

National Disability Employment Awareness Month in partnership with ODDS Case Management Conference

October 20, 2026



What is Ableism and Why it Matters in the Workplace

Today's presenters

Moderator

Allison Enriquez, Employment First Coordinator

Oregon Department of Human Services Office of Developmental Disabilities

Leadership Welcome and Introductory Remarks

Acacia McGuire Anderson, Director, Office of Developmental Disabilities Services

Keynote Presenter

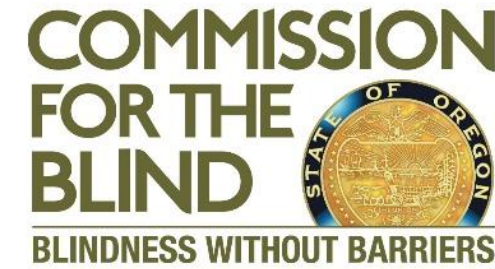
Todd D. Woodward, Vice Chair, Oregon Disabilities Commission

Agenda

1. NDEAM overview
2. Welcome and introductory remarks
3. What is Ableism and Why it Matters in the Workplace
4. Questions and discussion
5. Closing remarks



NDEAM webinar series is presented by:



NDEAM Webinar Schedule 2026

OCT
6

Lunch and Learn for Business: Celebrating Talent and Transforming Workplaces

OCT
13

Oregon as a Model Employer: Promoting Employment and Career Advancement for People with Disabilities in State and Local Government

OCT
20

What is Ableism and Why it Matters in the Workplace

OCT
27

Technology in Employment

NOV
7

Peer2Peer: An Award-Winning Employment Mentorship Program

More information at bit.ly/OregonNDEAM

NDEAM in Oregon

“Oregon reaffirms its commitment to expanding access to good jobs, career pathways, and economic opportunity for all Oregonians, including people with disabilities.”

Governor’s proclamation

Welcome and introductory remarks



Acacia McGuire Anderson

Director
Oregon Developmental Disabilities Services
Oregon Department of Human Services



OREGON DEPARTMENT OF
Human Services
Developmental Disabilities Services

Today's presenter

Todd D. Woodward, Vice Chair
Oregon Disabilities Commission

— NATIONAL DISABILITY EMPLOYMENT AWARENESS MONTH

What Is Ableism and Why It Matters

Understanding a bias built into our history, language, and workplaces

Todd D. Woodward — Vice Chair, Oregon Disabilities Commission

A guest presentation for ODHS and the ableNET ERG

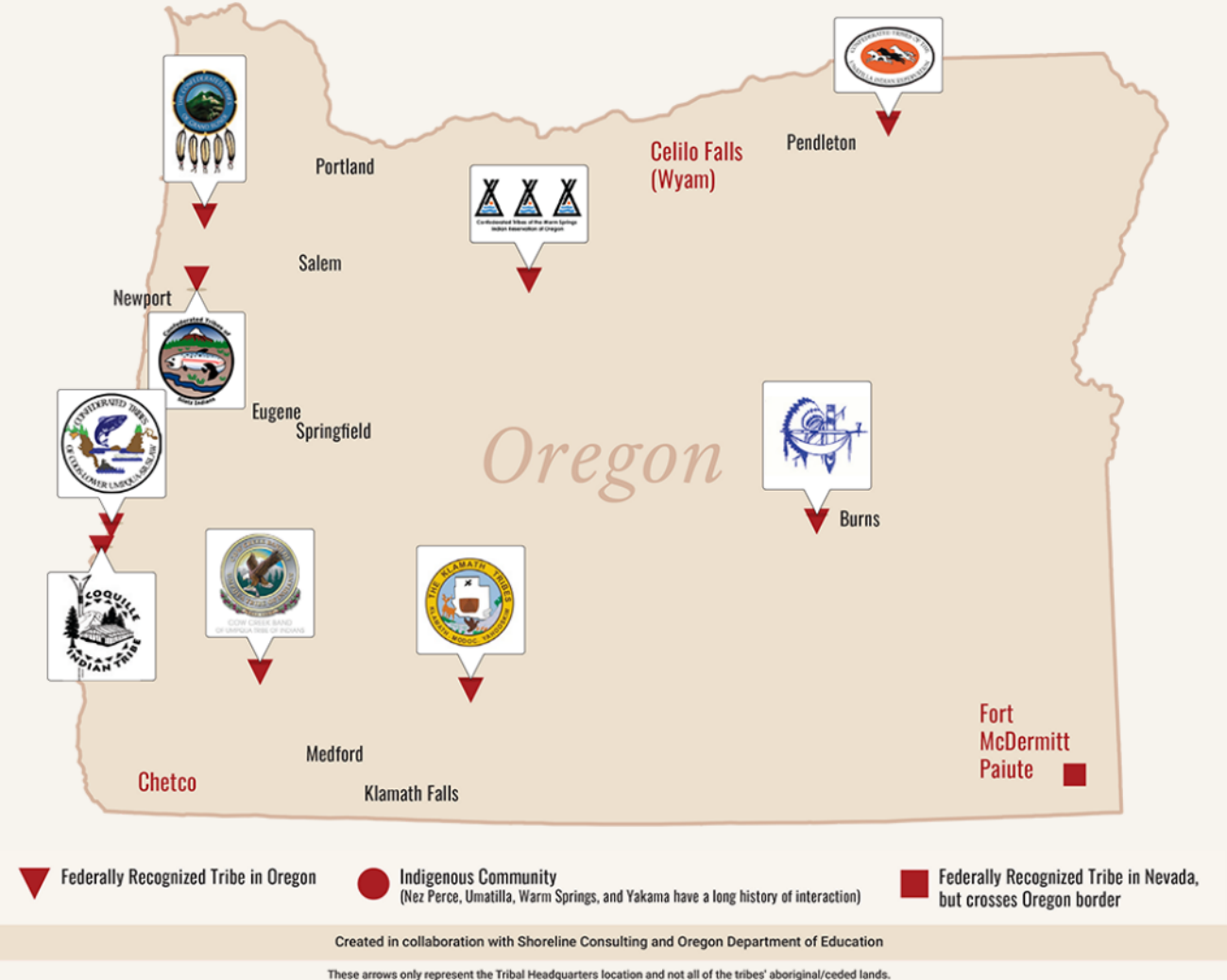
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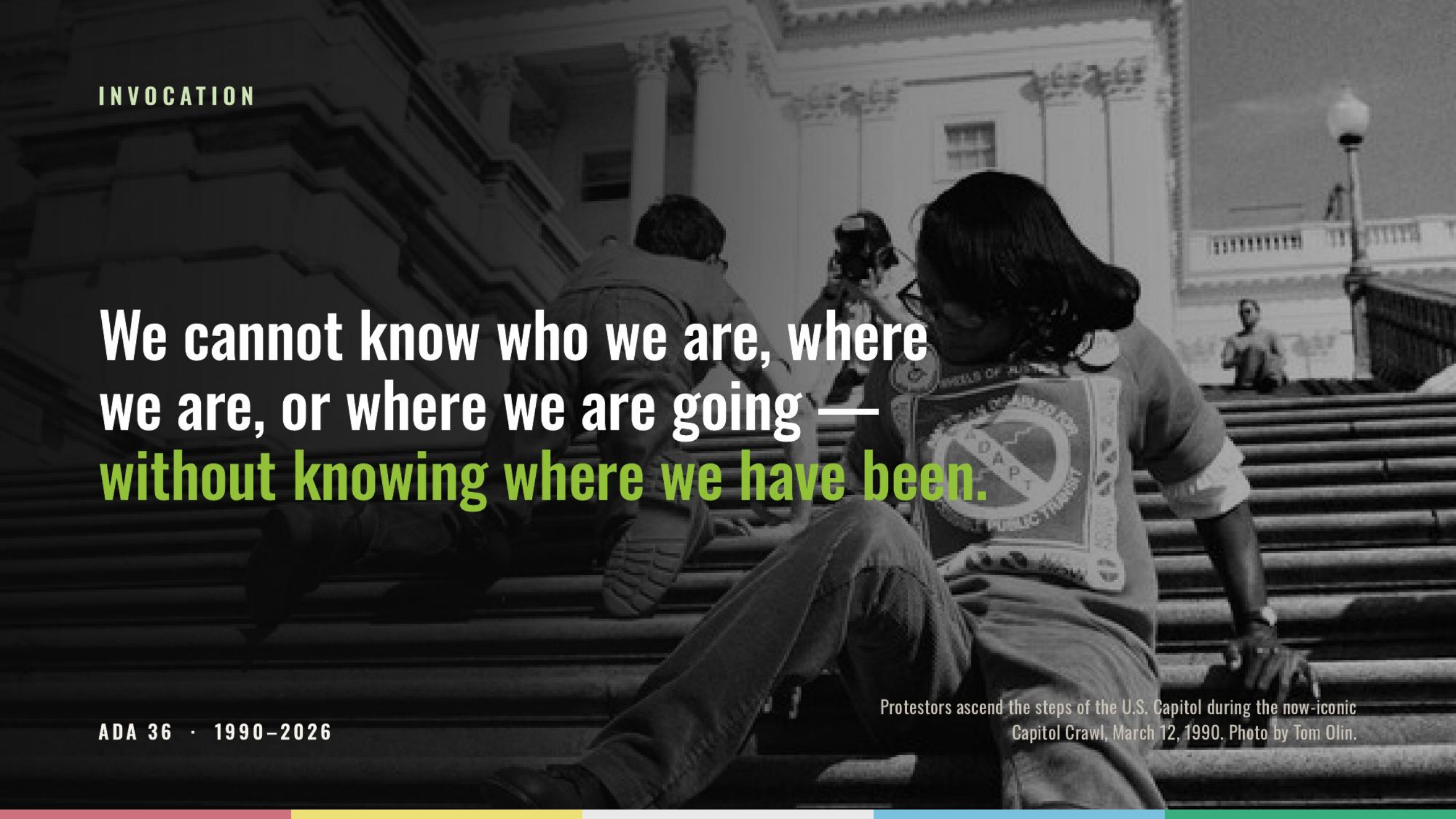
oregon.gov/odhs/agency/Pages/odc.aspx

LAND ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

We would like to acknowledge the many Tribes and bands who call Oregon their ancestral territory, and honor the ongoing relationship between the land, plants, animals, and people **indigenous to this place we now call Oregon.**

Tribal headquarters shown; markers do not represent full ancestral or ceded lands.





INVOCATION

We cannot know who we are, where
we are, or where we are going —
without knowing where we have been.

ADA 36 • 1990–2026

Protestors ascend the steps of the U.S. Capitol during the now-iconic
Capitol Crawl, March 12, 1990. Photo by Tom Olin.

A NOTE BEFORE WE BEGIN

**We will name eugenics, medical violence,
and death.**

Take care of yourself. Step away if you need to.

PART ONE

What Is Ableism?

First we name it. You can't fix what you won't name.

PART 1 • WHAT IS ABLEISM

You can't fix what you won't name.

A problem with no name has no owner. So before anything else, we give it one — because naming is the first act of accountability.

A WORKING DEFINITION

Ableism is a system that decides whose body and mind have worth.

Not mainly a rude person. A structure — in buildings, hiring, schools, healthcare, and language — that keeps running whether anyone is being rude or not.

A SHARPER DEFINITION · TALILA A. LEWIS · JAN 2021

Ableism

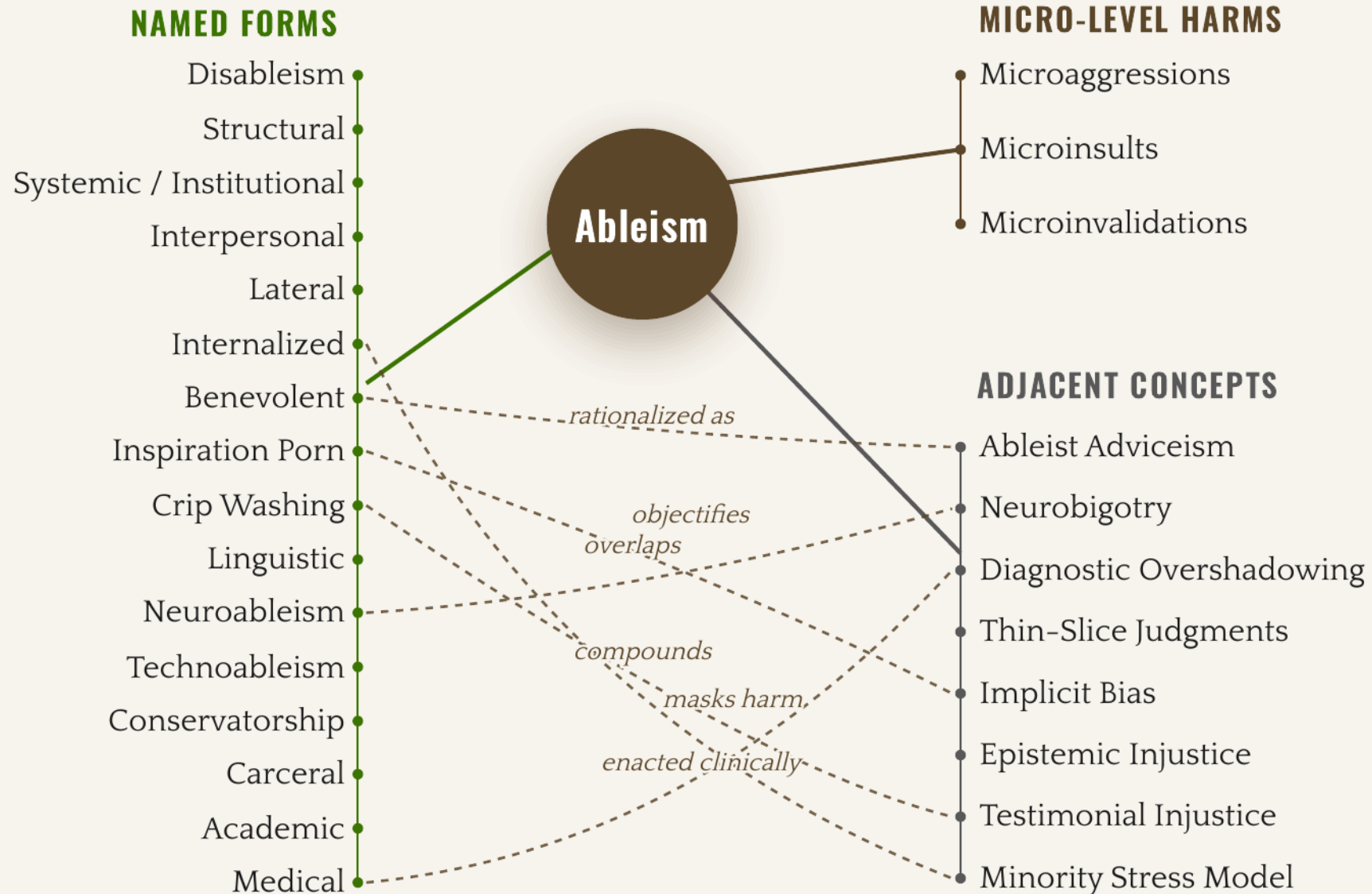
Working definition,
updated January 2021 —
developed in community
with disabled Black and
other negatively
racialized people.

A system that places value on people's bodies and minds based on societally constructed ideas of **normalcy, intelligence, and excellence** — ideas deeply rooted in **anti-Blackness, eugenics, misogyny, colonialism, imperialism, and capitalism.**

| You do not have to be disabled to experience ableism.

How the terms connect.

— names a form of ableism
- - - relates to / feeds across branches



01 Fix the person.

The medical model. Disability is a defect inside the person — to be diagnosed, treated, fixed. When it's the only lens, every barrier becomes a private problem.

02 Fix the barrier.

The social model. You are not disabled by your legs — you are disabled by the stairs. It gave us curb cuts, ramps, and captions, and moved the work from the person to the world.

03 Accept identity & culture.

The cultural model. Disability as community, pride, and knowledge — Deaf culture is the clearest example. Most systems, mine included, run only on the first two: diagnosis and compliance.

WHERE ABLEISM LIVES

Four floors of the same building.

Structural

Laws, budgets, who gets hired and promoted

Cultural

Language, media, what we treat as normal

Interpersonal

How we talk to each other, one on one

Internalized

The ableism a disabled person turns inward

WHY THE QUIET KIND MATTERS

A thousand small cuts.

No single comment is big enough to report. But a disabled person gets a steady drip, every day, for years. All of it together is exhausting — and a thousand small cuts is still a wound.

Microaggressions

Everyday slights, intended or not, that signal a disabled person is less.

"You don't look disabled."

Microinsults

Remarks that demean someone's identity or ability, often dressed as praise.

"You're so inspiring for just showing up."

Microinvalidations

Comments that dismiss or erase a disabled person's lived experience.

"Everyone's a little ADHD."

THE KEY IDEA

Ableism doesn't need a bad guy.

Good people build ableist systems every day, by default — because the default was set without us in the room. The work isn't finding bad people. It's noticing bad defaults, and changing them.

ABLEISM, EVEN HERE

Seventy years, always one word short.

THE MONTH

1945

“National Employ the
Physically Handicapped
Week”

OUR COMMISSION

1948

Oregon’s committee for
the “*physically*
handicapped”

THE MONTH

1988

National *Disability*
Employment Awareness
Month

OUR COMMISSION

1989

Oregon *Disabilities*
Commission

Each rename reached for the politest word of its decade — and never landed on what disabled people call ourselves. A default no one went back to fix.

PART TWO · THEN

Where Ableism Comes From

A structure with dates and laws — which means it can be taken apart.

THE WHOLE ARC, IN ONE BREATH



Only in the last fifty years did the arc begin to bend toward justice. Now the hard middle.

WHEN THE STATE MADE IT LAW

1883

The word *eugenics* is coined —
“good birth.”

1907

Forced sterilization becomes law,
state by state.

1927

The Supreme Court says yes.
Buck v. Bell.

“Three generations of imbeciles are enough.”

— Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes, writing for the Court. Mainstream science, written into mainstream law.

ABLEISM & RACISM

One machine, not two.

1851 — drapetomania. A doctor calls the desire of enslaved people to be free a mental illness. The prescribed treatment included whipping. Racism and ableism, fused in a single act.

1907–1970 — 60,000+ sterilized. Black, Indigenous, and Latina people were labeled disabled at far higher rates — so the state could stop them from having children. Disability was the tool. Racial control was the job.

You cannot end one and leave the other standing. They come apart together, or not at all.

OREGON · WITHIN LIVING MEMORY

Not somewhere else. Here.

2,600+

Oregonians forcibly sterilized by state law, 1917–1981.

“To Prevent Procreation of Certain Classes.”

The 1917 law's plain title. It created the **Oregon State Board of Eugenics** — a net that swept in disabled people, queer people, and teenage girls the state judged “degenerate.” At Fairview, in Salem, teens were sedated and sterilized against their will.

1917

The law passes. The Board is created.

1981

Oregon's last forced sterilization.

1983

The Board is finally abolished.

The state formally apologizes.

OREGON · 2020, NOT 1917

The board is gone. The logic isn't.

140

ventilators Oregon had to **spare** — shipped to New York. Disabled Oregonians were refused anyway.

Sarah McSweeney, 45, was asked whether her life was worth a ventilator. She did not get one. She died.

In Pendleton, a woman with an intellectual disability was pressed to sign away her own care, her “low quality of life” the reason. One hospital told a group home to pre-sign do-not-resuscitate forms — for residents who weren’t even sick yet.

Decide some lives are worth less. Then make sure no one counts them.

A 2013 law required Oregon to track disability in its health data. Through all of 2020, it didn’t — so the deaths were never counted.

THE TURN

**Nothing about us, without us.
Nothing *for* us, without us either.**

The first line gets us into the room. The second asks who owns it. Being present is not the same as holding power — from a seat at the table, to a hand on the budget.



TAKE A BREATH

That was heavy.
What are you feeling right now?

PART THREE · NOW

Ableism at Work

LENS ONE

Your workplace.

LENS TWO

The people you serve.

GETTING IN THE DOOR

A 32-point employment gap.

Disabled Oregonians employed

48.6%



Non-disabled Oregonians employed

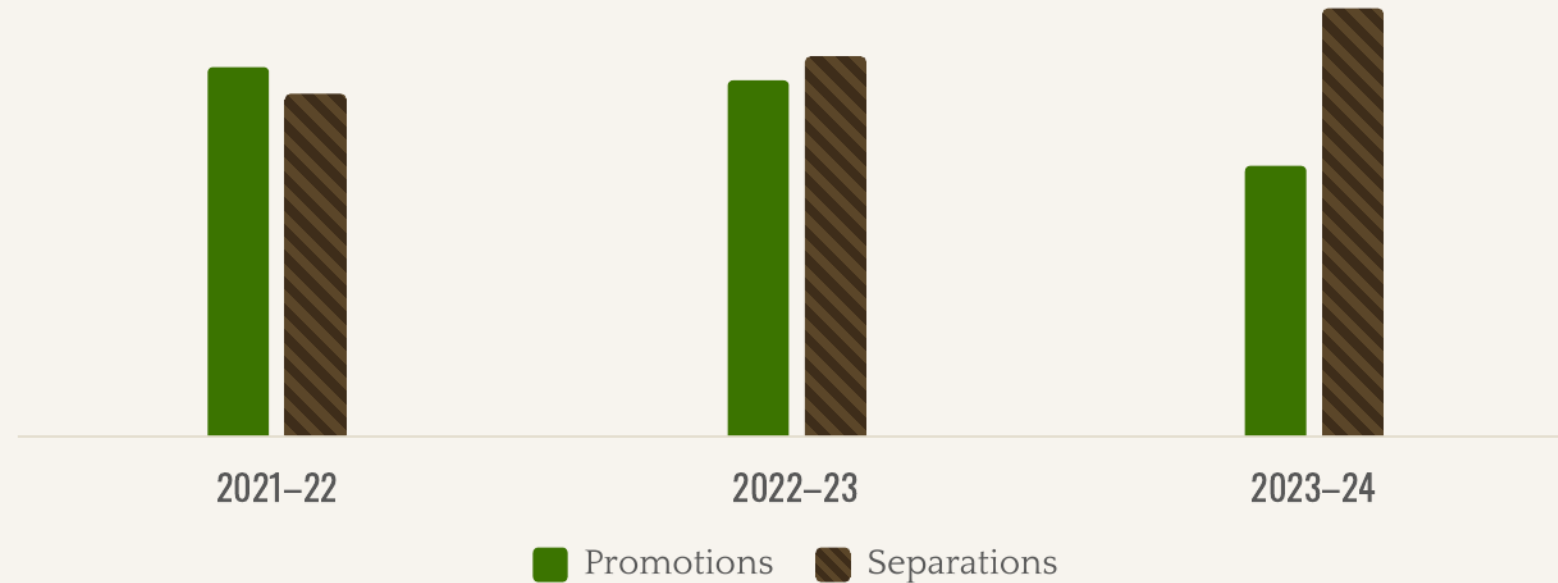
81.1%



Add everyone actively looking and **57%** of disabled Oregonians are in or trying to get into the workforce. The want is there. The door is not.

THE LEAKY PIPELINE · OREGON STATE WORKFORCE

Promoted less. Leaving more.



-28%

Promotions to disabled employees, in three years.

The pandemic proved flexible work was possible overnight. It was always possible — it just hadn't been chosen.

THE NUMBER TO REMEMBER

2.33%

1,087 of 46,557 state employees disclose a disability

Oregon is 15.7% disabled. The count is off by roughly 84%.

Not because they aren't here — because it isn't safe to say so. The state's system buries the question and offers no anonymity. You cannot fix what you will not count.

LENS TWO · LANE V. BROWN

“Too disabled to work.”

2012

The lawsuit

2020

The last state-funded sheltered
workshop

1,138

Workers into community jobs

SECTION 14(C) · FAIR LABOR STANDARDS ACT

Worth equals output, written into wage law.

1938

Below minimum wage, by federal law

Oregon

Ended June 30, 2023

Federal

Still allowed

PART FOUR · WHAT THE STATE IS AND IS NOT DOING

Ableism: named in **zero** frameworks.

Oregon's 2021 DEI Action Plan takes on racism and sexism in detail. Ableism is simply absent — even though **equity has been this Commission's charge since 1989**, before any other state's.

MISSING TOOLS

- × No statewide ADA Coordinator
- × No required anti-ableism training
- × No real accountability
- × A data system too broken to measure it

SEPTEMBER 2025 · A LETTER TO THE GOVERNOR

Five plain things we asked for.

- 01 Name **ableism** as **discrimination** in the state DEI plan.
- 02 Create a **statewide ADA Coordinator** with real authority.
- 03 Require **anti-ableism training** across agencies.
- 04 Fix the data system so people can be **counted safely and anonymously**.
- 05 Set real **disability employment targets**, with consequences.

Signed by every commissioner. Received. As of today — still only recommendations.

NO EXEMPTIONS — MINE INCLUDED

**We advise. We do not
govern.
Your move.**

The real work doesn't end with us. It ends with you, in your agency, today. You don't need a statute to begin.

WHAT TO CARRY OUT OF HERE

Three things. That's all.

01 · Name it

Out loud, in the rooms where it has been invisible. A problem with no name has no owner.

02 · Ask who's left out

For every hire, form, meeting, policy. Then ask a disabled person directly — not just about them.

03 · Share the power

Not a seat at the table — a hand on the budget and the agenda. Being in the room was never the goal.

Being in the room was never the goal. Running it is.

TAKE THESE WITH YOU

Go deeper.

Talila Lewis

A working definition of ableism

Oregon Disabilities Commission

Letter to the Governor (September 2025)

Lane v. Brown

Disability Rights Oregon · droregon.org

NDEAM

Federal: dol.gov/agencies/odep/initiatives/ndeam

Oregon: oregon.gov/odhs · [Celebrating NDEAM](#)

Next: reflection with **Allison**. **Thank you.**

Contact me: odc@ndoregon.org

Reflection – Removing Barriers to Full Participation in the Workplace

Let's take a few minutes to pause and reflect:

- **What's working?** Where have I seen people with disabilities succeed, and what made that possible?
- **What's in the way?** What systemic barriers (policies, practices, assumptions, or processes) can I help address?
- **What's my part?** What is one thing I can personally do differently starting this week?

If you'd like to share your thoughts, please add them to the Forms survey:

<https://forms.cloud.microsoft/g/HQd4S1piZX>



If we forget where we have been,
we forget where these rights exist,
who paid for them, and how quickly
they can be taken away.

The work continues.



Questions and discussion



OREGON DEPARTMENT OF
Human Services