

The U.S. Does a Good Job, But There Is Room for Improvement

We Have More Accommodations for People with Physical Disabilities than People with Mental Health Issues

Celeste Yauli

BEFORE YOU READ:

1. What does “room for improvement” mean? Have you ever used this phrase? Or heard it used?
2. Read the title, subtitle, and the headings. What do you think this article will be about?
3. For more on polio, see the article on pp. 18-19.

In Peru, He Felt Like a Burden

My father-in-law has a physical disability. He can't walk. He doesn't want to be treated as a burden, but he likes to feel special. My father-in-law developed polio when he was four years old. He was born in Peru in 1951.

Due to the disease, he lost the ability to move his legs. He was sent to a rehabilitation clinic in Lima, Peru. His father passed away when he was a baby, and his mother didn't have money to take care of him, so he stayed at the clinic for his whole childhood.

It was hard for him to be in the clinic without his mother and siblings for all those years. Imagine a four-year-old boy waking up every day away from home, just waiting for his family's next visit. He missed home every day, but the clinic started to feel like home.

In the clinic he had food, education, and medical attention, and he was surrounded by people with all kinds of physical disabilities. Inside the clinic, they looked after him. He was no different than the others, and he had the same opportunities.

But outside the clinic, he was considered a burden. Something so simple as trying to ride the public bus reminded him that Peruvian public



Curb cuts and tactile paving help pedestrians navigate the streets safely.

services were not ready to accommodate his needs. At the bus stops, the bus drivers wouldn't let him ride. They would make comments such as, “We are in a hurry. Wait for the next bus.” Or they said, “There is not enough space for you.”

He would try to go on his wheelchair for short distances to avoid the difficulty of taking a bus, but even that was not easy. Peruvian streets were not accessible for his wheelchair because there were not many ramps and when there were, they were damaged, or blocked by cars.

My father-in-law didn't know that he had the right to receive the same opportunities as everyone else until he came to the U.S. where he felt not different, but special. American society has made many successful adaptations to their public services and infrastructure to accommodate the needs of people with physical disabilities.



A pool lift makes pools more accessible to people with disabilities.

In the U.S., He Was Treated with Respect

When my father-in-law came to the U.S., he discovered he could ride a public bus in his wheelchair without problems. There is a system here that ensures he can ride the bus safely.

Another public service benefit he received was when we visited the Grand Canyon National Park, and he was given free access. And at the main gate, they gave him a special card that meant he could park in the handicap spaces. My father-in-law was so happy and felt very special. That made him realize how U.S. society respects his disability and provides him with extra benefits to make him feel not only equal, but important. He always talks about that day with pride.

In addition, the public infrastructure in the U.S. allows him to go out in his wheelchair with no trouble. The sidewalks have ramps, and they are not blocked by cars. Furthermore, he can go to a public pool and swim since they have a special system for people with physical disabilities to get in and out of the water. Being able to go for a walk and go swimming makes him feel no different than everybody else.

Room for Improvement in the U.S.

U.S. society may have good infrastructure for people with physical disabilities, however, it needs a lot of work when it comes to disabilities that you cannot see, like mental disorders. Mental disabilities can be invisible. It is critical for our society to invite people with mental disabilities to express their needs, struggles, and expectations from everyone else. In response, we should be receptive and respond to their needs without judgement.

In some ways, the U.S. is a good example for other countries. There is decent public infrastructure for people with physical disabilities. However, we could do better when it comes to accommodating people with invisible disabilities. We need to improve access for people with mental health issues, so we can get closer to an all-inclusive society where everyone feels valued and supported.

AFTER YOU READ: Make a chart with two columns. In the first column, put a heading that says, “Celeste’s father-in-law’s experience in Peru.” In the second column, put a heading that says “Celeste’s father-in-law’s experience in the U.S.” Underneath each heading, write notes about his experiences in the two places. Your notes should include a mix of *paraphrasing* of the text and *quotes* from the text. (Make sure to use quotation marks for direct quotes.) After you take notes, write a couple of paragraphs on the topic.

Celeste is from Perú and lives with her husband, children, and parents in Windsor, California. She is part of the Business Management program at Santa Rosa Junior College. She is taking college classes while working, so she can continue improving herself. She is very proud of her three boys and wants to set an example for them that it is never too late for learning and that honest and hard work always pays off.

