled people, ensuring schools are meeting the

needs of students with disabilities, and civil rights and voter protection for disabled Hoosiers.

"The disability community is one of the most diverse, marginalized communities out there," Keyes said. "You have all races, all religions, all ages, nationalities, ethnicities represented in the disability community."

The uncertainty has made it "very difficult" to plan ahead, Keyes said.

"It's challenging because, for so long, disability was not necessarily included in DEI," Keyes said. "Now that DEI is under attack, how do we navigate that?"

## **'Intent is always overshadowed by impact'**

Kevin McCracken, a member of the Governor's Council for People with Disabilities, said he is concerned about a half-decade of civil rights advancements for the disability community being "eroded little by little" at the state and federal level.

"Most people hear DEI and they think primarily race and maybe gender or sexual orientation, but most people don't work their way down to ability," said McCracken, who has hearing loss and identifies as a member of the disabled community. "The disabled community has always been a marginalized community, and only in my lifetime have there been some semblance of equal rights."

Along with DEI being marginalized, McCracken said he's concerned about the Trump administration's plans to dismantle the federal U.S. Department of Education, which [oversees whether school districts and states are complying with federal law](#) protecting students with disabilities and provides funding to support those students. There's also an ongoing federal lawsuit that Indiana joined targeting parts of Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, which helps students with disabilities qualify for accommodations in public schools.

There are [1.6 million U.S. students that are covered](#) by so-called 504 plans, according to the most recent federal education data. In Indiana, it's estimated that roughly 2% of students are eligible for a 504 plan.

Recently, the state of Indiana and other plaintiffs filed a joint status report clarifying that they don't plan to argue Section 504 as "unconstitutional on its face" after widespread pushback from disability advocates. Hearings in [the lawsuit](#) are currently [paused](#) at the request of the states and HHS.

"Our lawsuit is focused on Biden's unlawful rule, which added 'gender dysphoria' to the list of disabilities," Indiana Solicitor General James Barta said in a statement. "His actions would have made applications of section 504 unconstitutional. With the lawsuit on hold and President Trump working to restore federal law to its original intent, Indiana students will continue being protected."

McCracken said he wasn't sure if the lawsuit intended to go after 504 plans, but that "intent is always overshadowed by impact."

"Regardless of what's in their hearts, (that would) roll back more than a half century of civil rights legislation for the disabled community," he said.

## **'Doors wouldn't have been opened'**

Beth Crain, the Monroe County woman, wants a more inclusive future for her children than what she encountered in the workforce. She sees DEI efforts as critical in making that progress.

She remembers feeling discriminated against in job interviews, for example. A screener phone call would go well, only to be followed by an unsuccessful in-person interview.

"I come rolling in, and I'm an obese person, for one. I'm in a wheelchair, I have tics, and all of a sudden it's, 'We filled that position,' or 'We don't think it's going to work

out,' but nobody would give me a reason," she said.

That was long before DEI efforts became mainstream in the corporate world that her son Kaleb is now trying to navigate.

People with disabilities faced a better environment in the workplace thanks to efforts to center diversity, equity and inclusion, she said.

"Those doors wouldn't have been opened without that effort," she said.

Kaleb Crain said he's "barely keeping it together" as he tries to lean on loved ones and community members for support.

He said he wants policymakers to "have a backbone" and support people with disabilities and the government programs they rely on. He said he is particularly concerned about the lawsuit targeting 504 plans, potential cuts to Medicaid and Braun's executive order aimed at getting ABA therapy costs under control.

"A lot of people require these things to function and live," he said. "We are not just on them because we're lazy or don't want to get a job. Most of the time it's not even our fault we don't get the job. ... I'm scared for my life at this point."

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