



## Resources to Reach Out to Those with Disabilities in Your Area

*By Karen Rispin, Assistive Technology*

**A neglected population:** Many faith-based health providers intend to follow in the footsteps of Jesus when they reach out to heal. If you look carefully, most of those Jesus healed were people living with chronic disabilities. Yet this population is often neglected by many faith-based health providers.



Children served by BethanyKids in Kenya

**A huge opportunity:** The World Health Organization sees disability as one of the fastest growing health problems. People are living longer; diabetes is rampant, and children born with disabilities are more likely to live. Families dealing with disability often feel that this is due to a curse or shameful behaviour. This sparks spiritual anxiety and leads to questions.

**Good news! Resources are available,** and more are becoming available. The goal of the [Assistive Technology Catalyst Project](#) is to link faith-based health providers to available resources. Some resources are listed below. Others may be available in the country you work since some initiatives are regional or national. If you'd like to know more or search for initiatives in your area, please feel free to email [at.catalyst@ideasworld.org](mailto:at.catalyst@ideasworld.org)

**Large international aid initiatives – sign up to two free newsletter to hear of funding opportunities:** [ATScale](#) is a huge international initiative. In each country where there are ATScale initiatives, funders are looking for reliable partners. It's easy to sign up for the newsletter of the [Disability Innovation Hub](#), a branch of ATScale that posts opportunities. The World Health Organization [Global Cooperation on Assistive Technology](#) also sends out a newsletter that describes opportunities to apply for funding as they occur.

**Local resources may be available:** In many countries, there are initiatives by foundations and organizations with the goal of providing assistive technology. Here's one example; Cheshire Foundation offers assistive technology services in Ethiopia mostly focused near Addis Ababa. There may be opportunities to link with existing initiatives near you, or perhaps to refer clients. Several local governments are moving toward reimbursement for the cost of assistive technology. For example, in Kenya this seems to be happening one county at a time. If you'd like to know what's available in your area of service, we may be able to be of help. One of the goals of AT Catalyst is to work at knowing what is available.

**Training for parents on caring for children with disabilities:**

The London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine now has a significant focus on dealing with disability. This program sets up a parent support group and teaches feeding, positioning, activities of daily life for parents in a very interactive parent driven format. It reduces fear and isolation and opens doors to hope and to connections with others who understand. This fits into existing community health initiatives. [Access the hub](#)

**Training for local therapists and technicians in wheelchair provision:** Historically, sometimes wheelchairs have been simply handed out without following medical guidelines. Training will open doors for appropriate and ethical whole person care. Wheelchairs are not one size fits all. The World Health Organization has developed [training for those providing wheelchairs](#) that is available in many languages. Having staff trained may open doors for funding or for wheelchairs from organizations such as those listed below.

**Training for chaplains and pastors to encourage inclusion:** Often older ideas of disease and disability remain even in church settings and among health workers. Joni and Friends has a focus on encouraging churches to be inclusive. This includes training on reaching out with God's love and care. The [Beyond Suffering](#) course is now available in a format intended for use in low-resource settings. It is so sad if a family only receives physical help when much of their pain is social and spiritual.

**Professional mentors:** Online, one can join the [International Society for Wheelchair Professionals](#) to access many resources and connect with others. This is a USAID-funded initiative. When COVID is over, if you are interested in having a team of therapists with wheelchair experience come to work alongside and mentor your local therapists, you could explore options with ATCatalyst. There may also be possibilities with Joni and Friends [Cause 4 Life program](#) and CMDA.



A photo from a seminar session on one method of affordable complex seating

### **Wheelchair supplies:**

Many organizations have tried to address the desperate need for medically appropriate wheelchairs in low-resource countries. A few are very briefly described below. Links are provided to websites. Each has their own way to engage with partner organizations. [Free Wheelchair Mission](#) provides wheelchairs free to port for their partners. Research has indicated that the Gen 2 and 3 chairs are adequate clinically for people with good upper body. [CLASP](#), a USAID funded initiative will ship containers of several different types of wheelchairs at half cost to partnering organizations.

[BeeLine wheelchairs](#) are unique in that they can be adapted to the needs of many different wheelchair users including pediatric populations. Other wheelchair companies focused on low-resource areas include [Motivation](#), [ROC](#), [HopeHaven](#), [Whirlwind](#) and others. Organizations such as the [Wheelchair Foundation](#), the Joni and Friends [Wheels for the World](#) program ship donated chairs and a few purchased chairs.

It is of key importance to provide wheelchairs that are fit properly and whose design meets international ISO standards. Because of difficulty shipping and receiving containers, local organizations sometimes seek to build wheelchairs in country. BeeLine, with a design that is ISO and field tested, is focused on enabling that option.

**Research tools:** Assistive Technology Catalyst involvement in facilitating links to resources began with a LeTourneau University research project regarding wheelchair effectiveness in low-resource areas. Four simple outcome measures were developed and validated and these are available for free download at [www.letu.edu/wheels](http://www.letu.edu/wheels). These tools can be used to evaluate the



effectiveness of wheelchairs provided by your organization. Research enables the effective use of limited funds.



One of the BethanyKids staff with a client

### **BethanyKids (BK) in Kenya, an example**

Initially [BethanyKids](#) partnered with the LeTourneau University research project. Annually, teams of therapists with wheelchair experience mentored local therapists. BK put a plan place to gradually scale up appropriate wheelchair provision in a sustainable way. Trained staff and storage capacity opened doors to partner to receive containers of wheelchairs from [Free Wheelchair Mission](#) and [CLASP](#). Discussion is underway with [BeeLine](#) about building BeeLine chairs locally.

The number of people with disabilities receiving wheelchairs increased more than tenfold, benefitting clients' spiritual, intellectual, physical, and social growth. During COVID, the wheelchair provision team has been able to continue by using modified methods. Research studies have indicated an improvement in wheelchair appropriateness, condition and user satisfaction.