



Non-competitive

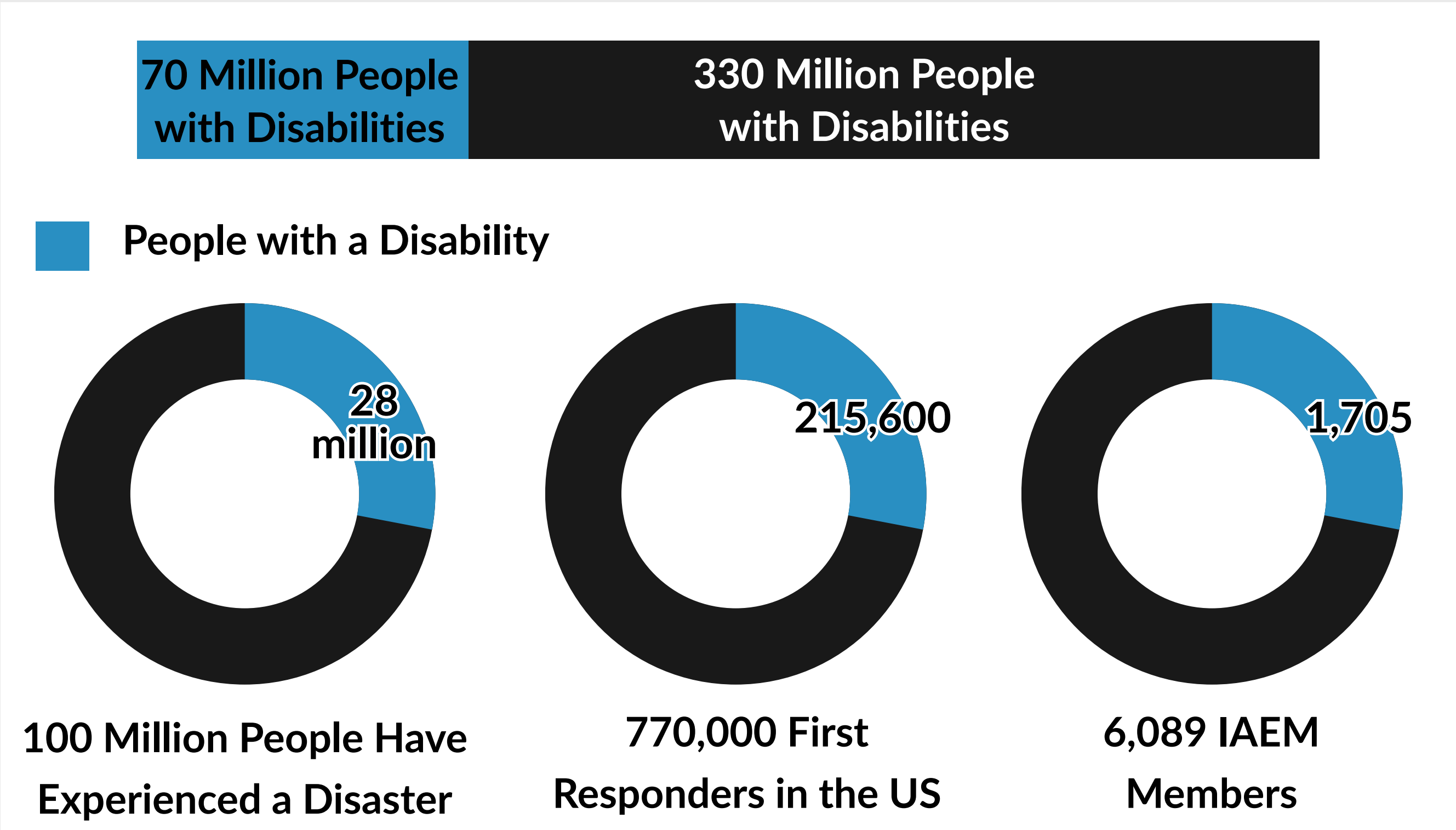
Bridging the Gap: Inclusive Communication Strategies for Engaging People with Invisible Disabilities in Emergency Management

Emergency managers are trained to act swiftly and communicate clearly. But in the rush to respond, we may unintentionally overlook people with invisible disabilities. Let’s equip leaders with tools to build inclusiveness, usability, and efficiency into communication across all phases of emergency management.

Why Invisible Disabilities Matter in Emergency Management

- Invisible disabilities often go unrecognized in emergency planning leading to exclusion and reduced safety.
- Veterans, older adults, people with cognitive disabilities, and those with chronic conditions (including TBI, PTSD, sensory sensitivities, chronic pain, neurodivergence, and mental health conditions) are part of every community—neighbors, co-workers, even first responders.
- **Inclusive disaster communication can mean the difference between life and death during and after disasters.**

People with Disabilities in the US



Data & Evidence-Based Assumptions

1 in 4 Americans have a disability and 10% of those who identify with a disability have an invisible disability.

Add to this **23% of the US population has a mental health disability, most of which are invisible.**

Reality exceeds these statistics due to:

- **underreporting**, many people with invisible disabilities do not self-identify
- **misconceptions**, some people are reluctant to disclose due to thinking their disability is not “real”
- the likelihood of developing certain invisible disabilities increases with age, which often is attributed to aging not disability
- **not counted**, people who are institutionalized are excluded in census numbers and > 60% of institutionalized individuals have an invisible disability

Invisible disabilities are the most frequently acquired disability in disasters.

**Statistics from the Center for Disease Control, American Community Survey, Department of Justice Report, World Institute on Disabilities Research

Gaps that Need Bridges

- **Invisible disability related needs are the least likely to be met in disaster**
- Disaster communication is often inadequate for invisible disabilities
- **Many professionals aren’t comfortable with disabilities due to lack of information**
- Including invisible disability accommodations **MUST** happen before a disaster
- **Inclusive disaster management MUST rely on invisible disability knowledge and skills**
- Disability knowledge exists in the community and must be applied to disaster resilience efforts.
- **Inclusive communication isn’t a luxury—it’s a human need**

Strategies for Building Bridges

- **Preparedness:**
 - **Educate Personnel**
 - Inclusive design in exercises, procedures, and messaging
- **Response:**
 - Trauma-informed procedure
 - **Contract with SME**
- **Recovery:**
 - Cultural humility and mental health competence
 - Integrate technology solutions where appropriate
- **Mitigation:**
 - **Track impact data that includes mental health and invisible disabilities**
 - Regular policy reviews for implicit bias
 - **Practice universal design in communication**

Bridges that Connect

- **Build awareness of invisible disabilities within emergency management teams through ongoing training and information**
- Develop clear and accessible alerts and messaging using templates, plain language, redundant formats and other accessibility features
- Actively seek out SME with disability, emergency management, and response lived experience for generating solutions
- **Most invisible disability related needs can be addressed through process modification and do not require allocation of scarce resources**

Person-Centered Micro-Trainings

These training draw on lived experience, field-tested tools, case studies, and focus groups to highlight strategies that empower—not overwhelm—people with invisible disabilities and professionals. A nine-course micro-training series for healthcare and emergency management professionals offering short, focused modules

- Foundations of Disability
- What are Invisible Disabilities
- Effective Communication Healthcare & Emergencies



Training on invisible and communication disabilities are hard to find, but essential.



QR code to webpage with free trainings available

“Aging happens, accidents happen - at some point in life, almost all of us will live with a permanent or temporary disability.”

