DAIR
Disability Advocates in Research

Tailoring Recruitment for

RESEARCH PARTNERS WITH INTELLECTUAL AND DEVELOPMENTAL DISABILITIES

A Recruitment Guide Led by People with Lived Experiences

Partnership for People with Disabilities
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Tailoring Recruitment for Research Partners
with Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities:
A Recruitment Guide Led by People with Lived Experiences
Version 1.0

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Executive Summary

People with intellectual and developmental disabilities (IDD) continue to be underrepresented in health research. They are often interested in participating in research, but many recruitment practices unintentionally exclude them. Flyers can be confusing or inaccessible, outreach doesn't always reach the right people, and processes can feel impersonal or one-sided. This guide was co-developed with Disability Advocates in Research (DAIR), a group of self-advocates with IDD, to help researchers make recruitment more welcoming, accessible and equitable.

We reviewed best practices from the literature and translated them into real-world strategies, grounded in lived experience. The result is a practical framework built around key themes:

RESPECT	COMMUNICATION	ACCESSIBILITY
PLANNING	RELATIONSHIPS	LEADERSHIP BY PEOPLE WITH IDD

We also took a closer look at one of the most common outreach tools – recruitment flyers – and learned that many design choices can unintentionally turn people away.

Disability Advocates in Research (DAIR) shared specific, actionable guidance for making materials clear, motivating and visually accessible. In short:

- *Say more with less*
- *Be specific about what participants will do*
- *Show why it matters*

Researchers don't need to start from scratch, but we do need to plan with intention. That means engaging with disability communities early, budgeting for accessibility, making sure people feel valued throughout the process, and revisiting materials and methods with inclusion in mind.

We hope this guide helps you take the next step toward building a research team that reflects the full diversity of the communities we aim to serve.

Inclusion isn't a box to check—it's a commitment to partnership, equity, and better science.

Rationale

People with intellectual and developmental disabilities (IDD) are consistently underrepresented in health and disability research processes. This underrepresentation is not due to lack of interest, but, in part, to recruitment practices that are often inaccessible, unfamiliar or unresponsive to the needs of people with IDD. Researchers are often unintentionally transactional and one-sided in their approach to recruitment (Kover & Abbeduto, 2023).

To improve the reach, equity and relevance of research, researchers must learn to recruit people with IDD more effectively and inclusively. This means going beyond simply translating materials into plain language. It requires accessible formats, flexible timelines and relationship-based outreach that accounts for differences in communication, support needs and prior access to services. This guide, developed with and by leaders with IDD, offers practical strategies to help researchers redesign their recruitment process so that more people with IDD can make informed choices to participate in research opportunities that matter to them.

Recruitment Literature

Members of the VCU team conducted a review of the literature of best practices for recruiting people with disabilities to participate in research. Findings from identified articles were grouped into themes, shared with the Disability Advocates in Research (DAIRs). A full list of articles is included in Table 1. DAIRs reviewed each theme to make sure the definition was clear and fit with their own experiences and expectations for research participation. After agreeing on theme definitions, Disability Advocates in Research discussed ways researchers can show they are intentional about including people with disabilities in research. DAIRs hope that these steps can help make abstract concepts more practical for researchers.

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TABLE 1.
Literature Reviewed for Recruitment Guide

Best Practices From the Literature

RESPECT:

Researchers talk and act in a way that shows they value the people who help with their research

Researchers can show respect by:

- Using up-to-date and accepted language
- Using inclusive images that show different types of people who might participate in the project
- Creating and enforcing guidelines for the group around language and behavior
- Speaking in a direct and straightforward manner, using accessible language and avoiding sarcasm

COMMUNICATION:

Researchers explain the project's goals and what they expect in a clear and simple way. They change how they talk to make sure it works for the people helping with the project. Researchers also keep checking in during the project to make sure things are going well and to change things if needed.

Good communication means that researchers:

- Use clear, direct language that all participants can understand
- Listen and respond to participants' needs. The best way to show a problem is heard and recognized is to do something about it
- Follow up with potential participants, even if someone isn't a good fit for the project

- Build in check-in points throughout, to make sure everyone has a chance to say how things are going

ADVANCED PLANNING:

Researchers think ahead about what people with IDD might need to join the project.

Researchers can show they planned ahead by:

- Clearly outlining the project timeline, expectations, requirements and goals from the very beginning
- Recognizing that including people with disabilities may take more time and money, incorporating that in the timeline and budget

ACCESSIBILITY:

Researchers make it easy for people with IDD to join the team.

Researchers can show they thought about accessibility by:

- Making sure all project materials are easy to understand. This includes using easy-to-read language, making materials screen-reader accessible, following font and color guidelines, and having video materials
- If using physical recruitment materials like flyers, making sure they are posted in accessible spaces
- If project activities are held in-person, making sure everyone can use the space easily

- Actively offering supports and accommodations, checking in with participants regularly. People can tell when accommodations are an afterthought.

PARTNERSHIPS:

Researchers work to build and keep strong connections with different groups who support and advocate for people with IDD.

Researchers can show that they value partnerships with people with IDD and with other organizations by:

- Regularly attending community events, not just when participants are needed
- Joining community events as guest speakers to talk about the project
- Including other people who support participants with disabilities,such as families, friends and staff, in recruitment activities

ACTIVE RECRUITMENT:

Researchers find and invite people to join the research team, making sure to meet them where they are, physically and emotionally.

Researchers can participate in "active recruitment" by:

- Hosting recruitment events at resource hubs, accessibility offices or other places where people with disabilities regularly spend time
- Following up with people and answering any questions they may have
- Remembering that research can be unfamiliar and scary for some people and taking the time to make things clear

RELATIONSHIPS BEYOND RESEARCH:

Researchers spend time with and support people with IDD because they are important, not just to get their opinions in research. The importance of having relationships beyond the research process is also related to themes of Partnerships and Active Recruitment.

When thinking about relationships beyond the research project, researchers should:

- Allow relationships to be genuine and develop naturally over time
- Share information learned from a project with participants and the wider disability community
- Support the disability community to put findings into practice to improve people's lives

INCENTIVES:

Payment for participating and planned outcomes of the research match the time and energy people put into the project.

Researchers should:

• Be transparent about incentives, including the amount of compensation and how it will be delivered

• When possible, talk with participants about what type of compensation will be offered. For example, DAIRs said that they would be more excited about gift cards to support a local coffee shop than for a chain

• Consider other incentives in addition to monetary compensation, including opportunities for presentations and authorship. Crediting participants for their role in producing knowledge is an important way to show that people's time and effort is valued.

RECRUITMENT IS A PROCESS

In one of our monthly meetings for improving inclusive, IDD-tailored recruitment, Disability Advocates in Research (DAIR) discussed discrete phases in the recruitment process. In addition to more general barriers to recruitment, they identified events that could occur along the way that would prevent them from joining a study. They also provided basic adaptations that researchers could intentionally undertake to make recruitment more accessible, respectful, and engaging.

Figure 1. shows recruitment phases in a larger recruitment process, why people would lose interest in participating, and some solutions to keep them involved.

IDD LEADERSHIP:

All stages of the research project include people with disabilities in active and valued roles.

Researchers can show how people with IDD are involved by:

• Disclosing (as appropriate) team members' positionality and disabilities

• Intentionally including a variety of disabilities and support needs, and making it clear that people with more support needs are welcome

• Citing disabled authors and people of other historically marginalized identities in the literature

BARRIERS AND SOLUTIONS AT VARIOUS PHASES OF THE RECRUITMENT PROCESS

Phase 1- Research Design
When researchers choose & create methods and materials

⚠ Common Barriers	✅ Solutions
• Materials are confusing • I dont understand how I would contribute • I'm not sure if I'm eligible	• Materials clearly explain my role and the project's purpose • Materials are very specific about who can participate • I can scan a QR code with more information

Phase 2- Recruitment Distribution
When recruitment materials are shared

⚠ Common Barriers	✅ Solutions
• Flyers aren't displayed in places I visit • Materials are emailed from an unknown sender	• Share information multiple times in different ways. Persistence pays off • Send materials from know and trusted partners

Phase 3- Learning More
When insterested recruits try to learn more about the oppurtunity

⚠ Common Barriers	✅ Solutions
• The only way to get more information is to call or email a stranger • Information about the project's goals and roles is unclear • No information about incentives	• Have a link/QR code with more information and FAQs • Be as clear as possible • Stress the importance of incentives and lived experience

Phase 4- Registration & Consent
When participants sign up and give consent

⚠ Common Barriers	✅ Solutions
• The consistent process isn't accessible • The study isn't a good fit • Traveling to study activities isn't convenient	• Use plain language and bulleted lists in consent materials • Have a conversation to talk through the study • Create videos to walk participant through the steps of registration and consent • Make in-person activities as convenient and comfortable as possible

Phase 5- Research Project Begins
When participation officially begins

⚠ Common Barriers	✅ Solutions
• Transportation is difficult	• Come to participants • Help arrange transportation

FIGURE 1.

Recruitment Barriers and Solutions at Various Phases
of the Recruitment Process

SOME OTHER PHASES TO CONSIDER

Eligibility, logistical support, and onboarding were not central topics in the Disability Advocates in Research (DAIR) discussions, but given their importance, we offer brief snapshots of common shortfalls and practical solutions across these phases of the recruitment process.

People with IDD may disengage early due to narrow or unrelatable eligibility criteria. To promote participation, inclusion criteria should be broad, strengths-based, and described in plain language with relatable examples. Often Disability Advocates in Research (DAIR) described being confused by umbrella terms like "IDD." They suggested that researchers use diagnostic examples, such as Autism Spectrum Disorder, Cerebral Palsy or Fragile X Syndrome, to add clarity.

Even when interest is high, logistical barriers—such as unclear schedules, inaccessible platforms, or unfamiliar meeting formats—can make it difficult to plan for or remember team meetings. Providing reminders in multiple formats, along with visual supports and the option to involve someone from the participant's support network, can improve follow-through.

Onboarding can also be a point of drop-off if expectations, timelines, or available supports are not communicated clearly. A simple, welcoming orientation with repeated opportunities to ask questions and build comfort is key. These efforts are not just accommodations — they are critical steps toward equitable access and meaningful engagement.

FOCUS ON RECRUITMENT FLYERS

Many research teams use recruitment flyers as the main tool to connect with potential participants. Inclusion of IDD community voices during the development process of recruitment flyers helps reach the intended audience effectively. The recommendations stem from lived experiences of DAIR and focus on how the audience should develop flyers that are:

DAIR reviewed examples of recruitment flyers used for various research projects during two meetings. When reviewing flyers, they highlighted what they liked, disliked, and suggested ways to improve. During these meetings, breakout groups discussed and shared key takeaways from discussions with the larger group (See Appendix 1).

INCLUSIVE   **READABLE**   **VISUALLY CLEAR**   **TRUST-BUILDING**

APPENDIX 1.
Disability Advocates
in Research's Brief
Recommendations
for Improving
Recruitment Flyers

RECRUITMENT INSIGHTS: IMPROVING FLYERS

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01.

Design & Layout

✅ Hire or consult a graphic designer to improve flyer aesthetics.
✅ Use high-quality, relevant images that align with the study (e.g., no misleading visuals).
✅ Ensure sufficient spacing to prevent overcrowding of text.
✅ Implement a fun but professional color scheme

02. Content & Readability

✅ Keep text minimal — focus on "Who, What, When, Where, Why."
✅ Avoid wordy descriptions and redundant information.
✅ Use bold headers to make key points stand out.
✅ Clearly define acronyms like "IDD" and provide context.
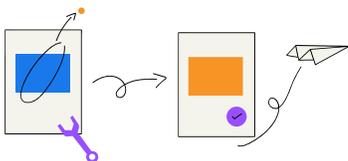
03. Accessibility & Inclusivity

✅ Represent a broader range of disabilities in visuals.
✅ Choose dyslexia-friendly fonts to enhance readability.
✅ Ensure images accurately reflect the study format

04. Engagement & Call to Action

✅ Place compensation details prominently.
✅ Use QR codes for additional details instead of cramming text onto the flyer.
✅ Highlight affiliation logos to build trust and credibility.
✅ Position contact details clearly and boldly near the top or middle of the flyer.

SUMMARY RECOMMENDATIONS CHECKLIST

✔ Use large, readable fonts

✔ Bold headers for key info

✔ Define acronyms clearly

✔ Include a QR code or a short/tear-off link

✔ Show logos and partners

✔ Use friendly, diverse, and relevant images

✔ Organize info using boxes or sections

✔ Check flyer for accessibility (Color contrast, dyslexia-friendly font)

✔ Make contact details bold and easy to find

✔ Align graphics with the research format (ex., Zoom vs in-person)

✔ Keep the flyer simple, clear, and inviting

DESIGN & LAYOUT

- Keep layouts clean, simple and easy to follow
- Title and project purpose should be most prominent elements
- Use clearly labeled boxes or sections for 5 W's: Who, What, When, Where, Why
- Bold and readable headers should guide reader through flyer
- Avoid clutter: limit bullet points and dense text blocks
- Ensure ample space and strong color contrast between text and background

READABILITY & CONTENT

- Large, scannable font sizes
- Fonts that are dyslexia-friendly (Arial, Verdana, Open Dyslexic)
- Plain language and minimal jargon
- Defined acronyms (spell out "IDD" at least once)
- Key content should appear early in flyer
- Include key information:
- Who qualifies to participate
- What is asked of participants
- Key dates, deadlines, or event times

- Compensation details:
- Use "compensation provided" if
- dollar amounts cannot be shared

*NOTE: **Avoid AI-generated flyer tools**. Human-designed materials allow better alignment with accessibility and cultural relevance.*

VISUALS & INCLUSIVITY

- Use diverse and relatable images, including people of varying races, genders, ages and disability types
- Avoid over-representation of physical disabilities only; include intellectual developmental disabilities visually
- Match visuals to format of study (show laptops for Zoom meetings)
- Visuals should reinforce study's purpose (advocacy, community, health)

ENGAGEMENT & TRUST

- Place clear contact information at top of flyer
- Include recognizable logos and affiliations (VCU, community partners)
- Use plain and welcoming language that feels

inviting and respectful

- Mention how participation supports the broader community ("Help improve health research for people with disabilities")
- Have flyer assessed by people who have IDD before distribution

ACCESSIBILITY OPTIONS

- Combine QR codes with a short link (bit.ly or other easy URLs)
- Ensure links are easy to type if QR scanning is not possible
- Consider tear-off tabs for printed flyers or phone number to call

If space is limited, provide link to complete information page online

KEY TAKEAWAYS

In general, and particularly when planning research that includes people with IDD and other disabilities, it is important for researchers to thoughtfully plan recruitment processes. Recruitment and participation will benefit from extra attention to planning ahead, clearly communicating who is welcome to participate, how they will participate, how their participation will be supported, and what potential benefits are.

Key factors in successful recruitment for people with disabilities include:

- Creating recruitment materials that are accessible, visually appealing, and clearly communicate important information

- Planning outreach that considers spaces and connections that people with IDD are familiar with and trust. Outreach efforts will be even more impactful if relationships are built before beginning recruitment

- Designing follow up processes for potential

participants that are

- easy, non-intimidating, and provide details that people will need to make decisions about participating

- Intentionally communicating about accommodations and individual needs that must be addressed to make participation possible.

- Considering how having an inclusive participant pool or project team will impact the study from start to finish.

- This includes potential benefits (how will perspectives of people with IDD improve the study and how will those perspectives and ideas be incorporated) as well as any additional effort that may be needed to ensure successful participation and collaboration (ongoing communication, pivoting when something is not working).

They can establish a foundation of respect, trust and clear and productive communication with all parties involved. However, such efforts do not end with recruitment but continue throughout the research process in planning activities, sharing information, gauging success, admitting mistakes and providing alternatives when needed.

CONCLUSION

Collaborating with members of a specific community plays an important role in formulating effective goal-oriented messaging. To achieve the goal of having a more inclusive research participant pool, it follows that the input of DAIR discussions directly indicates characteristics to be considered in research recruitment materials aimed at their community.

The recommendations of the group regarding design and layout, content and readability, accessibility and readability, and a specific call to action are vital to include in recruitment materials. Harnessing the power of saying more with less, or Smart Brevity, can be an effective way to write when recruiting

A recruitment flyer should be an invitation and not a barrier. By applying these strategies, research teams can design materials that respect the time, needs and perspectives of people with disabilities. Flyers are more than paper – they are a first impression, tool for access and reflection of your commitment to the inclusion of people with intellectual and developmental disabilities.

SMART BREVITY: "SAY MORE WITH LESS"

The group learned how important it is to communicate with a specific target audience in mind. Through hands-on practice, they demonstrated how to write brief, effective flyers that their own community would read, remember and likely motivate them into action.

Adopting this 'Smart Brevity' style of writing is highly recommended for researchers to implement in order to connect with and motivate their intended audiences, including those such as Disability Advocates in Research (DAIR). Communicating how the research is relevant and why it matters are crucial components to reaching prospective participants.

STRONGER RECRUITMENT

People with intellectual and/or developmental disabilities face barriers to joining research, like not knowing if they qualify, trouble with transportation, and hard-to-read consent forms. Clear info with FAQs, videos, and simple bullet points helps. Reaching out in many ways and offering payment or a welcoming space makes participation easier. Making these changes can help more people be included in research.

RECRUITMENT MATERIALS

- Need to clearly explain participation expectations and how it will contribute to larger purposes
- Are very specific about who (diagnosis & identity) is targeted
- Include a QR code linking to more project information and registration

MATERIAL DISTRIBUTION

- Email flyers and information multiple times. Persistence pays off.
- Send study materials and information from multiple known and trusted partners

ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

- Avoid requiring emails and phone calls. Have a link/QR code to more study details and FAQs
- Clarity in the project and your role in it is critical
- Offer incentives and stress the importance of lived experience

REGISTRATION & CONSENT

- Make consent with plain language and a bulleted list or presentation and conversation to talk through the study
- Create recruitment and registration videos to walk participants through the process
- Emphasize perks of going in person, like food or sensory room
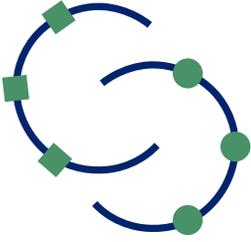- Help arrange transportation to study activities, if necessary

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