

# Building Disability Economic Power Through AAPD's Internship Program







The internship program showed me the diversity and resilience of the disability community by bringing together people with extraordinarily different lived experiences for a summer of deep connection, learning, significant growth, and fun experiences. Thanks to AAPD, I latched onto a community of multi-generational cross-disability advocacy and culture that I hardly knew existed.”

**Internship Alum**



# Table of Contents

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Introduction . . . . .	2	Recruitment and Outreach . . . . .	22
Organization Overview . . . . .	5	Application Process . . . . .	23
AAPD Summer Internship		Demographics . . . . .	24
Program Overview . . . . .	6	Interview Process . . . . .	26
Career Development. . . . .	7	Intern Onboarding Materials . . . . .	26
Leadership Development. . . . .	7	Program Supports . . . . .	27
Community Building . . . . .	8	Placement Site Matching. . . . .	30
Program Timeline . . . . .	9	Mentors. . . . .	31
Formal Evaluation . . . . .	10	Disability Advocacy	
Key Findings . . . . .	10	Certificate Program . . . . .	32
Recommendations. . . . .	13	COVID-19 Protocols. . . . .	34
AAPD Summer Internship		What Comes Next . . . . .	36
Program Changes . . . . .	15	Systemic Challenges . . . . .	37
Staff and Personnel. . . . .	15	Future Improvements . . . . .	38
Budget . . . . .	18	Conclusion . . . . .	40
Program Format. . . . .	20	Works Cited and Sponsors . . . . .	42

# Introduction

At the American Association of People with Disabilities (AAPD), we want to see disabled people thrive in decision-making roles, earn competitive wages, take pride in their disability identity, and find a sense of belonging at work.

Despite significant federal and state legislation that has improved the lives and employment prospects of people with disabilities over the last 20 years, inaccessible and inequitable workplaces remain commonplace. Workplace discrimination complaints filed with the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) may be made in cases of discrimination because of an employee or applicants' race, color, religion, sex (including transgender status, sexual orientation, and pregnancy), national origin, age (40 or older), and disability or genetic information. Out of all of those categories, in 2023, the EEOC reported that discrimination on the basis of disability was the largest category of new EEOC employment discrimination complaint filings. Disability-based discrimination complaints also saw the most significant percentage increase

of any EEOC employment discrimination category, at 77% in 2023 ("EEOC's Final FY 2023 Enforcement Statistics Show 10% Increase in Charges Filed," 2024).

In addition, adults with disabilities are employed at less than half the rate of people without disabilities, and twice as likely to live in poverty. Benefit programs like Medicaid or Social Security force recipients to live in poverty because of income and asset limit policies (National Council on Disability, 2023). This impacts the ability of people with disabilities to become financially secure and achieve economic independence.

The 2020 Census reported that people with disabilities are less likely to complete their high school education, enter and complete college, find jobs paying competitive wages, or earn as much as their contemporaries without disabilities. Many organizations that design career development opportunities like internship programs do not recognize the inequities that disabled people face leading up to when they enter the workforce.





Nondisabled students report that work experience gained during internships is critical to forming professional networks that lead to positive employment outcomes post-college (Briel & Getzel, 2001). Many internships or fellowships require a transcript or a certain grade point average to be eligible. Many disabled students' grades or class records may not accurately reflect their learning, but rather their lack of access or discrimination experienced in the classroom.

Furthermore, if disabled students are isolated in education, this impacts their number of opportunities to network with others in their field who could offer learning and employment opportunities. Disabled people of color face further barriers to obtaining education and employment opportunities (Losen et al., 2021; Shaw, et

al., 2012). Studies show that the majority of students with disabilities in the United States are students of color (Musu-Gillette et al., 2017).

There have also been extensive studies that share how higher socioeconomic status correlates with a higher quality of life and improves access to housing and medical care (Nutakor, et al. 2023). These studies also show that having social capital is positively correlated with a high quality of life. It is currently legal to pay people with disabilities less than minimum wage. In addition, people with disabilities experience a higher degree of loneliness and social isolation compared to people without disabilities. Studies have found that low social connectedness was associated with lower well-being (Emerson, et al., 2021).



For more than two decades, AAPD has run its Summer Internship Program to address the significant gaps that remain for people with disabilities. The program has provided hundreds of disabled students and recent graduates with career opportunities, along with resources and community support to make sure they obtain meaningful skills and knowledge to create change. Our goal for the Summer Internship Program is to ensure that students and recent graduates can develop stronger disability identities and develop the skills to shape the future of our workplaces and our communities.

To understand our progress towards this goal, AAPD hired an external evaluator to assess the impact of our program on the participants' career growth, as well as the impact on placement sites and mentors. Interns, supervisors, mentors, and community members, including

AAPD staff, board members, and key stakeholders, provided feedback to guide program improvement and impact for future years.

This report is an overview of the external evaluator's findings and future recommendations. We share some changes that we have already implemented from 2019 to 2023, as well as reflections on challenges and future changes. We also plan to use the findings as a way to assess how accessibility and equity are embedded into our program. By sharing our proven methods and successes in strategy, activities, and impact, our program model can serve as a resource for other organizations on how to implement inclusive programming with a focus on community building to increase impact on the participants' career opportunities and leadership development.



# Organization Overview



I just want to say that the program changed my life. It changed literally every component of my life. I'm in a great career with a great partner ... both of whom I would not have if I had never come to DC via AAPD. It is a wonderful program that has changed countless lives."

**Internship Alum**

Founded in 1995, the American Association of People with Disabilities (AAPD) is a convener, connector, and catalyst for change, working to increase the political and economic power of people with disabilities. As one of the leading national cross-disability civil rights organizations, AAPD advocates for full civil rights for the over 70 million Americans with disabilities by promoting equal opportunity, economic power, independent living, and political participation. One of the ways AAPD achieves our mission is through our Summer Internship Program.

# AAPD Summer Internship Program Overview

Established in 2002, the AAPD Summer Internship Program strives to develop stronger disability identities within students and recent graduates to better equip them to shape the future of our workplaces and communities. The comprehensive program provides participants with an opportunity to advance their career goals, gain leadership and advocacy skills, and connect with the broader disability community. To minimize barriers to participation, AAPD offers the internship

program in either a hybrid or fully remote format. AAPD provides interns with a competitive wage, technology support, and accessible housing or a housing stipend. For in-person interns and remote interns who come to Washington, DC for orientation, AAPD covers travel to and from DC. After interns get accepted to the AAPD internship, AAPD matches interns with a placement site based on career goals, pairs them with a one-on-one mentor based on their interests, and provides weekly programming.





# Career Development

AAPD's internship program provides an opportunity for disabled students and recent graduates to feel more confident as a person with a disability in their field of work. While placement site opportunities were initially focused on Capitol Hill internships in 2002, AAPD now provides high-level paid internships across all sectors, including government agencies, nonprofit organizations, and for-profit companies. The internship program may be the first time AAPD interns experience disclosing their disability in a workplace and going through the formal accommodations process with their supervisor. Throughout the program, interns have many opportunities to network and connect with a variety of people with disabilities in different career sectors and fields of interest.

# Leadership Development

Throughout the internship program, AAPD provides several opportunities for interns to learn and explore different leadership styles through meeting disability community leaders and participating in a variety of advocacy opportunities. Opportunities include the National Council on Independent Living Annual Conference, participating in AAPD partner organizations' rallies and vigils, workshops, webinars, and more. Interns also have opportunities to lead presentations on disability topics, write a blog post or a policy memo, and meet with their legislators. In 2018, AAPD established the Disability Advocacy Certificate Program to further develop interns' leadership and advocacy skills. The Certificate Program prepares participants to be knowledgeable and effective advocates in the disability community on the local, state, and national levels. The course focuses on using one's story to impact change in their community and workplace. They also learn about different tactics of advocacy (e.g., digital, art, campaigns, coalition building, etc). After the program, interns receive a Certificate in Disability Advocacy from AAPD.



# Community Building

For many interns, being a part of the program is their first introduction to the disability community and disability pride. AAPD kicks off the program with a book club for the book *Disability Visibility* by Alice Wong to introduce interns to different disability experiences and facilitate discussion among the cohort. AAPD hosts several informal weekly events for only the interns and also provides opportunities for the interns to meet other disabled people by inviting AAPD alumni and disability community members to participate in our gatherings virtually and in-person, providing support to attend conferences or networking events, and more.

In addition to participating in the internship and Certificate Program, each intern is matched with a mentor. The matching is determined by the mentee's personal and professional goals and other demographic preferences such as identity and location.





# Program Timeline

**2002**

Summer Internship Program established

**2003**

Microsoft: Federal IT internship established

**2018**

Disability Advocacy Certificate Program established

**2020**

Expanded eligibility criteria to include:

- 1 Recent graduates within the last five years
- 2 Students from community or technical colleges
- 3 Non-traditional degree college students in programs such as a skill-based transition program or inclusive college program

Technology supports offered

Alumni Network established

**2021**

Internship hourly wage increased to at least DC minimum wage

First fully virtual Summer Internship Program

**2022**

First hybrid Summer Internship Program

**2023**

Housing stipend offered for remote summer interns

Fall Internship Program established



# Formal Evaluation

In 2022, AAPD celebrated two decades of the Summer Internship Program. After 20 years and one formal external evaluation in 2007, AAPD decided to contract an external evaluator, Third Sight, LLC. Third Sight assessed the program's effectiveness and provided recommendations for continued program improvement for the future, including program expansion. Their goals were:

1. Examining the program and its evolution over two decades.
2. Collecting information from alumni to determine if and how the program might have affected their employment and life goals.
3. Learning about the value of the program for internship placement sites and mentors.
4. Identifying strengths of the program and recommendations for further improvements.

Third Sight developed a report with their findings after gathering feedback from various key community members (i.e., alums, supervisors, mentors, AAPD Board members and staff, and partners) through surveys and interviews. The report discussed implications and shared a list of recommendations.

## Key Findings

These are key findings from people who participated in surveys and interviews conducted in 2022. Not all who engaged with the Summer Internship Program responded.

### Alumni

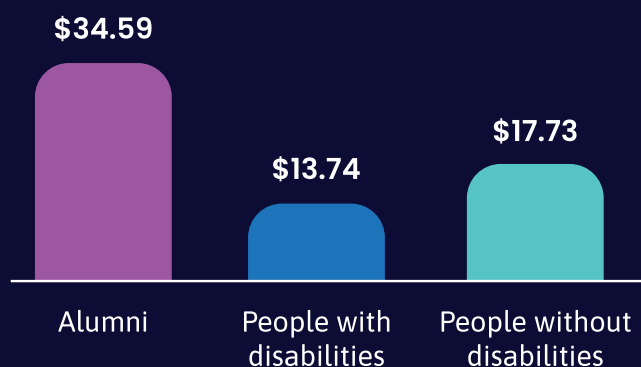
- The majority of alums **strongly agreed** or **agreed** that the internship program contributed to greater awareness of their disability identity, their experience in the world of work, their understanding of public policy, and their ability to network.

Note: Data is from respondents of the Summer Internship Program; not all who participated responded. Alumni data is from 2022. Employment data is from the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2022. Hourly wage is Third Sight authors' calculation from U.S. Census Bureau, 2020.

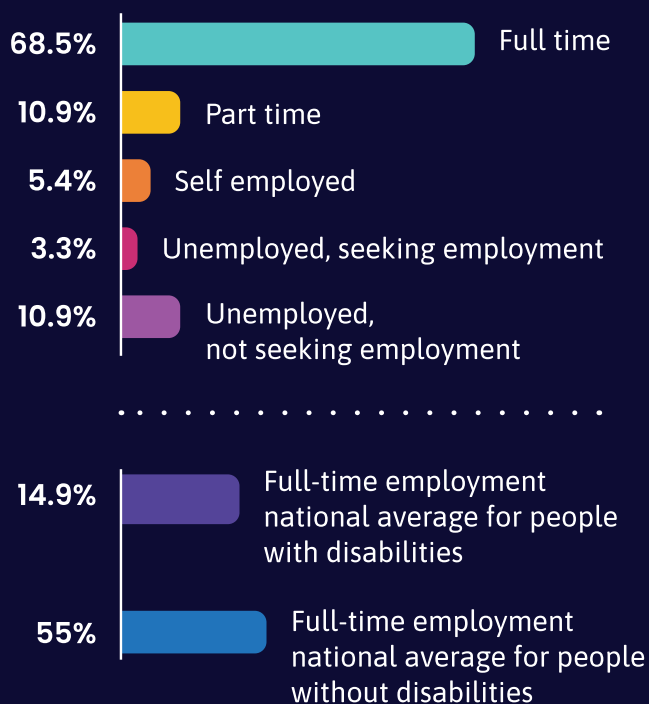


- Most alumni reported that the program strengthened their identity as a person with a disability by providing the opportunity for them to be around other people with disabilities in general, people with similar disabilities, and those with disabilities in their age group.
- All the alumni interviewed reported that the internship program positively impacted their self-confidence at work or in their community.
- More than 68% of alum respondents are employed full-time. In comparison, 14.9% of the general disability population and 55% of the nondisabled population are employed full time (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2022).
- Nearly 85% of alum respondents are employed. In comparison, 21.3% of the general disability population and 65.4% of the nondisabled population are employed (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2022).
- Alumni reported their average hourly wage is \$34.59. The national hourly wage of people with disabilities is \$13.74, compared to \$17.73 for people without disabilities (Third Sight LLC authors' calculation, U.S. Census, 2020).
- Alumni are more likely to be in the workforce and employed than the national average for people with disabilities. Alumni also have a higher attainment of a bachelor's degree than the average for people with and without disabilities.

Alumni Hourly Wage vs National Averages



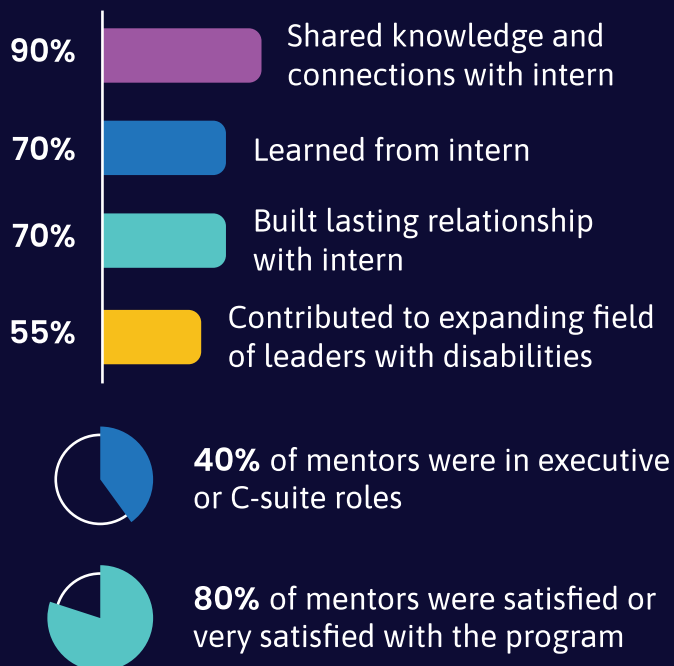
Employment Status of Summer Internship Program Alumni



The opportunities to network along with the cohort allow for building an incredible community and foster a sense of belonging that I haven't found in many other places, especially from a cross-disability perspective!"

Internship Alum

## Benefits to Mentor Participation



## Supervisors and Internship Placement Sites

- The majority of supervisors were **satisfied** or **very satisfied** with their experiences with the internship program. They gave high ratings to AAPD across the board, including on communication from AAPD staff, clarity about the supervisory role, matching of the interns to the position, professionalism of the intern, quality of communication about participation in AAPD-sponsored events, and AAPD staff's support during the internship.
- About a third of supervisors **agreed** or **strongly agreed** that the internship led them to hire more people with disabilities, and more than half responded that working with AAPD interns led their organizations to make their workplace more inclusive.
- Eighty percent of supervisor survey respondents are still in touch with the interns, and a majority continue to have a professional relationship with the interns.

## Mentors

- The majority of mentors enjoyed the opportunity to share their knowledge and connections with interns, learn from the interns, and build lasting relationships while contributing to the expansion of leaders with disabilities.
- Mentors benefited from "giving back" by helping interns build their networks and have successful, positive job experiences. Mentors could share their disability experiences with their mentees and broaden their understanding of the disability community through learning from the new perspectives and life experiences of the interns.



# Recommendations

Third Sight also provided several recommendations for AAPD. Their recommendations centered on improving program structure, providing additional supports for interns, increasing alumni engagement, diversifying intern recruitment, expanding internship programming, and strengthening mentorship activities.

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## Program Structure

- Increase stipends.
- Consider adding professional development components, including:
  1. *Leadership development*
  2. *Guidance on how to network*
  3. *Orientation to DC, including how to get around*
  4. *Guidance on how to address interpersonal conflicts*
  5. *Team building*
  6. *Diversity and equity training*
  7. *Practice advocating, including self-advocacy skills*
- Provide practical tools and tips for advocacy.
- Implement a pre- and post-evaluation of interns' knowledge, skills, and engagement to measure impact.

## Greater Intern Interest Alignment and Support

- Ensure that selected interns receive all supports and accommodations needed for their full participation. This may require additional training or orientation for some interns, and an early review of their housing and transportation to ensure they have adequate services.
- Continue to ensure that interns are well-matched with the job placement.

## Alumni Engagement

- Increase the number of alumni events offered.
- Ensure that interns across cohorts have the opportunity to engage with each other.
- Identify alumni experts for speaking engagements and events. Leverage key alumni with successful careers.



Thank you AAPD ...  
for creating such a great  
program. It felt like the  
first time ... my disability  
was normalized and ... I was  
in a community of other  
people who were doing  
awesome work and being  
change makers in the field  
and I owe a lot to them.”

### Internship Alum



## Diversity in Recruitment

- Expand outreach to different schools and locations across the country to increase the diversity of cohorts.
- Highlight alumni who are women, people of color, LGBTQIA+, and from different regions of the country to support diversity in recruitment.

## Internship Expansion

- Create a year-round internship program with summer, spring, and fall cohorts.

## Mentorship Component

- Review the process for matching interns to mentors. Consider sharing professional interests and the opportunity for interns to engage with mentors who have similar disabilities.
- Create more opportunities to bring together mentors and interns through planned activities. Include virtual opportunities for greater flexibility and engagement.
- Clarify expectations of the mentoring program with mentors. Ensure mentors are prepared to dedicate the time required to participate in the program.
- Provide interns with structured guidance on how to engage with mentors.



# AAPD Summer Internship Program Changes

Approximately 85% of alumni who responded to the survey were from the Summer of 2019 and prior. Since the leadership changes described below were implemented, there have been notable changes throughout the internship program that respond to most of the recommendations identified by Third Sight's evaluation report.

## Staff and Personnel

In Summer 2018 and 2019, the internship program was led by the AAPD Programs Manager with the support of the President & Chief Executive Officer (CEO). The Programs Manager was responsible

for developing and executing all aspects of the Summer Internship Program and Disability Advocacy Certificate Program in addition to several other of AAPD's national programming initiatives, including the Disability Rights Storyteller Fellowship, Disability Mentoring Day, Paul G. Hearne Emerging Leader Award, and the NBCUniversal Tony Coelho Media Scholarship. In 2019, AAPD contracted a part-time Summer Internship Program Assistant who worked full-time during the summer internship program and part-time hours leading up to and following the completion of the internship program.

In Fall 2019, AAPD welcomed a new President & CEO to the organization and a new Programs Manager to lead the Summer Internship Program.

Similar to in 2018, the Programs Manager continued to manage multiple programs in addition to the internship program focused on emerging leaders, such as awards and scholarships. AAPD also added a part-time Program Coordinator to focus on Disability Mentoring Day and Alumni Network to support staff sustainability in the organization. This allowed the Programs Manager to have more capacity to implement changes to the internship program. In 2022, the Programs Manager became the Programs Director to manage the growing internship program team, along with the Programs team.

In Summer 2021, AAPD expanded the Internship Program Team by hiring a Summer Internship Program Coordinator. The Program Coordinator was solely dedicated to the internship program to increase capacity. In fall 2023, AAPD promoted the Internship Program Coordinator role to Manager to recognize the full scope of responsibilities of managing all of AAPD's internship programs. This also recognizes the increased responsibilities of the internship expansion to include a fall cohort. Due to the expansion of the internship program, AAPD hired a year-round part-time Program Assistant working 10-20 hours a week to support the Program Manager.

In Summer 2023, AAPD hired an Events & Logistics Coordinator to provide additional support to the Internship Program team. The Events & Logistics Coordinator provides support with travel, supplies, inventory, technology, speaker honorariums, on-site support, and more. AAPD also hired a full-time Programs Coordinator to focus on the Alumni Network, to continue supporting the professional development of former AAPD interns and other program participants, and to help manage Disability Mentoring Day each October. With the Programs Team comprised of a team of four people, and three of the four Programs Team members supporting the internship program, this further increased the Internship Program team's capacity to implement more meaningful changes.

The last significant change in 2023 was that AAPD hired a Chief Operating Officer (COO). The COO helps develop additional structure and policies, and streamlines processes to strengthen the internship programs. The COO also works closely with the Internship Program team to work on evaluation and impact.



By the end of 2023, the AAPD Leadership Team supported the long-term sustainability and effectiveness of the internship program:

- President & CEO
- Chief Operating Officer
- Programs Director

The Internship Program Team supported the day-to-day execution:

- Internship Program Manager
- Programs Coordinator (Alumni Network focus)
- Events & Logistics Coordinator
- Program Assistant

“

I think the program is great. The only thing I would wish is that we could get more AAPD interns.”

Internship Supervisor



# Budget

Throughout this report, AAPD will detail many changes that have impacted our budget. To the right is a table that summarizes how the expenses have changed each year.

We chose Summer 2019 as a reference point, as it was the last summer before the COVID-19 pandemic and before new leadership joined the organization.

## *Some notes:*

- Summer 2019 was fully in-person.
- Summer 2020 was not included due to only offering the Disability Advocacy Certificate Program.
- Summer 2021 reflected our first fully virtual internship. We had two classes, since interns from 2020 were invited to return in 2021.
- Summer 2022 was our first hybrid program (i.e., interns participated in DC or remotely).
- Summer 2023 was the first time we offered a remote housing stipend.



I haven't previously had opportunities to experience cross-disability community, and I feel I have made valuable and lasting connections in the cohort. My experience in the program has tremendously built my confidence, and I feel that I have really grown a lot this summer."

### **Internship Alum**





	2019	2021	2022	2023
<b>Internship Format</b>	In-Person	Virtual	Hybrid	Hybrid
<b>Number of Interns</b>	19	28	22	20
<b>Hourly Wage</b>	\$8.75	\$15	\$16.10	\$18
<b>Total Intern Stipend</b>	\$53,200	\$134,400	\$113,344	\$115,200
<b>Disability Accommodations</b>	\$15,242	\$46,091	\$32,362	\$41,987
<b>Lodging (Housing / Hotel)</b>	\$87,000	\$0	\$75,228	\$67,787
<b>Travel</b>	\$11,333	\$0	\$11,435	\$4,605
<b>Honorariums</b>	\$0	\$14,560	\$8,075	\$3,675
<b>Events (Including Catering)</b>	\$15,116	\$12,320	\$1,062	\$7,587
<b>Technology Support</b>	\$0	\$1,225	\$1,499	\$1,720
<b>Supplies</b>	\$754	\$2,002	\$4,379	\$4,894
<b>Miscellaneous</b>	\$2,246	\$989	\$65	\$389
<b>Total Direct Expenses*</b>	<b>\$181,892</b>	<b>\$208,596</b>	<b>\$243,006</b>	<b>\$242,563</b>



\* The total direct expenses do not include everything listed in the table. Travel line items may fluctuate depending on sponsorship available. Other expenses may include subscriptions or contractors.

# Program Format

From 2002 – 2017, AAPD hosted the Summer Internship Program entirely in-person with internship placements requiring 40 hours of work a week over ten weeks. The program components, including mentors, placement sites, and activities, were all based in Washington, DC. In 2018, AAPD added the Disability Advocacy Certificate Program, which reduced the weekly placement site hours to 32 hours, from Monday to Thursday.

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic in March 2020, AAPD pivoted to offer only the Disability Advocacy Certificate Program remotely that summer. Many placement site partners needed more time to be ready to host entirely virtual interns by the summer. While we could not place participants in internships at this point, we continued to pay the interns for their time due to a lack of financial opportunities amid the pandemic. We also paired our interns one-on-one with a virtual mentor for the first time. The 2020 cohort was offered an opportunity to return in summer 2021 to gain internship experience.

Due to a virtual format and wanting to create similar opportunities to an in-person environment, AAPD strengthened our community engagement by providing weekly virtual informal events for interns to meet and get to know each other.

Some examples include a monthly book club, with topics determined by the interns, such as disability and dating, disability and abolition, LGBTQIA+ pride, and more. We received significant positive feedback surrounding the creation of intentional spaces for engagement of our internship cohort, and we have continued providing spaces for our interns to informally connect with each other and the broader community in multiple formats. Many interns also took the initiative to plan their own virtual gatherings, such as co-working spaces.

In 2021, since the COVID-19 vaccines and tests were not yet widely available, AAPD hosted the entire internship program remotely. This ensured the safety of the AAPD interns while providing high-level quality access to career opportunities, leadership development, and connections with the disability community. AAPD's first-ever remote internship program was built on the success of the remote Disability Advocacy Certificate Program in 2020. By providing remote opportunities, AAPD created more opportunities for internship placement and participation across the country in a modality that is more accessible to many.

At the conclusion of the 2021 program, AAPD surveyed our interns to ensure the remote format was an accessible and meaningful experience. Ninety-two percent of the respondents recommended

that AAPD continue to provide a remote option. In addition, 92% of the interns who responded to the survey reported that they strongly agreed or agreed that their virtual internship placement site was a meaningful experience. Lastly, 40% of the interns who responded to the survey shared that the virtual format was more accessible for them than an in-person format. However, 16% of the interns reported that an in-person environment would have been more accessible for them.

As a result of the responses, AAPD decided to continue offering both in-person and remote internship opportunities. In 2022, AAPD hosted our first-ever hybrid program successfully, with an opportunity to join in-person in Washington, DC, or participate fully remotely. The in-person interns also experienced a true hybrid environment (going to the office a few times a week). All remote interns have the opportunity to attend in person for the weeklong orientation in Washington, DC, during which AAPD covers their travel and lodging. A hybrid internship program allows remote

interns to access meaningful internship opportunities without worrying about their access to healthcare in their home state or leaving their place of safety (e.g., COVID-19 protocols, support systems, etc.) Based on the continued success of a hybrid model in Summer 2022, AAPD will offer a hybrid summer internship program going forward.

Based on feedback from the Summer Internship Program evaluation and with the support of a challenge grant from Arconic Foundation, AAPD launched our Fall Internship Program in September 2023. The Fall Internship Program is entirely virtual and part-time. This is an opportunity to offer part-time internships to provide more opportunities for students who may be managing school or work obligations. Additionally, part-time opportunities allow flexibility for income limits that may impact people with disabilities who receive public benefits. We do not want prospective interns to choose between impactful career development and the benefits they need to survive.





# Recruitment and Outreach

Beginning in the Summer 2021 cycle, AAPD diversified our recruitment efforts by intentionally reaching out to several organizations or institutions that primarily serve people who experience intersecting oppression or are historically excluded. Some examples include, but are not limited to: Historically Black Colleges and Universities, Tribal Colleges, Minority Serving Institutions, community colleges, and post-secondary education programs specifically for people with intellectual and developmental disabilities. In addition, we contacted different organizations outside of university Disability Resource Offices, such as student-led organizations on campus, Offices of Diversity & Inclusion on campuses, youth-led organizations, and vocational rehabilitation services.

We see the impact of our intentional recruitment among disabled people of color. The following spread showcases the percentages across cohorts for interns' racial and ethnic identities, gender identities, and those identifying as LGBTQIA+. The number of people identifying as a specific race may exceed the number of interns due to interns identifying with more than one race, as seen on page 25.

The year 2020 was excluded because numerous interns opted to defer their participation to 2021 due to no internship component being offered or wanting to focus on their well-being during the summer.

In 2021, AAPD staff began hosting a virtual information session on the Summer Internship Program, which features a panel of intern alumni. This is an opportunity to access information about the program in real-time beyond written materials and it also allows prospective interns to engage with AAPD staff and alumni.



# Application Process

For Summer 2021, AAPD changed the eligibility criteria of the internship program. Historically, we required participants to be enrolled in or recently graduated from a traditional 4-year university or college. We know that access to post-secondary education is often inequitable for students with disabilities, especially students with disabilities who have multiply marginalized identities. The eligibility criteria now intentionally include language around associate degrees, community colleges, post-secondary education transition programs, and any skills-based programs (e.g., apprenticeships). The AAPD Summer Internship Program initially defined recent graduates as those within one year of graduation. This definition has shifted over time, and in 2021, we clarified the program's definition of recent graduates to include people who completed their degree within the past five years.

Starting in Summer 2022, AAPD changed the required application materials. We no longer require letters of recommendation, as we recognize that students and recent graduates with disabilities often experience challenges with their professors and disability resource offices that can prevent them from accessing classroom content or developing a professional connection.

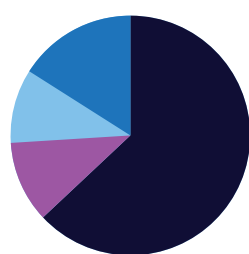
Their professors also may not be able to accurately speak about their disability experience or how they overcome their challenges related to their disability, despite a lack of support from the university or disability resource office.

Instead of having resumes focus solely on professional experiences, we reframed resumes to demonstrate passion, growth of skills, and involvement in their community. We encouraged applicants to include broader experiences that may have contributed to their professional growth, such as volunteer work, school projects, and personal initiatives or projects. AAPD recognizes that people with disabilities may not be able to access the same types of career and work opportunities as non-disabled people for a variety of reasons, including a lack of accommodations provided by their educational institution or workplace, discrimination, and inconsistent access to transit.

In 2021, AAPD made an internal change to how we score applications in the review process. Previously, an applicant's resume would be weighed equally to essay answers. As we recognize that resumes do not provide a full picture of people with disabilities' contributions, we now put more emphasis on essay responses to focus more on their growth as a person.

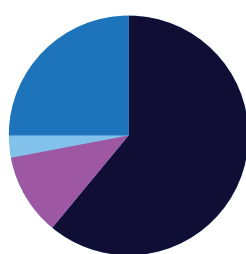
# Demographics of AAPD Summer Internship Program Participants

## Gender Identity Demographics of AAPD Summer Internship Program Participants, 2019–2023



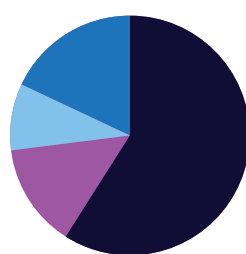
2019

- Female **63%**
- Male **16%**
- Nonbinary **11%**
- Not Disclosed **11%**



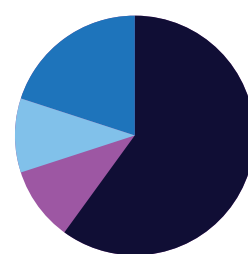
2021

- Female **61%**
- Male **25%**
- Nonbinary **4%**
- Not Disclosed **11%**



2022

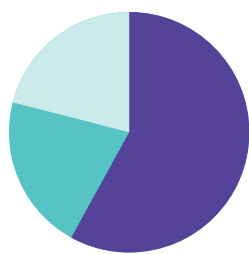
- Female **59%**
- Male **18%**
- Nonbinary **9%**
- Not Disclosed **14%**



2023

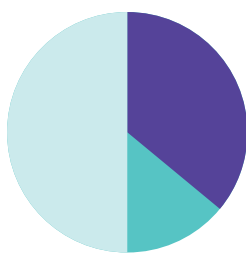
- Female **60%**
- Male **20%**
- Nonbinary **10%**
- Not Disclosed **10%**

## Sexual Orientation Demographics of AAPD Summer Internship Program Participants, 2019–2023



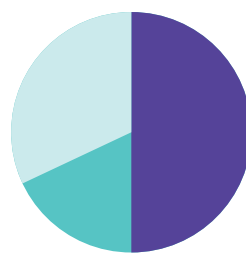
2019

- LGBTQIA+ **58%**
- Heterosexual **21%**
- Not Disclosed **21%**



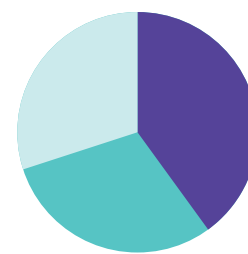
2021

- LGBTQIA+ **36%**
- Heterosexual **50%**
- Not Disclosed **14%**



2022

- LGBTQIA+ **50%**
- Heterosexual **32%**
- Not Disclosed **18%**

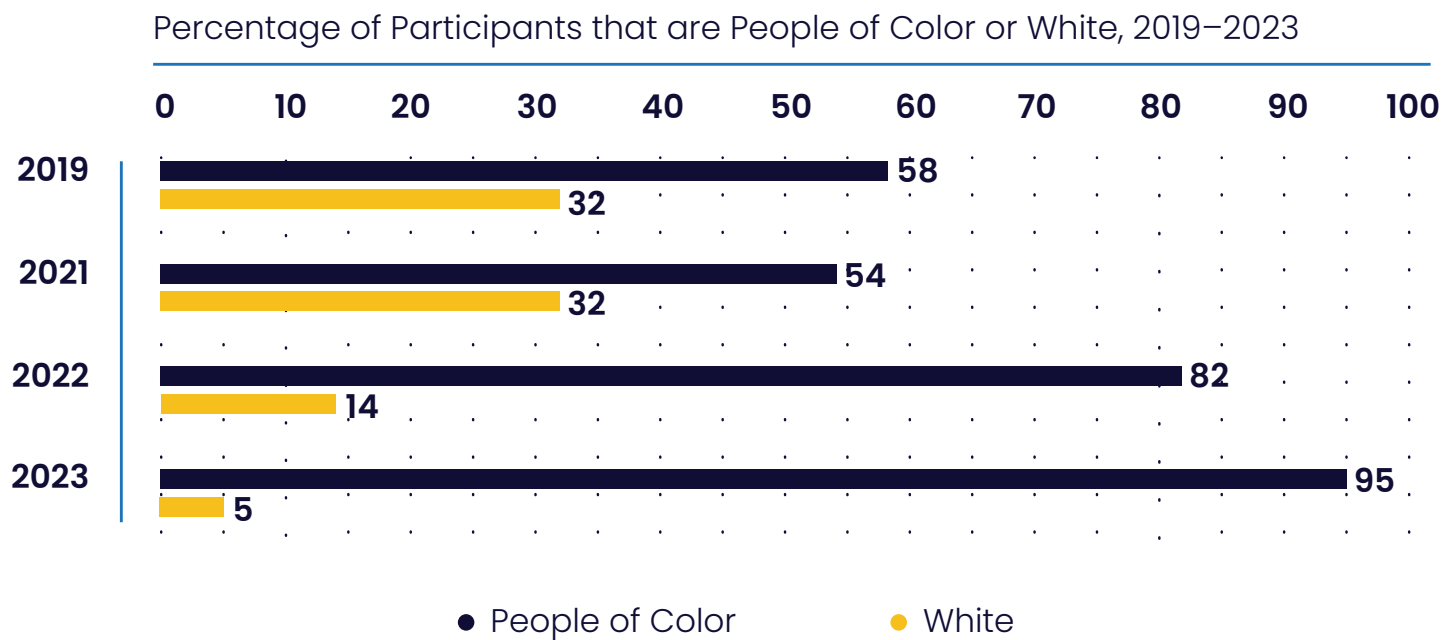
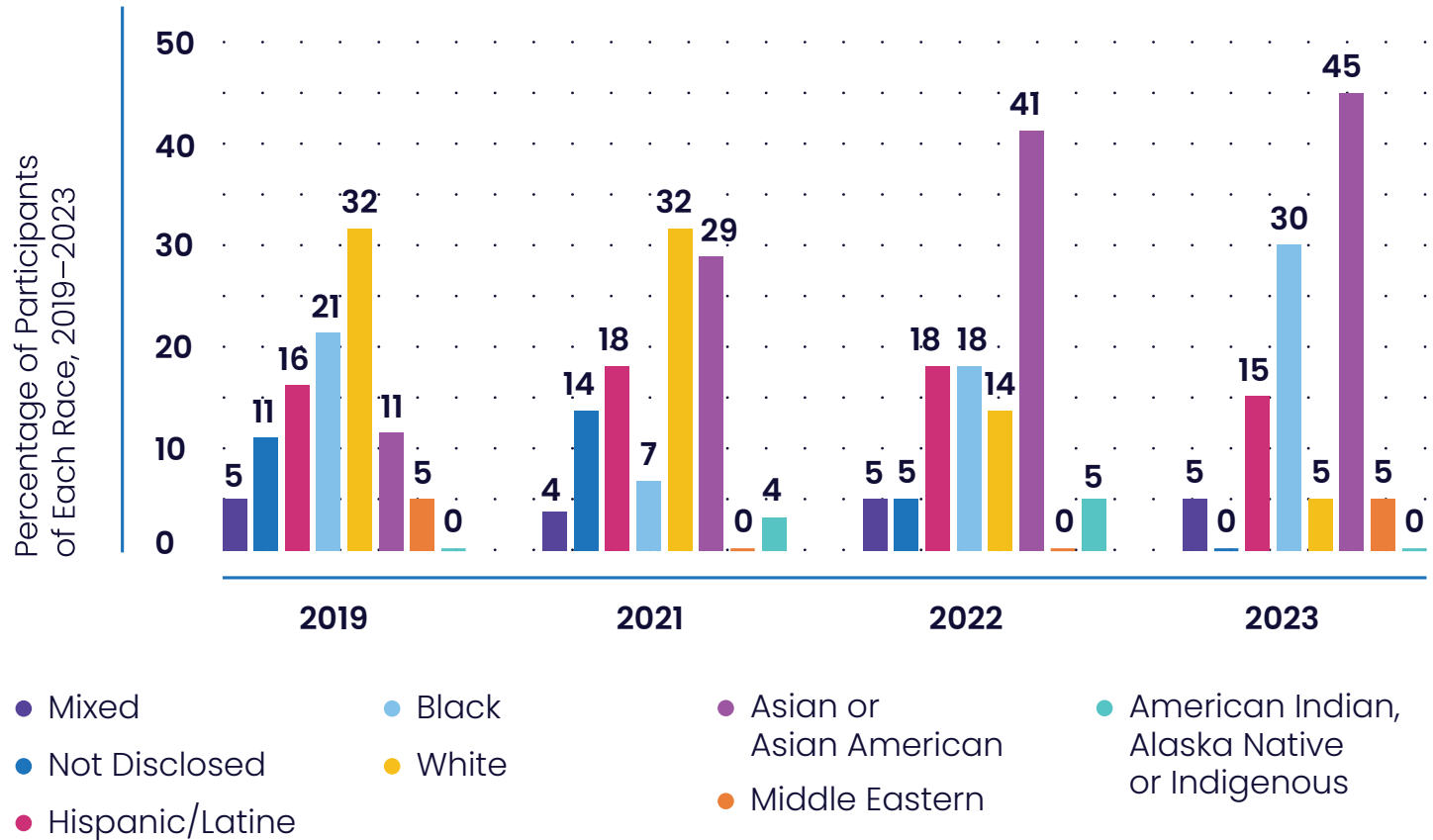


2023

- LGBTQIA+ **40%**
- Heterosexual **30%**
- Not Disclosed **30%**



# Racial Identity Demographics of AAPD Summer Internship Program Participants, 2019–2023



# Interview Process

During the interview stage, we have continued the practice implemented in 2018 of engaging alumni in the interviews. We provide alumni opportunities to share feedback on the interview questions and format. Alumni's perspectives significantly impact how we consider applicants who will benefit the most from the program.

We also changed our interview process to be more accessible in 2020. We reduced the length of the interview from 60 minutes to 30 minutes (unless an accommodation has been requested that asks for more time), and we reduced the number of questions asked. We also conducted our interviews on the Zoom platform instead of Google Meet to allow integration with real-time captioning.

# Intern Onboarding Materials

In 2021, AAPD drafted and developed several onboarding documents to formalize the internship program and establish a shared understanding between AAPD staff and interns.

When an intern was officially matched with a placement site, AAPD required more formal agreements for shared understanding. First, the placement site had to fill out a form to agree and adhere to all the placement site responsibilities. The placement site would also share more information upfront about the intern's activities and tasks for the summer. After the form was completed, AAPD prepared an offer letter for the intern to agree to and accept.

AAPD developed a Code of Conduct and Community Guidelines. The Code of Conduct outlined expectations of intern engagement and behavior, such as communication expectations between interns and supervisors, staff, and mentors. It was included as part of the intern's offer letter to the program. The Community Guidelines were co-developed with each cohort of interns during their first day of orientation and revisited throughout the summer. It included items such as checking in with people about their accommodation and access needs before planning a restaurant outing, speaking based on their own experience instead of generalizing it to the entire community, confidentiality, and so forth.

From 2022 onwards, AAPD included COVID-19 protocols as part of our Code of Conduct.

# Program Supports

Before 2020, AAPD provided interns with a living stipend equal to \$8.75/hr for 32 hours a week over a 10-week period, accessible housing, and transportation to and from Washington, DC. AAPD also budgeted in personal care attendants to travel with and support the interns during the summer, and meal stipends of \$200 for the entire summer. Since then, the hourly wage, housing stipends, meal stipends, and other program supports have all increased.

## Hourly Wage

Our interns with disabilities come from diverse backgrounds that add value and expertise to their placement sites. However, people with disabilities frequently go unpaid or are often paid subminimum wage. While this contributes to the pay gap between nondisabled and disabled people, many people with disabilities cannot accept unpaid work due to paying for additional support or resources to live independently in their community.

In the summer of 2020, AAPD provided a stipend of \$20/hour for our interns during their time in the Certificate Program, as they may have planned on relying on the internship program as a source of income. The Certificate Program was six hours a week over a 10-week period.

In 2021, AAPD increased the living stipend per hour to match at least the District of Columbia's (DC) minimum wage or higher. For 2021, it was \$15/hour. The hourly wage increased again in 2023 to \$18/hour.

Due to the increase in stipend, AAPD works on a case-by-case basis with interns who may need a different payment schedule due to their public benefits. If interns are concerned about the hourly wages impacting their benefits, AAPD will split up the payments over a longer period of time to minimize the impact. AAPD will also work on a case-by-case basis to figure out alternative payment methods to ensure interns are compensated for their time and expertise.





## Housing

For the majority of the internship program, AAPD has provided in-person interns with accessible housing at George Washington (GW) University. In 2022, AAPD started to provide remote interns with hotel lodging during orientation week. In 2023, AAPD began offering remote interns a monthly housing stipend of up to \$2,000. This rate is comparable to the monthly rate AAPD pays to cover in-person interns in Washington, DC. Because the Internal Revenue Services (IRS) considers housing stipends as income since we pay the interns directly, AAPD informs interns that the housing stipend may impact their benefits before they officially accept their spot as an AAPD intern. Like with the hourly wages, AAPD will work with interns individually to figure out an alternative if this stipend threatens their benefits.



## Meal Stipends

In 2018 and 2019, AAPD provided a meal stipend of \$200 over 10 weeks through American Express gift cards as part of Friday's Disability Advocacy Certificate Program lunches. When the full internship program resumed virtually in 2021, AAPD continued providing meal stipends. In 2021 and 2022, AAPD increased the amount to \$400 over 10 weeks through grocery or food delivery gift cards to factor in fees and tips. Instead of adding the meal stipend to their living wages, AAPD provides gift cards to minimize potential impacts on interns' taxes or benefits.

In 2023, GW University offered meal plans for its summer residents, including AAPD interns. The meal plan was \$550 for the summer, which included 50 meal swipes (prices vary based on meal) and \$50 declining debit balance on their GW card. Due to this change, AAPD allowed all interns to choose one of the three options:

1. Participate in GW's Meal Plan
2. Receive a \$550 Visa gift card or food delivery service gift card\*
3. Receive \$550 as part of their stipend.

*\*On a case-by-case basis, AAPD provided a grocery gift card of the intern's choosing if food delivery is not accessible in their area or does not meet their dietary accommodations.*

Similar to the housing stipend, AAPD informed interns that if they opt out of a meal stipend and choose to combine it with their living wages, this may impact their taxes and/or benefits.

## Technology and Equipment

Starting in 2020, AAPD provided internet stipends for remote interns and developed a budget for technology support. The internet stipend provides additional support for interns who may not have access to high-speed internet. Technology supports include, but are not limited to, laptops, monitors, accessible software, and accessories (e.g., headphones, ergonomic mouse, monitor, etc). Since many placement sites' organizational policies provide limited technology offerings for interns (especially remote interns), AAPD purchases equipment for interns to use during their internship experience.

## Sustained Engagement

In 2020, AAPD launched the Alumni Network to continue investing in our program participants. Alumni can obtain professional development support related to their career goals, make new community connections, and sustain existing connections. As part of the Alumni Network, AAPD established the Ambassadors Council.

They are alumni who help guide AAPD's planning for future initiatives. Due to AAPD implementing more structure to keep in contact with alumni, we are able to execute a more intentional effort to uplift and continue building relationships with them. They are frequently invited to participate in the internship program as guest speakers and mentors and attend community events. Because of our continued relationships with alumni, we can also recommend them for other professional development opportunities, such as a guest speaker on a Hill briefing, subject matter expert webinars, blog posts, and so forth.

## Information and Preparation

In 2022, AAPD developed a more comprehensive resource guide to support interns during the summer. This includes information on national resources and mental health services. For in-person interns, this includes access to healthcare, including COVID-19 testing and treatment, and transportation.

We also provided pre-orientation sessions, which share information with interns before they arrive in Washington, DC. Sessions included how to navigate transportation in DC, such as how to use the Metro, and discussing accommodations while flying.

# Placement Site Matching

AAPD completes a thorough vetting process with every placement site before officially pairing them with an intern. As part of our vetting process, we ask about the supervisor's comfort level with providing and implementing accommodations and the organization's disability inclusion policies or beliefs. We also ensure interns will be assigned meaningful tasks and activities. Historically, AAPD has required that administrative duties not take up more than 25% of the interns' time.

In 2021, AAPD began a more formal process with our placement partners. All placement site supervisors must sign an agreement that outlines each intern's responsibilities and confirms the interns' scope of work. This gives AAPD an opportunity to review the activities and enforce our requirement of limited allocation to administrative duties. This information is also included in the interns' offer letters before they agree, so interns have a chance to ask questions about their responsibilities and expectations. This creates greater transparency and sets expectations for the summer. This process also mirrors what an intern may experience when applying for jobs and finalizing an offer. AAPD references this information during the check-ins throughout the summer between supervisors and interns.

In 2022, AAPD started collecting more information from placement sites to share with interns ahead of time before starting the formal process. Since AAPD does not do a background check on our interns or require U.S. citizenship, many of our placement sites have an independent process. Some placement sites may require U.S. citizenship, current enrollment in a university or college, and background checks, including fingerprinting, paperwork, and/or reference checks. The information from the placement site allows interns to determine whether they want to proceed with a specific placement site's selection process. This information is also available to applicants as part of our recruitment efforts.

In 2023, AAPD continued to work with placement site supervisors to streamline the matching process and ensure the interns are set up for success. We began collecting more information on what resources (e.g., technology equipment) or existing skills are required to ensure a meaningful experience for the interns.

AAPD also made intentional efforts to diversify our placement partners for two reasons: to ensure the placement site was tailored to the intern's career goals and to increase AAPD's impact on different organizations. From 2021 to 2023, AAPD averaged nine new placement site partnerships each year.



# Mentors

Beginning in 2020, AAPD offered the option of virtual mentors in addition to in-person mentors. The virtual format allowed us to find mentors more aligned with the interns' interests and advocacy development, if desired. AAPD also developed mentorship guidance with prompted questions to better support facilitation between the mentor and mentee.

AAPD also asked more questions about interns' preferences for their mentors. We asked if they prefer their mentor to have a specific background or expertise and shared identity (disability, race, gender, etc). As a result of recruiting a more diverse intern cohort, we end up matching more interns with mentors with a disability, particularly mentors with a disability who are also people of color.

In 2021, AAPD shifted our traditional "How to Network in DC" orientation workshop to focus on how to build and sustain meaningful relationships with their mentors, supervisors, peers, and community members.



I was an AAPD intern myself 6 summers ago. I still work for the same agency I had my summer internship placement, with which I was offered a job while an intern. I was supervised by yet another former AAPD intern at that time. Having the opportunity, in turn, to supervise an AAPD intern this fall was invaluable. The AAPD legacy continues..."

**Internship Mentor**

# Disability Advocacy Certificate Program

AAPD offers the Disability Advocacy Certificate Program to complement the Summer Internship Program experience. Created in 2018, it was initially designed for interns to learn more about the electoral and legislative process in Washington, DC. This included learning about different legislation that impacts the disability community. In 2018, this was established in partnership with a DC-based university (American University and George Washington University both served as partners). As a result of the university partnership, interns could opt to pay to take the course for credits that can be transferred to their home university.

In 2022, due to the low interest in interns taking the course for credit and feedback on the Certificate Program, AAPD decided not to continue a partnership with the university. The program was redesigned to focus on preparing interns to be knowledgeable and effective advocates in the disability community through storytelling. This also includes understanding their individual, local, state, and national audience.

*By the end of the course, interns learn how to:*

1. Communicate their story to different audiences across multiple mediums (e.g. social media, blog posts, policy memos, Hill visits, presentations, etc.).
2. Identify a variety of advocacy strategies and tactics to address issues the disability community faces.
3. Describe approaches to developing relationships and coalitions.
4. Apply an intersectional lens to their advocacy.
5. Understand their role and responsibility in the collective disability movement.

They receive a certificate from AAPD upon completion of the program.





I had such a great experience when I went through the program myself and I care about giving back to the disability community. Being in AAPD was a life changing experience for me, and I wanted to be that resource for someone else.”

**Internship Mentor**

In 2020, AAPD started offering honorariums to Certificate Program speakers. We also prioritized guest speakers who identify as a person with a disability. This is an opportunity to not only pay disability experts for their work and knowledge, but also uplift community members and provide professional development opportunities for them.

*As of 2023, we offered the following honorariums:*

- \$300 for a single speaker on a topic between 1 - 2 hours, including breaks
- \$150 each for co-speakers on a topic between 1 - 2 hours, including breaks
- \$75 for each panelist on a topic up to 1.5 hours, including breaks

In 2023, AAPD started collecting the other identities of speakers in addition to disability identity. Guest speakers can opt in to share this information, and only demographics are shared publicly. This allows AAPD to better understand how we are engaging disabled people with intersecting identities.



# COVID-19 Protocols

The pandemic continues to impact the lives of people with disabilities. Despite the COVID-19 Public Health Emergency ending in May 2023, AAPD continued to implement COVID-19 protocols for all in-person components of our internship programs.

In 2022 and 2023, AAPD had COVID-19 protocols and contingency plans to ensure in-person interns could safely participate. For both years, any in-person intern could change their preference to work remotely (up until a reasonable “drop date” of March, to allow time for coordination). Reasonable accommodations were provided upon request.

AAPD asked questions about individuals’ COVID-19 safety precautions as part of the roommate match process for DC-based interns.

The 2022 and 2023 protocols applied to all of the in-person internship program participants, including remote interns who participated in-person for Orientation week, personal care attendants, and AAPD staff.

## *Requirements included:*

- Most recent COVID-19 booster vaccine as of the time of the internship program
- Weekly COVID-19 rapid antigen test, provided by AAPD
- Wearing masks provided by AAPD during weekly Friday programming
- In-person interns have their own private bathrooms in their dormitories
- HyperHEPA air purifier in the room during Orientation week and Friday classes

Interns could request a private suite instead of a shared suite. A shared suite is defined as having multiple private bedrooms with private bathrooms, but shared living spaces, such as a kitchen and living room.

Remote interns who opted to visit Washington, DC had their own hotel room.

If an intern tested positive for COVID-19, they were required to immediately notify both AAPD and GW University Housing in 2021 and just AAPD in 2022. From there, interns were expected to isolate themselves in their room for at least five days or until a negative test, whichever was longer. In both 2022 and 2023, AAPD provided additional rapid tests as needed, thermometers, and pulse oximeters. GW University Housing provided support to interns on a case-by-case basis, including supporting delivery services related to food and/or essential items.



If an intern tested positive and their suitemate did not, the suitemate took daily rapid tests for up to 1 week. AAPD provided daily test kits.

AAPD also reserved the right to shift the Friday Certificate Program class to a fully virtual format if the following occurred:

1. Five (5) interns and/or one AAPD Summer Internship Program staff member tests positive.
2. When fewer than five (5) in-person interns attend due to concerns about COVID-19 or due to accommodation needs.

Guest speakers and access vendors (e.g., ASL interpreters) participating in-person during community events or the Disability Advocacy Certificate Program were required to have a negative COVID-19 rapid antigen test and wear a mask. AAPD provided masks and tests.



AAPD has given me a unique opportunity to meet a diverse group of people with disabilities, learn from each other's experiences, and collaborate on how we can better contribute to the disability community."

**Internship Alum**





What  
Comes  
Next:

Challenges,  
Opportunities,  
and Our Goals  
for Future  
Improvement



# Systemic Challenges

Even with numerous changes to our program, there remain significant national systemic changes needed to ensure students and recent graduates with disabilities have access to meaningful career and leadership opportunities. This impacts people with disabilities' future employment opportunities. Some existing barriers include, but are not limited to:

- Interns have concerns about risking their benefits due to asset limits. AAPD has to consider how much financial support to give interns without impacting their benefits long-term.
- While many remote opportunities increased during the peak of the COVID-19 pandemic, many workplaces are reversing their policies.
- Interns may lose their access to home and community-based services if they are away from their homes for too long.
- Interns are only eligible for home and community-based services in their home state, not when they travel or temporarily relocate.
- Interns are concerned about the accessibility of travel, such as how airlines may damage their mobility aids, or whether they will receive the accommodations they need for travel.
- Placement sites may not have the budget for accommodations due to limited funds. If the placement site is a small organization under 15 employees, they may be less willing to provide accommodations because the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) does not require workplaces of this size to provide reasonable accommodations.
- If interns are not local to the District of Columbia, Maryland, or Virginia area, then they may not have access to their healthcare providers for the summer.
- Due to the lack of access to vaccines and public health guidance, interns may not feel comfortable risking their health to accept a hybrid position.
- Lack of enforcement of the ADA may affect whether placement sites and transportation are accessible for interns.

It is important to note that the systemic barriers listed on the previous page are existing challenges at the point when interns are connected with AAPD. There are several challenges that happen long before they are accepted in the program, such as accommodations in primary and secondary education or access to inclusive volunteer or after-school activities that impact their opportunities to enter post-secondary education. There are also numerous challenges to accessing employment after they complete the program.

To address some of the systemic barriers and propose long-term solutions, AAPD works with our community to bring awareness and solutions. AAPD collaborates with our Policy Team to educate policymakers on the impact of their policies. We continue to engage and educate our federal partners on the impact of our program. We also share contextual information with our placement sites and mentors to help them understand the challenges that people with disabilities have entering the workforce. AAPD also aims to partner with other internship programs or workforce coalitions, even if they do not have a focus on disability, to share inclusive practices.

## Future Improvements

For AAPD, advancing access and equity is a continuous commitment and practice. The AAPD Internship Program team continues to improve the program annually, incorporating feedback from Third Sight, conducting internship program evaluations, and responding to policies impacting people with disabilities.

Looking ahead, AAPD has begun planning some next steps to ensure the internship program continues to be reflective of the diverse disability community, as well as continuing to measure the program's impact. Below are some of our priorities.

### Internship Goals and Objectives

- Assess our program activities to ensure they align with the program goals and objectives.
- Develop pre-and post-evaluation surveys for interns and alumni to better understand the impact of the AAPD Internship Program.

- AAPD has received feedback that interns often feel like they have competing priorities regarding the internship component and the Disability Advocacy Certificate Program. Despite AAPD staff reducing the number of assignments and classes, interns continue to report challenges balancing their workload. AAPD will revisit the Certificate Program model to ensure interns maximize their career opportunities, leadership development, and community building.

## Processes and Support for Interns

- Research best practices for the application and interview processes, such as submitting application information in alternative formats, sharing interview questions ahead of time, etc.
- Identify additional supports for the internship program, such as access to mental health and healthcare, job coaching accommodations, and more.
- Explore options for providing a housing stipend without impacting interns' income.
- Strengthen the mentorship component based on alumni's feedback.
- Create more materials in plain language.

- Continue to build intentional relationships with Historically Black Colleges and Universities and Minority Serving Institutions, college programs for people with intellectual and developmental disabilities, and community and technical colleges for recruitment efforts.

## Alumni Network

- Continue building out the Alumni Network to increase and sustain engagement.
- Provide a transition period when interns complete the program and get involved in the Alumni Network.

## Processes and Support for Supervisors and Mentors

- Gather more resources to provide support for supervisors who may not have experience with an intern or employee with disabilities.
- Build in capacity to support supervisors and mentors during the internship program.

Throughout the development and implementation of new initiatives or practices, AAPD plans to engage intern alumni and community members to ensure our approach is accessible and equitable.



# Conclusion

Since the inception of the AAPD Summer Internship Program in 2002, the program has played a vital part in preparing disabled people to be in decision-making roles that impact our future workplaces and communities. AAPD cultivates an environment to strengthen disability identities for students and recent graduates during their internship experience. Many alumni have reported that the internship program positively impacted their self-confidence in the work environment. As the evaluation found, many alumni who go through our program are more likely to graduate from college, obtain full-time employment, and earn higher wages than the national average of people with and without disabilities.

The Summer Internship Program not only increases the power of people with disabilities through career and leadership opportunities, but it is also a program that prioritizes and values community connection by instilling and embracing disability identity. AAPD builds in many opportunities for interns to connect with the broader disability community by

exposing them to leaders with disabilities across all sectors and participating in a cohort of all people with disabilities to support building their social capital. As their disability identity strengthens throughout the internship program, interns become more engaged in the disability community. When we have more people who are aware and proud of their disability identity, we believe they will positively shape and impact our collective future.

The AAPD Summer Internship Program has gone through significant changes since new leadership joined the team in 2019. AAPD has increased the number of and strengthened the quality of our resources to support disabled people looking for career opportunities, leadership development, and connection to the broader community. While the AAPD Summer Internship program has changed significantly since its inception, the model of the program remains a flexible yet strong foundation for continued program improvement.

*This allows AAPD to:*

1. Implement changes to address the inequities and inaccessibility that impact how people with disabilities access meaningful employment.
2. Broaden our understanding of what meaningful employment, leadership, and community looks like for people with disabilities.
3. Provide a variety of experiences for interns to learn more about themselves as individuals, and their experience as a person with a disability in a broader community of disabled people and in their workplaces.
4. Adapt and respond to society's changing conditions (e.g. COVID-19 pandemic).

Due to our program's flexibility, AAPD has implemented incremental and systemic changes to improve our program between 2019 and 2023. The incorporated changes have been guided by feedback and input from program participants and alumni, placement site supervisors, mentors, supporters of the program, and the broader disability community. AAPD will continue to engage with them to guide future program improvement and expansion efforts.

AAPD is committed to building a future where all people with disabilities can live and thrive in our communities by providing opportunities and resources for them to influence our future. The Summer Internship Program is more than just a program that provides career and leadership opportunities. The program recognizes the power of disability pride and having access to inclusive communities. This has a ripple effect, since mentors and supervisors who participate in the program also feel the impact of people with disabilities in the workplace.

Yet, significant challenges and barriers remain for people with disabilities to access meaningful employment opportunities, which impacts many other aspects of their life, such as education, housing, healthcare, transportation, and more. AAPD shares our strategies, findings, and impacts in the hopes of increasing disability awareness and demonstrating best practices of how to plan inclusive programming. In order to truly have a more inclusive society, it takes all of us to advocate for policies and implement equitable practices to ensure all disabled people have equal access and opportunities.

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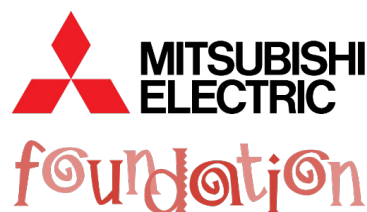
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I am driven to learn what it takes to not only become an environmental professional, but also a diverse, disabled leader in this space. I plan to develop and implement science-based policy solutions, all while advocating with and for underserved communities.”



The disability community allows disabled people the space to dream, to lean on one another, and to be proud of who we are—but it also allows us to rest, to be unsure, and to struggle ... This year’s internship cohort has taught me what it means to be a part of a community that sees every facet of your identity as a strength rather than a liability, an error, or a weakness.”



Being part of the AAPD summer internship cohort has reaffirmed my understanding that finding disability community is critical to survival, organizing for political and social change, and feeling generally seen and understood.”



You can’t underestimate the importance of having fully covered housing, travel to DC, and a stipend. It leveled the playing field and made the internship available and equitable to so many in my class who couldn’t take an unpaid opportunity, especially in DC.”



My summer internship has greatly broadened my perspective on what advocacy work can look like, and it has left me with a newfound confidence in my ability to bring people together to advocate for systemic change.”