

HEALTH

This is how much more it costs to live in New Jersey with a disability



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In New Jersey and beyond, [people with disabilities often pay more](#) to do ordinary things that others take for granted, like going to a doctor's appointment or buying groceries.

There are hidden costs of daily life that people without disabilities don't see, costs that can become a steady drain, said Edison's Javier Robles, who uses a wheelchair.

"Being disabled means that you often pay more or you do without or you miss out on a lot of things because you can't afford them or they're inaccessible to you," he said.

The added economic burdens of disability were driven home once again by a [March 16 report on poverty](#) in New York City that found that health conditions that got in the way of work were far more common among low-income residents.

Adults receiving federal nutritional assistance, the program formerly known as Food Stamps, were more than three times as likely to have a health condition or a disability that limited work compared with non-recipients, according to the report by the anti-poverty group Robin Hood and Columbia University.

The findings were a reminder that disability and poverty often go hand in hand in America, though the added costs weigh on people with disabilities across the economic spectrum.

In New Jersey, where the state says [one out of every four](#) of its residents lives with a disability, those expenses can affect things as basic as getting to work or heading out for fun.

A [2022 study](#) by researchers at Syracuse University's Burton Blatt Institute found that U.S. households where someone has a disability need, on average, about 29% more income to enjoy the same standard of living as households without such conditions.

At the median-income level, that works out to about \$18,322 more a year, according to the institute.

“That’s an understatement,” said Robles, who is the director of the [Department of Kinesiology and Health](#) at Rutgers University.

The burden is high for people with disabilities, who also have to spend on medical equipment and other daily supplies.

Hurdles to Health Care: [NJ has a huge health care gap for people with disabilities. Dig into our series](#)

Health care and personal assistance are among the largest added costs. Out-of-pocket health spending is more than twice as high for people with disabilities, according to the National Disability Institute.

A 2020 report from the National Disability Institute found that working-age adults with disabilities are twice as likely as other people to have incomes below the poverty threshold. They are less likely to be employed and, when they do work, tend to earn less on average. Family members often have to [reduce their work hours to provide care](#), further shrinking household income.

That reality shapes everyday decisions, Robles said. People with disabilities often have less money for leisure “because you’re spending most of your money on stuff you need.”

Robles used travel, with its extra layers of cost, as an example. He doesn't risk booking a cheaper hotel, he said.

"I have to go to a Sheraton or a Hyatt or a hotel that I know is going to be accessible versus risking ending up paying for a vacation that's not accessible and then regretting it," he said. "Then you have to bring a lot more equipment with you. If I am bringing luggage, I'm paying for an extra bag, maybe two bags."

Next comes renting a vehicle. Budget-friendly cars are off the table when you need something big enough to accommodate a wheelchair, Robles said.

Travelers with disabilities can also spend hours researching whether a destination is accessible, only to discover upon arrival that what is promised online doesn't match reality.

On a trip to Italy for a family wedding in Rome, Robles said he spent days researching accessible hotels in Venice. When he got there, he found there was no bridge or accessible ferry to reach the island lodging. His family spent hours trying to figure out what to do.

Ultimately, firefighters had to carry him and his wheelchair onto a boat. The experience was frightening and exhausting, he said, with his wife and daughter crying as they worried that his heavy, \$26,000 wheelchair might fall into the canal.

Beyond the time sunk into research, there's also an emotional cost.

