



Disability
Rights
Oregon



Disability
Law United



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People with Disabilities, Advocates Sue City of Portland and Multnomah County Over Inaccessible Emergency Systems

Federal lawsuit follows 2021 heat wave that killed 69 people
and years of ignored warnings from the city's auditor

Portland, Ore.—People with disabilities and disability rights advocates filed a federal lawsuit today against the City of Portland, Multnomah County, and their top elected officials, alleging that the jurisdictions' emergency management systems fail to protect people with disabilities before, during, and after disasters — in violation of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act, and Oregon law.

"We're in a wildfire emergency right now statewide and people with disabilities cannot be an afterthought," said Jake Cornett, executive director at Disability Rights Oregon. "We often hear about victims with disabilities in the aftermath of disasters — and that's not good enough. We need the city and county to have an inclusive plan to evacuate and shelter people with disabilities long before a wildfire, flood, earthquake, or some other disaster strikes."

The complaint seeks to avoid a repetition of the City of Portland and Multnomah County's response to the June 2021 extreme heat wave, when [temperatures reached an all-time high of 116 degrees and 69 people died of heat-related causes in Multnomah County](#) — with people with disabilities overrepresented [among the dead](#). Many victims lived on upper floors of multi-family housing, in trailers and RVs, or were unhoused. Survivors with disabilities reported being unable to reach cooling centers, obtain accessible transportation, or access timely, usable emergency information.

That risk is not abstract. A local wildfire expert who studied the 2025 Eaton Fire in Los Angeles — which killed at least 17 people and destroyed 9,000 structures — found that [Portland is less prepared and has fewer resources than Los Angeles did before that disaster](#). Forest Park has only two wildfire-detection cameras, and Southeast Portland's Oaks Bottom area, where three fires have already ignited this year, [has none at all](#).

The lawsuit was filed by Disability Rights Oregon, Disability Law United, the ACLU, and law firm Cambreleng & Marton, and names the City of Portland, Multnomah County, Portland Mayor Keith Wilson, and Multnomah County Board Chair Jessica Vega Pederson as defendants.

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Disability Rights Oregon is the Protection and Advocacy System for Oregon

The Plaintiffs

Plaintiffs in the lawsuit are Disability Rights Oregon, Oregon's federally designated protection and advocacy organization, and Bridges Oregon, a nonprofit that serves Deaf, DeafBlind, Hard of Hearing, and Late-Deafened Oregonians. Three individuals also join the case:

- **Audra Pearson, a Portland resident with cerebral palsy who relies on a powered wheelchair, paratransit, and round-the-clock caregiver support:** *"I can't just grab a bag and walk out the door during an emergency — I need an accessible vehicle, a shelter that fits my wheelchair, and staff who know how to help me. Nobody has ever asked what I'd need to survive a disaster, even though it's obvious I'd need help. That has to change before it costs someone their life."*
- **Jonathan Simeone, a Portland homeowner who is blind:** *"Learning about the emergency system created and maintained by Portland and Multnomah County, I realized they do not include those of us with disabilities in their emergency planning and that their violations of our civil rights have resulted in those of us with disabilities being more likely to suffer injury or death during an emergency simply because we are disabled and Portland and Multnomah County have not considered the rights of disabled people with the care they have considered the rights of nondisabled people."*
- **Philip Wolfe, a Deaf Portland resident:** *"I have the same right to survive a disaster as anyone else, but every time there's a wildfire, heat wave, or other dangerous emergency, I worry whether I'll get the information I need in time."*

What's Wrong

The lawsuit alleges that Portland and Multnomah County's emergency system denies people with disabilities meaningful access at every phase of disaster response:

- **Alerts and warnings** are shared in inaccessible formats, including maps without descriptive text and social media videos without captions or ASL interpretation.
- **Evacuation assistance** is unreliable: the city and county have no adequate way to identify residents who need help, lack accessible vehicles and trained drivers, and exclude entire categories of residents with disabilities — including people in high-rises, psychiatric facilities, and group homes — from evacuation plans altogether.
- **Shelters and recovery centers are riddled with known accessibility barriers**, and there is no concrete plan to fix them or to ensure access to medication and equipment after a disaster.
- **Planning, training, and outreach continue to exclude the disability community**, despite years of advocacy and documented requests to be included.

What the Lawsuit Seeks

The lawsuit asks the court to:

- **Declare** that Portland and Multnomah County's emergency planning, preparedness, response, and recovery programs violate the ADA, Section 504, and Oregon law;
- **Order** the City and County to design, implement, and maintain an emergency management system — covering alerts, evacuation, shelter, and planning — that is fully accessible to people with disabilities; and,

- Award damages to individual plaintiffs and reasonable attorneys' fees and costs to organizational plaintiffs.

"This isn't a case of a government caught off guard," said Ayelet Weiss at Disability Law United. "The City's own auditor and community members have urged the Defendants to include individuals with disabilities in a comprehensive planning process for years. That hasn't happened, and the needs of the disabled go unaddressed. As the City Auditor put it, 'This lack of preparation puts the lives of people with disabilities at risk.'"

"Five years ago, as temperatures soared above 115 degrees, far too many disabled Portland residents could not reach cooling centers or even access usable emergency information. As a result, people with disabilities were overrepresented among those who died," said Malhar Shah, lead ACLU counsel on the case. "With the threat of extreme weather and disasters like wildfires only accelerating, Portland and Multnomah County have a legal duty to make their emergency system accessible to people with disabilities and give them the equal opportunity to survive."

Plaintiffs tried to resolve these issues without litigation by notifying the city and county of their findings in February 2025 and meeting with counsel in March 2026. After those efforts failed to produce meaningful commitments, plaintiffs notified defendants of intent to sue in June 2026.

"When the law is ignored for years, litigation is the necessary next step to ensure equal protection for all Oregonians," said Rebecca Cambreleng, partner at Cambreleng & Marton and co-counsel on the case. "We intend to see this through until the city and county meet their legal obligations to everyone with disabilities."

Resources

- [Download the Complaint](#)

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[Disability Rights Oregon](#) upholds the civil rights of people with disabilities to live, work, and engage in the community. Serving as Oregon's Protection and Advocacy System since 1977, the nonprofit works to transform systems, policies, and practices to give more people the opportunity to reach their full potential.

[Bridges Oregon](#) is a nonprofit organization serving Oregonians who are Deaf, DeafBlind, or Hard of Hearing. It is in our mission to facilitate equity and inclusiveness and to provide a bridge to opportunities through advocacy, education, and communication.

[Disability Law United](#) is a national, nonprofit legal organization that fights for equity through intersectional disability justice. Their work is driven by grassroots movements for systemic change, focusing on disabled individuals facing discrimination, oppressive legal systems, and access barriers.

For more than 100 years, the [ACLU](#) has worked in courts, legislatures, and communities to protect the constitutional rights of all people. With a nationwide network of offices and millions of members and supporters, the ACLU takes on the toughest civil liberties fights in pursuit of liberty and justice for all.

[Cambreleng & Marton](#) is a small, female-led firm whose attorneys have decades of experience fighting for justice for all Oregonians.