

Newsletter

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Editor's Note

Dear friends,

Personally a very fulfilling month with lots of vigorous campaigning to make a simple basic right, access a possibility. A small step by me and my friend by starting a petition on change.org resulted in a momentum for beach access.

This edition brings to you interesting reads. Hope you enjoy it as much as I do compiling them.

Happy Reading,

Regards,

Bhavna Botta

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Straight Talk

Meet Sameer Garg, the brain behind **BillionAbles**, India's first all inclusive online platform to discover accessible places, products and services for persons with special needs & elderly.



Tell us about your work on the online portal -your challenges and success, aspirations

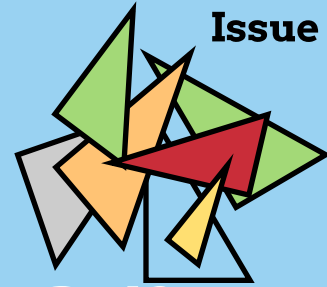
We started working on our platform almost two years back. The initial months were spent on ideation, research and developing a blueprint for the project. Slowly but gradually, we started developing the prototype for the mobile app which saw multiple iterations based on users feedback. It was a tough time as we were low on resources and very few people believed in the idea.

The concept of working towards enhancing social life of PWDs was not heard of especially in India. The vision was not to just cover the access details of every listing but also to provide an experience of a lifestyle product at par with other apps for persons without disabilities. Collection of first data through own sources and crowd sourcing was extremely difficult as people were not acquainted with the idea. Most feel that the contribution of one accessible listing will not work or bring a change. But as the database grew, more and more people starting joining and supporting the cause.

Currently, the platform showcase more than 1000+ listings with 400+ verified listings. To sensitize people and populate database, a first of its kind initiative "AccessHunt" was started. It is an event where volunteers come together to break into groups and map a particular locality/market for accessibility and list it on BillionAbles app.

Till now, 3 editions of AccessHunt has been organized, two in Delhi and the latest one at Noida on World Disability Day on Dec. 3, 2017 which saw a participation of 125+ volunteers who identified around 175+ places on that day itself. We plan to expand this initiative to other cities in India now. The organizations and individuals working for the disabled community play a vital role in its success.

Another vertical is "RevUp" where inclusive tours and trips are planned for persons with varied disabilities. Two such inclusive trips to



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Amusement and Water park are already organized at Delhi where 50+ PWDs participated and enjoyed thoroughly first time in their life. The next edition of RevvUp is an Adventure Park scheduled on January 21 at Gurgaon.

2. What is your support system-family and friends and community in general as a person as a professional

My family has been really supportive and a source of strength and motivation. Due to this, I am able to focus on my vision of creating a centralized database of disabled friendly places and services across India enabling millions to live a dignified social life.

I believe that the disabled community should come out from the realm of charity model of support and empowerment. Instead, they should ask the businesses for inclusive services and products which will lead to creation of marketplace accessible for everyone. As more enterprise will recognize the power and importance of this biggest minority section of the society, it will push them to develop products and services catering to millions of persons with special needs.

3. what is the one thing you would like to see changed in this community for equity

Sensitization about accessibility and inclusion for all should be a compulsory part of curriculum at primary and higher education so that it get inculcated in the mindset and universal access is provided by and for everyone while planning any or all infrastructure/services/products. It should be planned and made available as free as the oxygen we breathe and without which one

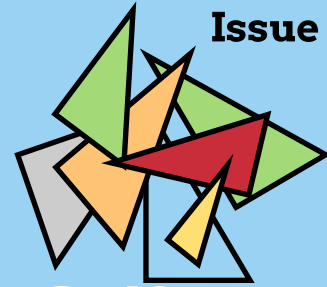
cannot live. As simple as that!

4. what is your view on inclusive education and on access for PWDs -are we moving forward or backward

Inclusive education will pave the way for empowerment of this marginalized section of the society enabling them to get in the mainstream by getting access to equal opportunity and dignified livelihood. The recent judgment by the honorable Supreme Court regarding special schools for disabled redundant the whole concept of inclusion.

Though there might be instances where such special centers are required and supported as well, yet our constitutional 'Right of Equality' itself directs towards literary and social inclusion for all irrespective of their abilities. As the government has already launched Accessible India campaign which is directed towards making government buildings accessible, the private sector needs to open up to complement the mission as well as boost the economy by increasing earning opportunities for users as well as merchants. The new RPWD Act 2016 is a welcome step in this direction, though the actual implementation would be a challenge.





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5 what about the new app developed by Billionables.

In India, currently 21 million people are disabled as per Census 2011. As per WHO, the actual figure stood at around 100 millions. In addition, persons with special needs which includes elderly and severe health disorders are around 100 million which may increase to 200 millions by 2030.

These people don't have access to information about Accessibility places, products and services which can empower them to live a dignified life and enable them to earn a living.

Currently, in India, no centralized online platform provides information about accessibility of places or services. The users have to search for each and every service through referrals or through search engines. Afterwards, they have to confirm it through phone calls or through mails.

Even after that, sometimes the information provided is not accurate as communicated. The people with special needs who live in remote areas are dependent upon known nearby facilities only though more exists around them. Due to lack of proper training and accessibility, most of them are confined to their homes only.

We have conceptualized, researched and developed an android mobile application for providing information on Accessible places, products and services for persons with special needs (i.e. Persons with disabilities, health disorders and elderly).

The app lists Categories such as Education, Health, Disability Events, Public

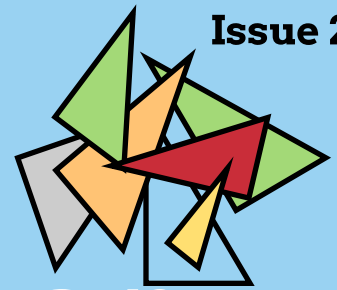
transport, Accessible tours, Accessible cabs, Accessible Washrooms, Disabled Parking spaces, Accessible Restaurants & Hotels, Accessible Shops & Malls, Accessible Entertainment Joints etc.

It is a crowd sourced platform and fully accessible as per Web Content Accessibility Guidelines Working Group (WCAG WG), WCAG 2.0 which means it will be accessible by screen readers and provides option of changing font size and color contrast.

6. Interesting ,how are you gathering the information and what else does this app allow

First of all, there is no such organization working in India. We are crowd sourcing information from across India through our users as well as own Network. Then we are authenticating and validating the Accessible Places, Services and Organizations working in the disability sector by personally visiting these.

Our India's first of its kind unique app will also have an option of booking the Accessible places & services for which we are already in talks with some merchants and hope to on board them soon. It will also include the feature of providing reward points to the users for adding new locations as well as for rating and review of existing listings. These reward points will be redeemable as a rebate at selected Accessible merchant outlets.



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From The Heart

Maureen Huang, who started Pawsibility explains about Animal Assisted Therapy

Tell us how dogs help people with disabilities or conditions.

Dogs change the atmosphere of a therapy setting. They help people to relax, be more engaged in the therapeutic process and be more motivated to participate in therapy. For example, a person with depression/anxiety may not even want to get out of bed to talk to their counsellor.

The presence of a therapy dog changes that whole dynamic. The client feels motivated to come for the session and is generally more open to talking to their counsellor. In a way, the therapy dog helps to facilitate the interaction between therapist and client. *In addition, patting a friendly therapy dog helps to lower one's blood pressure, heart rate, stress hormone-cortisol and increases social inducing hormone - oxytocin.*

For children with special needs, Animal Assisted Therapy (AAT) can be a great avenue for them to build healthy social emotional skills.

These include kids on the autism spectrum who struggle with social skills and empathy. Working with a loving and non-judgemental dog helps these children to learn these skills in a fun way. The child learns how to make friends and be a friend, and grows to be more confident.

On top of mental health work, therapy dogs can also aid in the rehabilitation of physical health. They can help in physiotherapy and occupational therapy, motivating patients to participate in therapy and encourage them to achieve more, for example increased mobility, strength, fine/gross motor skills.

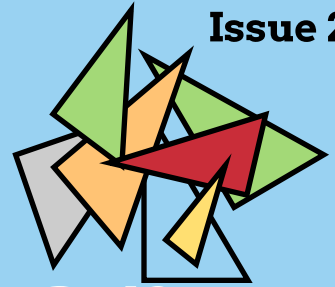
Give us a couple of examples that stand out for you

At Pawsibility, we focus mainly on mental health of our clients. One of whom is a 15 year old girl with selective mutism and social anxiety. She doesn't make eye contact with others and barely speaks in school. She really likes working with my therapy dog, Telly and is all smiles when she is interacting with Telly. Having Telly lean on her lap as she pats her, helps her to be more calm and relaxed. One of

her favourite things is to get Telly to do tricks. To do so, she needs to speak up to give Telly the command. As she gave Telly the commands, and watched Telly respond to her, she gradually grew more confident.

We managed to practice having conversations about Telly and then about other topics. Subsequently, she started speaking up in school, starting with one word, then a phrase and now she can speak a few sentences with a few people in school. Her parents are very happy at the remarkable improvement they have seen in their daughter and the school counsellor also noticed the positive changes.





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What training is entailed for a therapy dog?

Firstly, we need to select the right dog for the right job. We typically look for dogs that are confident and have a friendly temperament. Dogs are then trained with basic obedience skills as well as some specific skills that they may need to use during the therapy sessions. The dog needs to be reliable, predictable and should enjoy interacting with many different people in different settings. Lots of positive socialization for the dog is helpful. It's important that the dog enjoys the work and not just merely tolerates it.

More than simply training for the therapy dog, it is equally important that the human half of the team (dog handler/health professional) is trained in animal assisted therapy. This is so that they can facilitate the session and bring out the best in the dog. It's critical that the handler knows the dog well and is constantly watching out for any stress signs that the dog may exhibit and is ready to intervene at any time.

Is it the natural friendliness of the canine which helps make the patient comfortable, or is the dog specifically geared to behave in a particular way?

I think it is a bit of both. The moment my office door opens, Telly would run over to greet my clients with a wagging tail and a big smile on her face. Sometimes, she would even bring a toy for my clients. That is a very natural behaviour for her and it is part of her friendly personality. However, I did teach her to have good manners e.g., not to jump on people, to sit politely for greeting, etc.

Her warm, friendly presence helps to

put people at ease and many of my clients tell me that she makes them feel happy. Dogs tend to be accepting and non-judgemental and that is a message that comes across quite clearly to the people that they interact with.

Is the same dog used to address different issues or different dogs have to be brought in for various problems?

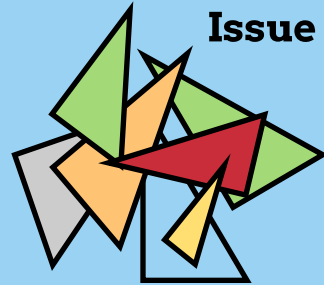
That depends. Different dogs like to do different things. I have two dogs with different personalities and strengths. Telly is very playful and is a perfect animal assisted play therapy dog; she lives by the mantra "What shall we play next? What can I do to please you?"

My other dog, Hope, wants to cuddle up in your lap to get endless pats; she would be great for some of my counselling clients who just want to talk and pat a dog while doing so. Some dogs prefer working with children, others prefer adults.

Different people also respond differently to different dogs (size, energy level, breed etc). Another factor to consider is the training of the dog and handler. It is about finding the right fit for all parties involved.

What made you start Pawsibility?

I have seen first-hand how animals are able to help people - how people with disabilities are more confident on horseback, how people who are not motivated for physiotherapy would push themselves a bit more to raise their hands to throw a ball for a therapy dog to fetch, how people with anxiety relax in the presence of a friendly therapy dog, how people who find it hard to talk to a



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counsellor/psychologist would talk to one with a therapy dog present etc. I believe in the power of the human-animal bond to touch lives, teach skills and inspire change. While people in the United States or in Europe have access to AAT, very few people in Asia have even heard of it. I started Pawsibility with the hopes of helping people in Singapore to also benefit from this wonderful intervention.

See Telly in action in this video [here](#).

https://youtu.be/yo_WI054Pvo



Maureen Huang is Master's in Social Work and has a Certificate in Animal Assisted Social Work from the University of Denver's Graduate School of Social Work.

Originally published at <https://www.patientsengage.com/healthy-living/healing-power-therapy-dogs>

Tech Solutions

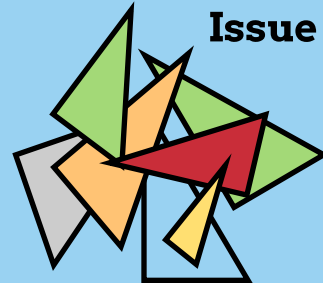
Unveiling 'Braille Me': the world's most affordable smart braille display

Refreshable braille displays are revolutionizing the way the visually impaired/deafblind consume digital information. These products enable the users to effortlessly use their phones and computers, and also provide a portable alternative for the bulky braille books. However, because of its hefty price not many can afford such devices even in developed countries.

Seeing this issue, we at Innovision set a target to bring down the cost of these devices by more than ten times and yet provide the same functionality. Through 3 years for relentless research and development we have successfully developed 'Braille Me': A digital smart braille display.



'Braille Me' was introduced with an aim to bridge the gap which leads to an inclusive society. It consists of two basic components, a tactile display with 20 six-dot braille cells, for reading and a perkins style keypad, for typing. Even though it weighs less than 600g and is almost the size of a personal diary, it comes packed with features such as the stand-alone editor for taking notes and reading documents offline, a USB mode where the users can efficiently browse and navigate their computers via USB connection, and a Bluetooth mode for connecting to and accessing their phones instantly. All these features, among others, are powered by a powerful battery which lasts 12 hours. Another really important feature of 'Braille Me' is that it supports multiple languages in braille, so it does not matter whether the user wants to read a Hindi book or a book written in French as 'Braille Me' is able to interpret around 40+ languages. 'Braille Me' is perfect for a student, as it can help in reading books, taking notes in a classroom and also give exams. Based in Mumbai, Innovision is an upcoming startup founded by IIT Bombay alumni who seek to transform people's lives through their innovative products. <https://www.innovisiontech.co>



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Tech Solutions

This wearable turns your fingers into a Bluetooth keyboard

Originally shared and published at davebanesaccess.org/

Tap represents an unorthodox alternative to the tiny virtual keyboard on your iPhone or Android smartphone. It also has potential as a method for navigating your way through a virtual reality world, which requires you to wear a headset that blocks your vision. The company says the product has applications in the accessibility field, offering the vision impaired a speedier way of composing messages.

Tap look like a string-equivalent of brass knuckles. You place your fingers through fabric loops that are linked together by short nylon straps. There's a larger loop for the thumb that also houses a haptic motor and a sensor that turns it into a mouse.

The five fingers each represent one of five vowels, and tapping a combination of fingers gets you different letters. Tap comes with a charging case that gives it eight days of active use (roughly six hours). By itself, the finger strap will get you through a single day.

Tap costs \$130. It opens up for pre-orders on Thanksgiving, with the first products shipping in December. You can order it through Amazon too.



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