

***LOVE Building:
An Honest Conversation with Ramiro Alvarez,
Communications Director of the Detroit Disability Power***

Leslie Cieplechowicz

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“Honestly, straight up, the biggest problem people with disabilities face is that people do not care enough. People don’t even like the word disabled. We’ve been called everything in the book, ‘the handicaps,’ ‘the invalids,’ ‘the sick and dying,’ ‘the homebound,’ ‘the ADA community,’ ‘the special needs people,’ and the ‘differently abled,’ says Ramiro Alvarez Jr. He is working hard to change that.

Alvarez is the Communications Director of the Detroit Disability Power (DDP) whose mission is to build the political power of the disability community and end disparities in employment, education, healthcare, housing, and transportation. The group facilitates anti-Ableism workshops for social justice organizations to educate them in the oppression of disabled people, and hosts educational, fun community building events.

Ramiro has lived in Southwest Detroit since the late 90s, arriving after his parents came to this country from Mexico. He learned from them the importance of a community working together and sharing resources and labor to better everyone. After being employed as a teacher and youth organizer, positions he lost during the pandemic, he decided to work on creating social justice spaces and getting to the root of societal issues. When the position at DDP came along, it was the perfect opportunity he had been seeking.

“From the disability justice perspective, none of this is working. Not the systems of power, not the models of community, not our buildings/homes/streets, and not even the pace at which we do social change work. It has all got to change,” states Alvarez.



Portrait of Ramiro Alvarez. Courtesy of Laura Suprenant Photography

DDP is housed in the LOVE Building, located in Core City, where accessibility is central to the building's design. "Accessibility is love made tangible, so The LOVE Building picked us, really," says Ramiro. DDP's founder and current Executive Director Dessa Cosma, and the current Deputy Director Jenifer Daniels, have old ties to Allied Media Projects. Their vision, along with the vision of the community and the neighborhood, created DDP's new headquarters.

Detroit Disability Power serves Core City, where members implement the organization's Get Out the Vote, whose reach expands throughout Detroit's seven districts, where members, staff, and volunteers reside. Because the city lacks affordable and accessible housing, causing many Detroiters to leave, the organization also helps disabled people throughout metro Detroit. DDP has also traveled to Lansing and Washington DC in their push to change laws.

In 2024, DDP surveyed its members to find out the most pressing issues they were facing and ways it could connect people to resources they need. The organization's goal is to present the data to the city council for their budgeting in 2026. The survey results found the top priority for Detroiters with disabilities is affordable and accessible housing, whether renting or owning. "Disabled people want to be homeowners, too. But it feels like a far shot for many. And those that own homes across the city, whether they identify as disabled or not, are aging, or have already arrived at an age where those porch steps are getting dangerous to walk up and down all winter. But the funds to fully remodel a senior's home needs to come from the city, and we push for that," says Alvarez.

DDP in the past has worked with City Council, the Mayor, the Housing and Revitalization Department, and even local developers to implement accessible housing. Later in 2025, the organization will work with Detroit to co-publish a resource guide about accessibility home remodeling for contractors, developers, and residents.

Success for the DDP comes when an individual living within the community has the resources and support they need. Where disabled people can get the education they desire, the healthcare and employment opportunities they deserve. Where they can become leaders within whatever field they

pursue, and they are accepted. "Somewhere in Detroit a baby is born with a disability, or someone becomes disabled, and it will not be the end of the world. That's the dream, a mix of political, economic, and cultural shifts around disability. We honestly don't feel like we're asking for much," says Ramiro. The current federal administration does not threaten Detroit Disability Power. Ramiro feels that no matter who is in charge, disabled people are at the bottom of the Quality-of-Life Index world-wide, and greater society has done very little to help with that. "To this day, in 2025, disabled people are seen as pitiful, tragic, living lessons for good or bad, 'blessings' who inspire people to believe they have more than us, see us as anything but human," says Alvarez. When disabled people lose their rights, the DDP is prepared to fight back by any means necessary, to prevent even more marginalization.

"When we say disability, we're talking about your grandma who uses a cane. Your auntie who needs a scooter to grocery shop. Your uncle who can only walk a few blocks before taking a seat. Your cousin who can't stand or sit too long. Avoiding the word disabled isn't helpful, it teaches others that it's a dirty word that should be kept out of public conversation. That's exactly what we're resisting, because many disabled people have been kept hidden from public life," explains Ramiro.

DDP is proactive in reaching out to the community through social media, canvassing, phone banking, and mailings, and doing it in ways that consider a variety of audiences, including the deaf and the blind. They are actively recruiting new members through their website and newsletter and they appreciate any donations. Alvarez states that anyone with a skill to lend, such as event support or DJing, can reach out to him. "You don't have to have a disability to get involved in this work, because let's be real, you just don't have a disability yet. Make sure that the society you're aging into is ready for your changing needs."

Ramiro "Rami" Alvarez
he|him they|them
313-247-9565
Detroit Disability Power, Communications Director
www.DetroitDisabilityPower.org

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