There have been many innovative and diverse ways for coalitions to form in state legislatures. As the groups of people who participate in the political process change, one such innovative legislative tool to ensure all voices are heard would be a legislative caucus.

Like the constituents they serve, state legislatures across the country are made up of policymakers with diverse viewpoints, backgrounds and life experiences. The passage of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) 30 years ago represented a fundamental change in how individuals with disabilities are treated. The ADA represented fundamental changes in:

- employment;
- state and local government;
- public accommodations;
- telecommunications;
- and a number of other provisions.

Since the ADAs inception, state policymakers have continued to pass legislation in the states to encourage the inclusion and protection of people with disabilities. Additionally, policymakers have utilized the caucus system to give a voice to people with disabilities.

8 states currently have active legislative disability caucuses to help address issues facing individuals with disabilities, including: Connecticut, Kentucky, Massachusetts, Michigan, New Hampshire, North Carolina, and Ohio.

While not every state has a disability caucus, several states have implemented supplementary caucuses that include people with disabilities. Many states, for example, have a Veterans Caucus and this specifically seeks to provide inclusion of veterans in the legislative process, including veterans with disabilities.

Some states further break-down overall disabilities into their own caucuses. The state of Pennsylvania, for example, has an overall disability caucus, but also has the following caucuses: Lupus Caucus, Mental Health Caucus, Multiple Sclerosis Caucus, Rare Disease Caucus, Autism and Intellectual Disabilities Caucus, Arthritis & Osteoporosis Caucus, Asthma Caucus, Brain Injury Caucus and a Diabetes Caucus.

While the legislative caucus has essentially existed for as long as Legislatures themselves, disability caucuses are relatively new. The Engage and Empower Caucus, for instance, created by Representative Al Gentry (D-Louisville) and Representative Brandon Reed (R- Hodgenville) in the Kentucky House of Representatives was created in 2019. The Engage and Empower Caucus focuses on issues facing people with disabilities and how the Kentucky Legislature can better address those issues.

CSG Policy Analyst Sydney Geiger delved deeper into the creation of the caucus in Kentucky and you
Kentucky isn’t the only state with a new disability caucus. The state of North Carolina has created a bicameral, bipartisan Intellectual and Developmental Disability Caucus with the goal of cross-committee collaboration to work towards improving the lives of people with intellectual and developmental disabilities. The Caucus currently has bipartisan support and consists of fifteen representatives and three senators.

The Michigan Legislature, in 2016, was praised by the Lieutenant Governor for their focus on the inclusion of people with disabilities in the legislative process through the establishment of a Disability Awareness Caucus. The caucus was created by state Representative Frank Liberati (D- Allen Park) and state Senator Rick Jones (R-Grand Ledge).

In a press release, Lt. Gov. Brian Calley said, “People with disabilities deserve a chance to live self-determined, independent lives, but are often judged based on what they can’t do, instead of what they can. I’m pleased that Senator Jones and Representative Liberati are making opportunities for people with disabilities a priority by forming this caucus.”

States are the laboratories of democracy and as they continue to find innovative ways to prioritize accessibility and universal design, we are sure to see the rise of more legislative disability causes in the states.

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