



2023 ANNUAL REPORT

COALITION OF TEXANS WITH DISABILITIES

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Introduction

As anyone in the Texas Legislature's orbit can attest, 2023 was rough. Texans in power have always resisted fully investing in their constituents with disabilities, and we really felt that this legislative session (which extended to December with a staggering four special sessions). Although we met with considerable disappointment, we are also proud of all that we accomplished with and for our community.

We're pleased to report on our successes outside the Capitol, as well, in public education, the arts, and consumer direction. What did CTD do to bring down barriers for Texans with disabilities in 2023? Read on!

All images by CTD unless otherwise noted.

2023 by the Numbers

- ▶ \$2.188 billion moved in state budget, with our influence
- ▶ 33,155 emails sent by 3,072 CTD members to 72 legislators
- ▶ 1,341 attendees at CTD advocacy events
- ▶ 59 advocacy partners
- ▶ 50 media hits
- ▶ 13 partner sign-on letters
- ▶ 19 workgroups and advisory boards

CTD at the 88th Texas Legislature

With a \$33 billion operating surplus and another \$27 billion savings in the Rainy Day Fund, advocates for disability services saw 2023 as a once-in-a-lifetime session for Texas to make long-neglected advances. That optimism faded, though, and many groups saw little or nothing from legislators. Texans with disabilities didn't get all we needed this session, but we came away with more than nothing—a lot more.

Our advocacy team worked long hours for months alongside our members, self-advocates, and partners. We had notable successes in budget appropriations, voting rights, and access to medicines, plus victories challenging egregious state-sanctioned practices in school discipline and criminal justice. We advanced the conversation on inclusive child care, special education, youth justice, Medicaid waiver interest lists, medical cannabis, and more. A few highlights:

Community Attendant Wages

As in past sessions, one of our top priorities was raising community attendant wages. At the beginning of 2023, we recommended a base hourly wage of \$15. This was a big ask, but we were optimistic. In addition to the budget surplus, we had seen a jump in media coverage on attendant wages (which would continue through the session), legislative leadership on this issue was strong, and we knew CTD member and partner advocacy would be extraordinary.

As the session played out, however, legislators still had considerable confusion about how to raise the base wage, and it became clear early on that the \$15 target was unlikely. In the end, the Legislature put the base hourly wage of community attendants at \$10.60.

This is woefully inadequate, and we will keep fighting for a higher wage.

We are encouraged, though, that the budget conference committee took the Senate's methodology of raising the wage, which will give more to attendants than the House's version: \$2 billion this biennium and another \$2 billion carried forward in the next biennium's base budget. This will put us in a stronger position to seek a competitive wage next session.

In addition, a raise to \$10.60 per hour is the biggest increase the Legislature has ever given attendants, by far. In the context of the budget as a whole, the Legislative Budget Board (LBB) identified only two Medicaid items as budget highlights, and the attendant wage rate was by far the larger.

Student Safety and Schools

Over the last few years, CTD and our partners have noted an alarming uptick in news articles and reports about students with disabilities being violently, sometimes lethally, disciplined in public schools. Right out of the gate this session, CTD helped organize a powerful press conference on harmful student restraint in schools to educate lawmakers about the dangers of such practices—and offer policy solutions to end them. With the No Kids in Cuffs coalition, CTD was instrumental in passing SB 133 (West), the No Kids in Cuffs bill, a measure to ban certain types of physical restraint, tasers, handcuffs, and the use of chemical irritants on students in 5th grade and below.



From left, Representative Lacey Hull, House author of No Kids in Cuffs, CTD's Jolene Sanders, and the Autism Society of Texas' Jacquie Benestante at the School Shouldn't Hurt: Ending Harmful Student Restraint press conference, January 30.

Also regarding public schools, the fight over vouchers deeply divided state leaders and played out over the unprecedented four special sessions. A school voucher, or education savings account (ESA), is a subsidy that parents use to send their children to a private school, as opposed to a public one. The subsidy comes from the state (meaning taxpayers). For students with disabilities, vouchers are problematic for a number of reasons, including that federally required rights and protections in public schools do not apply to private schools. In addition, a voucher program would take money away from public schools, which already lack adequate funding for many things, including serving their students with disabilities.

CTD joined a broad coalition of education groups, parents, educators, administrators, and students to fight hard against private school vouchers through the end of the fourth special session in December. As of this report, no proposal has passed.

Consumer Protections in Healthcare

HB 999 (Price), the Copay Accumulators bill, was a multiyear, multisession endeavor to ban the practice of commercial insurance companies double dipping into copay assistance funds while not applying those funds to a patient's deductible or out-of-pocket maximum.

CTD played a critical role in advocating for this bill in both the House and Senate, making office visits, giving both invited and public testimony

across multiple hearings, and utilizing our broad network of partners and advocates to raise awareness. CTD helped lead the Texas All Copays Count Coalition (55 organizations) and the Coalition for Stable Patients (24 organizations) to get this bill across the finish line.

We are extremely pleased to have secured this win but remain vigilant for new insurance practices that unfairly shift costs to the patient.

Criminal Justice

In the area of criminal justice, we worked with a determined group of criminal justice advocates and self-advocates to support SB 1146 (West), a bill that will end the dehumanizing—and completely inaccessible—conditions of medical transport for women in the Texas Department of Criminal Justice, known as medical chain.

By December, we had already received reports from incarcerated women that conditions are improving as they make the journey across Texas from their units to receive medical care.



Advocates at an April 11 House Corrections hearing, from left, Jennifer Owens, Lori Mellinger, Marci Simmons, Andreas Michelle, Deb Gore, and CTD's Dennis Borel and Jennifer Toon.

In a session dominated by culture wars, we take pride in these achievements and know that we have laid important groundwork for more positive outcomes in 2025. Our Legislative Report at www.txdisabilities.org has more details about our work.

In the Community

Workgroups

In and outside the Legislature and with state agencies, our staff served on 19 workgroups, advisory councils, and boards. These include groups focused explicitly on disability issues, like the Guardianship Reform & Supported Decision-Making Workgroup and the Special Education Stakeholders Roundtable, and those that benefit from having our community at the table, like the Texas Legislative Education Equity Coalition and the Texas Patients First Foundation board.

Awards

Two longtime partner organizations honored CTD staff with awards:

- Texas Advocates presented its annual Friendship Award to Dennis Borel for friendship and partnership in the 2023 Legislature and many years before.
- The American Council of the Blind of Texas named Chase Bearden Advocate of the Year for his hard work in the 2023 Legislature on voter access.

Advocacy Education, Awareness, and Training

In 2023 we hosted two programs to educate and support disability advocates and self-advocates at the Legislature.

CTD's interactive Raise Your Voice! (RYV) Advocate Connection Program provides a functional understanding of the legislative process while linking self-advocates with the CTD advocacy team and each other to pursue shared policy goals. It also gives CTD staff insight into the concerns of Texans with disabilities that informs organizational policy priorities, recommendations, and strategy. During the 2023 Legislature, we:

- educated over 500 participants on 19 RYV calls from February 13 through December 11,
- connected participants with organization, legislative offices, and self-advocate leaders, and
- gathered input from Texans with disabilities that will inform our advocacy in the 2024 interim and 2025 legislative session.

A newer program, the Advocacy Corps, seeks to engage, encourage, and support self-advocates who have lived experience with disabilities. A-Corps interns commit to legislative participation and receive training from CTD staff who share their priorities.

In our first year, 12 A-Corps interns joined the program from around the state, and two bills were filed at their request.



From left, CTD's Chase Bearden with A-Corps interns Leah Gardner, Laurie Truesdell, Megan Truesdell, and Shawnett Viani on a Capitol visit.

External to our own programs, CTD staff presented at 15 advocacy events, reaching at least 824 individuals. Presentations included guest lectures to college and high school students, press conferences, advocacy training, legislative briefings, and consumer education.

In the News

CTD's staff and work appeared in the media 50 times in 2023, and we connected reporters with our members and A-Corps interns whose relevant lived experience amplified their stories. Just a few highlights:

- The State of Disability in Texas: A Texas Standard Special, September 2. The Texas Standard.
- At-Risk Texans Are Getting Half the Attendant Care They Need, July 20. D Magazine.
- Gov. Greg Abbott vetoes bill that would give people with disabilities new option to vote by mail, June 21. Texas Tribune.

Read these full statements and more at txdisabilities.org/about-us/media-kit.

Arts Programming

Cinema Touching Disability

2023 was a milestone for Cinema Touching Disability as we celebrated our 20th year! October 20 and 21 we held the Festival at a new venue: the Rollins Theater at the Long Center for the Performing Arts. We had a great time watching movies and hanging out in this beautiful, new-to-us space.

Each night, attendees enjoyed ambient music by Gretchen McMahon (Celtic harp) in the lobby and Devin Gutierrez (keyboard) in the theater. Both are local musicians with disabilities!

To the screen we brought 13 outstanding pieces from our international Short Film Competition. These documentaries and narrative shorts examined people with disabilities living both ordinary and extraordinary lives.

Find the full lineup, including this year's winners, at www.ctdfilmfest.org.

In addition to these screenings, the Festival welcomed a ton of guests from near and far.

- Mayor Kirk Watson helped us kick off the Festival on Friday,
- we learned how to sign some Austin FC chants from Deaf Capo star Leo Bopp,
- the Texas Film Commission presented us with a proclamation in honor of 20 years, and
- directors Andy Cockrum, Cory Reeder, and Cameron S. Mitchell attended to present their films and take audience questions.

As we celebrated an incredible 20 years, we also said goodbye to our Film Festival founder and director, William Greer. Under William's leadership, the Film Fest went from an idea to an award-winning, internationally recognized staple in Austin's film scene. He is moving on to the next chapter in his career, and we wish him the best.



From left, Devin and Gretchen with audience member (and fellow musician!) Mary Rose Bushland. Photo by Patty Bushland.

Literary Events

Our monthly Lion & Pirate inclusive open mic (with partner Art Spark Texas) remained mostly virtual in 2023. Each month we feature a different artist(s) with a disability, before opening the mic to community participation. 2023 featured a number of poets and musicians as well as a storyteller, a video artist, and video tributes in memoriam to members of the L&P community who have passed.

In October, we held our first in-person open mic since the pandemic shutdown. On a beautiful afternoon, we gathered in Art Spark's backyard for music, poetry, dancing, and more. It was delightful to be together again!



Amy Litzinger and Juan Muñoz perform an improvisational dance. Photo by Patty Bushland.

Also in collaboration with Art Spark, we continued our support of the Thunder & Lightning Poetry Collective, which is led by and serves BIPOC disabled and queer disabled poets. In 2023 CTD provided technical support and communications access and helped plan:

- Three Storm the Mic! poetry showcases featuring the work of BIPOC disabled and queer disabled poets.
- A monthly series of creative writing workshops (three each month from April to October), open to the public and led by queer, BIPOC, disabled poets.

Consumer Directed Services (CDS) Update

CDS supports Texans in attendant care programs to take control of their services. It's not a secret that the pandemic and the introduction of EVV (Electronic Visit Verification) threw a wrench at all Texas agencies supporting CDS consumers. CTD's CDS team installed user-friendly technologies that solved these issues. In fact, we're open to new CDS consumers now!

Call (512) 236-1070 or email cds@txdisabilities.org for information.

Notable Moments from 2023



Jan. 26: Dennis Borel runs into former CTD policy intern Evan Weinstein, who was starting his legislative internship in Senator Judith Zaffirini's office.



Feb. 10: Dennis Borel and longtime ally Richard Ponder co-presented on the 20th anniversary of CTD's history-making Team Everest '03 expedition.



May 6: Adam Greibel releases Gene Rodgers' ashes into Lake Lady Bird—on a bungee cord! Over 120 of Gene's friends gathered to celebrate his life and send him off in a style he would have appreciated.



Oct. 7: Dennis Borel and William Greer join a group of incredible advocates and good friends for the annual ADAPT FUN RUN for Disability Rights, in person for the first time in three years. Photo by ADAPT of Texas.



Oct. 22: Laura Perna is really happy to see the Lion & Pirate crew in person! From left, back: Juan Muñoz, April Sullivan, Ms. Boye Nagle, Laura, Mary Rose Bushland, Devin Gutierrez; front: Amy Litzinger and Krystal Cates. Photo by Patty Bushland.



Nov 14: Jolene Sanders joins a united community of students, disability advocates, parents, and educators for a press conference to urge legislators to oppose private school vouchers.



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