

Equal Access and Equal Rights: Lived Experiences of Persons with Disabilities in Accessing Government Program Services

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ABSTRACT

This study examined the lived experiences of persons with disabilities (PWDs) in accessing government program services in Numancia, Aklan, Philippines, contributing to understanding gaps between policy intent and actual service delivery. Guided by narrative inquiry and the Capability Approach, the study explored concepts of access, barriers, and support systems. Data were collected in through semi-structured interviews with ten (10) registered PWDs. Findings revealed that access is anchored on formal recognition through the PWD identification card but is often mediated by intermediaries and characterized as occasional and conditional. The study highlights the need for more inclusive, responsive, and disability-centered governance to improve equitable service access.

INTRODUCTION

The Philippine government has enacted laws to protect and promote the rights of Persons with Disabilities (PWDs), including Republic Act No. 7277 (1992), otherwise known as the Magna Carta for Persons with Disabilities, and Batas Pambansa Blg. 344 (1983), otherwise known as the Accessibility Law. These legal frameworks guarantee access to education, healthcare, employment, and social services. National agencies such as the Department of Social Welfare and Development (DSWD), Department of Labor and Employment (DOLE), and Department of Health (DOH) implement programs that may benefit PWDs, including the Assistance to Individuals in Crisis Situations (AICS), the Pantawid Pamilyang Pilipino Program (4Ps), Tulong Panghanapbuhay sa Ating Disadvantaged/Displaced Workers (TUPAD), and PhilHealth benefits.

At the local level, Local Government Units (LGUs) are tasked with operationalizing these mandates in accordance with Executive Order No. 417 (2005) and its Implementing Rules and Regulations, which direct national agencies and LGUs to institutionalize funding and implement programs that promote the economic independence, self-reliance, and social inclusion of PWDs. Despite these frameworks and funding mechanisms, gaps persist between policy intent and lived experiences. Many government programs are not disability-specific, and existing eligibility criteria may inadvertently exclude some PWDs. Employment-based initiatives such as TUPAD often require short-term labor participation (DOLE, 2023), which may not be feasible for individuals with certain impairments. Poverty-targeted programs like 4Ps are household-based rather than disability-focused, while social pension schemes primarily prioritize senior citizens. Consequently, some PWDs remain ineligible for key social protection programs despite significant health and economic vulnerabilities.

Even with established laws, empirical evidence consistently points to a disconnect between formal commitments and everyday realities. Filipinos with disabilities continue to face constrained access to healthcare, livelihood opportunities, and social protection (Marella et al., 2016). These challenges also reflect broader gaps in the realization of disability rights, where legal guarantees provided under national policies are not consistently translated into practical entitlements in everyday life, resulting in uneven access to services and limited exercise of rights among PWDs (Tabuga, 2013).

In light of these gaps, this study examined the lived experiences of PWDs in accessing government program services in Numancia, Aklan. Using narrative inquiry, it explored how PWDs experience formal recognition, access services often through intermediaries, encounter structural and social barriers, exercise available rights, and develop support strategies within local service delivery systems. By centering PWD voices, the study offers policy-relevant insights into the persistent implementation gap between national disability frameworks and local governance practices.

THEORETICAL REVIEW

Capability Approach

The Capability Approach, developed by Sen (1999), provides a framework for understanding welfare and development in terms of individuals' real freedoms or capabilities to achieve the lives they value. Rather than focusing solely on the provision of resources or services, the approach emphasizes whether individuals have the actual opportunity to use these resources in meaningful ways. This perspective highlights the distinction between formal access and substantive access, where the presence of programs does not necessarily guarantee that individuals can benefit from them.

In the context of disability, the Capability Approach underscores that persons with disabilities (PWDs) require more than nominal or symbolic access to services. They need enabling environments—physical, social, institutional, and informational—that support their ability to participate fully in society. Nussbaum (2000) further expanded this framework by identifying central human capabilities, including autonomy, social inclusion, and control over one's environment, which are essential for understanding the lived experiences of PWDs.

In this study, the Capability Approach served as an analytical lens to examine how government program services shape the actual opportunities available to PWDs. It guided the interpretation of how personal conditions, social relationships, institutional arrangements, and environmental barriers influence access to services and the extent to which these services enhance or constrain the capabilities of PWDs.

Narrative Inquiry

Narrative inquiry, as conceptualized by Clandinin and Connelly (2000), is grounded in the idea that individuals construct meaning through the stories they tell about their lived experiences. It views narratives as both the method and the phenomenon of study, recognizing that experiences are shaped by context and interpreted over time. This approach allows for an in-depth understanding of how individuals perceive, interpret, and make sense of their interactions with social institutions.

Central to narrative inquiry are the three interrelated dimensions of temporality, sociality, and place. Temporality situates experiences across time, encompassing past experiences, present conditions, and future expectations. Sociality refers to the personal and social conditions that influence experiences, including relationships, emotions, and institutional interactions. Place highlights the specific physical and social contexts in which experiences occur.

In this study, narrative inquiry provided the methodological and analytical foundation for exploring the lived experiences of PWDs in accessing government program services. It enabled the examination of how participants' experiences of access, barriers, and support strategies are shaped by time, social interactions, and local contexts, allowing for a deeper understanding of service delivery beyond formal policy structures.

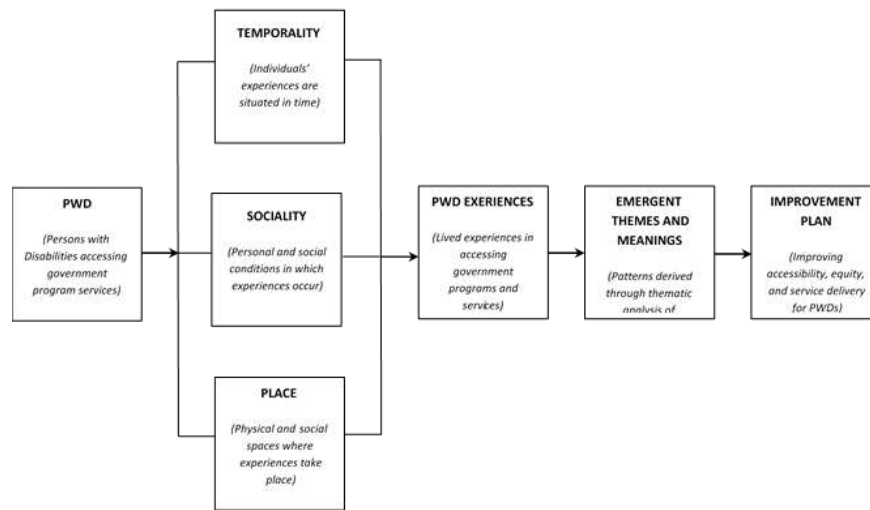


Figure 1. The Paradigm of the study using Clandinin and Connelly's (2000) Narrative Inquiry: temporality, sociality, and place as lenses of analysis.

METHODOLOGY

This study employed a qualitative research design using narrative inquiry to examine the lived experiences of persons with disabilities (PWDs) in accessing government program services. The study was conducted in Numancia, Aklan, Philippines.

The participants consisted of ten (10) registered PWDs who had accessed at least one government program or service. They were selected through purposive, maximum-variation sampling to capture diverse experiences based on age, disability type, and level of engagement with government services.

Data were collected in November 2025 through semi-structured interviews conducted in Aklanon. Interviews lasted approximately 20 to 40 minutes and were audio-recorded with participants' consent. Transcripts were translated into English for analysis.

The analysis followed the six phases of Braun and Clarke (2006). In the first phase, familiarization with the data, the researcher read and reread the transcripts several times to become deeply immersed in the participants' narratives and to develop an overall sense of their experiences. In the second phase, generating initial codes, significant statements, recurring ideas, and meaningful text segments were identified and assigned preliminary codes. In the third phase, searching for themes, related codes were grouped together to form broader patterns of meaning that captured important aspects of participants' experiences. In the fourth phase, reviewing themes, the preliminary themes were carefully examined and refined to ensure they were coherent, distinct, and well supported by the data. In the fifth phase, defining and naming themes, each theme was clarified, its scope and focus were determined, and appropriate labels were assigned to reflect its central meaning. In the sixth phase, writing the report, the final themes were woven into a narrative presentation of results, supported

by participants' accounts and interpreted in relation to the study's objectives and conceptual framework.

The coding process was both inductive and deductive. Inductively, codes and patterns were allowed to emerge from the participants' own stories. Deductively, the researcher also examined these codes in relation to the conceptual dimensions of Amartya Sen's Capability Approach, such as mobility, health and well-being, autonomy, participation, and access to enabling structures, to illuminate how personal and structural factors shaped participants' actual opportunities to access government services.

To preserve narrative integrity, each transcript was first developed into a case narrative summarizing the participants' background, experiences, perceived barriers, strategies, and reflections, presented chronologically. These restored narratives helped maintain the holistic character of each participant's story before moving into cross-case analysis. After this, a cross-case thematic analysis was conducted to identify convergent, divergent, and unique experiences across participants.

Ethical considerations were observed through voluntary participation, informed consent, and confidentiality using pseudonyms.

RESULTS

This section presents the results of the study derived through thematic analysis of the narratives of ten (10) registered persons with disabilities (PWDs) in Numancia, Aklan.

Table 1. Profile of the Participants

Pseudonym	Age	Sex	Marital Status	Educational Attainment	Type of Disability
Mario	40	Male	Married	College Graduate	Physical Disability
Ramon	62	Male	Single	College Level	Physical Disability
Antonio	69	Male	Married	Elementary Level	Physical Disability
Lourdes	50	Female	Single	Elementary Graduate	Physical Disability
Kevin	23	Male	Single	High School Graduate	Physical Disability
Joshua	24	Male	Single	No Grade Completed	Speech Impairment
Rosalinda	69	Female	Single	Associate Graduate	Physical Disability
Edgar	48	Male	Single	Elementary Level	Physical Disability
Maricel	32	Female	Single	Elementary Graduate	Physical Disability
Dennis	36	Male	Single	High School Graduate	Mental Disability

The group reflects diversity in age, sex, marital status, educational attainment, and type of disability. Most participants were male and single, with ages ranging from 23 to 69 years old. In terms of disability type, the majority had physical disabilities, while one participant had a speech impairment and another had a mental disability.

These variations indicate that PWD beneficiaries are not a homogeneous group but individuals with differing conditions and life circumstances. This diversity underscores the need for government programs that are inclusive and responsive to the varying needs of the disability sector.

Table 2. Experiences of PWDs in Accessing Government Program Services

Major Themes	Description
Recognition as the Gateway to Access	Access to government services begins with formal recognition as a PWD through registration and possession of a PWD identification card, which serves as the primary requirement for eligibility and entitlement to benefits.
Access Through Intermediaries	Access is facilitated by family members, barangay officials, PWD leaders, and health workers who provide information, assistance, and guidance in navigating procedures and claiming services.
Assistance as Occasional and Conditional	Government support is experienced as irregular and dependent on availability, prioritization, and selection processes, rather than as a consistent or guaranteed provision.
Navigating Access Across Multiple Offices	Access involves moving across different government offices and institutions, requiring referrals, documentation, and coordination across multiple service points.

The findings show that access to government program services is shaped by both formal requirements and informal support systems. While recognition enables eligibility, actual access is influenced by intermediaries, resource availability, and local service processes.

Table 3. Rights Exercised by PWDs

Major Themes	Description
Right to Identification as a Person with Disability	Formal recognition through the issuance of a PWD identification card, which establishes eligibility and enables access to government services and benefits.

Major Themes	Description
Right to Discounts and Special Privileges	Exercise of statutory benefits such as the 20% discount and VAT exemption on essential goods and services, including medicines, food, and transportation.
Right to Social Assistance	Access to material support such as rice, groceries, canned goods, and other basic necessities provided through barangay and municipal programs.
Right to Medical Assistance and Health-Related Support	Access to financial aid, medicines, health services, and ongoing support from health institutions to address medical needs.
Right to Information on Programs and Benefits	Access to information regarding available programs and services through barangay officials, PWD leaders, health workers, and family networks.

The results indicate that PWDs exercise their rights through identification, access to benefits, and participation in government programs. These rights are experienced in practical, everyday contexts through available services and assistance.

Table 4. Barriers Encountered by PWDs in Accessing Government Program Services

Major Themes	Description
Limited Coverage and Selective Distribution of Assistance	Access to government support is constrained by limited resources, quotas, infrequent distribution, and selection processes, resulting in restricted and uneven access among eligible PWDs.
Access Shaped by Intermediaries and Personal Connections	Access often depends on the presence of family members, barangay officials, or personal connections who facilitate procedures, reducing barriers for some but creating unequal access for others.
Uneven Access Shaped by Context, Relationships, and Social Perceptions	Access varies depending on situational factors, including interpersonal relationships, local practices, and social perceptions of disability, resulting in differing experiences among PWDs.

The findings reveal that barriers to access are linked to structural limitations, procedural conditions, and social factors. These challenges contribute to uneven and inconsistent access to government services among PWDs.

Table 5. Support Strategies Employed by PWDs to Overcome Barriers in Accessing Government Program Services

Major Themes	Description
Family Support as the Core Strategy for Daily Survival and Access	Family members provide emotional, financial, and practical support, including caregiving, food provision, assistance in accessing services, and covering medical expenses, enabling PWDs to manage daily needs and navigate barriers.
Emotional Coping and Personal Acceptance as Support Strategies	PWDs employ internal coping mechanisms such as acceptance of social perceptions, prayer, and emotional expression to manage psychological challenges and sustain resilience despite limited and uncertain support.

The results show that PWDs rely on both family support and personal coping strategies to overcome barriers. These support systems play a crucial role in sustaining daily functioning and enabling continued access to services.

Table 6. Insights to Improve the Accessibility and Delivery of Government Program Services for the Disability Sector

Major Themes	Description
Need for Regular, Adequate, and Sustained Assistance	Government support should be consistent, sufficient, and continuous to effectively address daily living and health needs of PWDs.
Fairness, Transparency, and Needs-Based Distribution	Assistance should be distributed equitably based on clear criteria, prioritizing the most vulnerable and ensuring transparent selection processes.
Equitable Prioritization of PWDs in Social Protection Programs	PWDs should be given equal or greater priority in social protection programs, considering their limited work capacity and ongoing needs.
Simplifying and Making Service Delivery More Direct	Service processes should be streamlined to reduce bureaucratic steps, making access easier, faster, and more accessible for PWDs.
Strengthening Health and Medical Support	Health services should include continuous provision of medicines, regular check-ups, and expanded medical assistance to support long-term needs.
Proactive, Accountable, and Informative Service Delivery	Government agencies should actively conduct outreach, monitor beneficiaries, ensure accountability, and improve dissemination of information on available services.
Inclusive Livelihood and Employment Opportunities	Programs should support income-generating activities and employment opportunities for capable PWDs to promote self-reliance and dignity.

The findings highlight participants' recommendations for improving the accessibility and delivery of government services for PWDs. These insights emphasize the need for more consistent, equitable, and responsive support systems, including simplified processes, strengthened health services, and proactive service delivery. Overall, the results point toward a shift from short-term assistance to more inclusive and sustainable approaches that promote dignity and self-reliance.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study demonstrate that access to government program services among persons with disabilities (PWDs) is shaped by the interaction of formal eligibility, institutional practices, and social relationships. While legal frameworks establish entitlements, actual access is experienced as conditional, mediated, and uneven across participants. This reflects a broader pattern in the Philippines where the existence of policies does not automatically translate into consistent and equitable service delivery (Marella et al., 2016; Tabuga, 2013). Similar findings were observed by Velasco et al. (2021), who noted that implementation gaps and uneven local resource allocation continue to affect the accessibility of disability-related programs despite the presence of formal legal protections. The present study supports these observations by showing that formal recognition alone does not guarantee sustained and equal access to services at the local level.

From the perspective of the Capability Approach, access to services extends beyond the mere availability of programs toward the real freedoms of individuals to utilize them. Although participants were formally recognized as beneficiaries, their ability to access assistance depended on enabling conditions such as institutional responsiveness, availability of resources, and support from others. This suggests that capabilities were not uniformly expanded, as structural and procedural constraints continued to limit participants' actual opportunities to benefit from government programs. This finding reinforces Sen's (1999) argument that development should be evaluated not only through the existence of resources or entitlements but through individuals' actual ability to convert these into meaningful opportunities and functionings. In the context of disability, the findings also support Nussbaum's (2000) emphasis on enabling social and institutional conditions that allow individuals to participate fully in society.

The findings further reveal that access is often mediated through interpersonal relationships rather than through standardized administrative systems. Participants relied heavily on family members, barangay officials, and local networks to obtain information, process requirements, and claim assistance. This aligns with Tabuga's (2013) observation that PWDs frequently depend on informal support systems due to limited awareness and accessibility of formal mechanisms. While such mediation facilitates access, it also introduces variability, making service delivery dependent on social connections rather than consistent procedures. Similar patterns were identified by Galo and Cancio (2023), who found that families of PWDs often assume central roles in navigating institutional and bureaucratic barriers because formal support systems remain limited or

fragmented. Likewise, Rahman et al. (2025) observed that beneficiary inclusion in social protection programs may depend heavily on local relationships and community mediation rather than solely on formal eligibility procedures. The present study extends these findings by demonstrating how intermediaries influence not only awareness of services but also the actual processing and claiming of assistance.

At the same time, government assistance was experienced as occasional and conditional, reflecting limitations in coverage, resource allocation, and implementation. Participants described assistance as infrequent, minimal, and dependent on availability or selection processes. This finding is consistent with studies indicating that social protection programs in the Philippines remain unevenly implemented and often fail to reach all eligible beneficiaries (Albert et al., 2021; Cabual et al., 2024). The irregular nature of support suggests that assistance functions more as discretionary relief than as a sustained entitlement. This observation also reflects Pal's (2018) discussion on the continuing invisibility of PWDs within institutional systems, where rights formally exist but are inconsistently embedded within routine administrative practices. Furthermore, Kafea and Nurhadi (2023) noted that the absence of clear disability-specific targeting mechanisms may contribute to selective and uneven inclusion in local assistance programs.

Barriers to access were also shaped by structural and social factors, including limited program reach, reliance on intermediaries, and contextual variations in service delivery. Access was not experienced uniformly but varied depending on personal relationships, local practices, and social perceptions of disability. This unevenness reflects the findings of Susmerano and Yamada (2022), who note that differences in local capacity and governance contribute to disparities in service provision. Similarly, Arcinas (2025) emphasized that the effectiveness of disability service delivery is influenced by local leadership, administrative capacity, and resource allocation, resulting in variations in how programs are implemented across communities. The findings of the present study support these observations by demonstrating that access to assistance often depended on situational arrangements and interpersonal facilitation rather than on uniformly accessible systems. In this context, access is not solely determined by policy but by how it is implemented within specific local settings.

The findings also parallel the observations of Quetulio-Navarra et al. (2023), who noted that locally administered assistance for vulnerable sectors may become selective and contingent due to limited resources and discretionary practices. Likewise, Muego (2019) highlighted that the lack of reliable disability-related data at the barangay and city levels contributes to uneven inclusion of PWDs in local planning and programming. In the present study, these structural limitations were reflected in participants' experiences of infrequent assistance, quota-based distribution, and reliance on local selection processes.

In response to these barriers, participants demonstrated adaptive strategies that highlight their agency and resilience. Family support emerged as a central mechanism for sustaining daily needs and facilitating access to services, consistent with findings that Filipino families play a critical role in managing disability-

related challenges (Galo & Cancio, 2023). This finding is further supported by Lasco et al. (2021), who observed that families facing health-related and financial challenges often redistribute responsibilities and resources among household members to sustain medical and daily needs amid uncertain public support systems. Similarly, Oberes et al. (2023) emphasized that strong interpersonal relationships within families serve as essential support systems that help PWDs navigate daily difficulties and maintain participation in social life. The present study extends these findings by showing that family support functioned not only as emotional assistance but also as a practical strategy for navigating bureaucratic procedures, securing medicines, obtaining food, and facilitating access to government services.

In addition, emotional coping strategies such as acceptance, prayer, and resilience enabled participants to manage psychological stress and maintain daily functioning despite limited and uncertain support systems. These findings are consistent with Oberes et al. (2023), who found that emotional and spiritual coping mechanisms, including positive religious outlooks and emotional support systems, helped PWDs sustain hope and overcome personal and social challenges. In the present study, emotional coping complemented material and relational support by helping participants regulate distress, endure uncertainty, and continue engaging with everyday life despite persistent barriers. These findings underscore the importance of both relational and personal resources in compensating for gaps in formal service delivery.

Finally, participants' insights point toward the need for more responsive and inclusive governance. Their recommendations emphasize regular and adequate assistance, transparent and needs-based distribution, simplified service processes, strengthened health support, and expanded livelihood opportunities. These reflect persistent gaps between policy intent and actual implementation, reinforcing the need for disability-responsive systems that move beyond short-term aid toward sustained and equitable support. As Marella et al. (2016) highlight, improving access requires not only policy commitment but also effective implementation that ensures PWDs can fully exercise their rights and capabilities in practice. This finding is further supported by Quetulio-Navarra et al. (2023), who observed that assistance for vulnerable sectors in the Philippines is often temporary, selective, and shaped by discretionary local practices rather than institutionalized support systems. Similarly, Albert et al. (2025) emphasized the importance of strengthening disability-responsive budgeting and outcome-oriented monitoring mechanisms to ensure that government programs produce meaningful and sustained improvements in the lives of PWDs.

Participants' calls for simplified procedures and more proactive service delivery also parallel the observations of Tabuga (2013) and Velasco et al. (2021), who noted that weak implementation mechanisms, fragmented service systems, and varying local governance capacities continue to constrain equitable access to disability-related programs. Moreover, participants' recommendations for inclusive livelihood and employment opportunities support the findings of Mendoza (2021) and Balala et al. (2024), which emphasize that many PWDs remain

capable of productive work but are constrained by structural barriers, limited support mechanisms, and social stigma.

Taken together, these findings suggest that improving accessibility and service delivery for PWDs requires not only the continuation of existing programs but also stronger institutional commitment, sustained funding, transparent implementation, and inclusive development approaches that recognize both the rights and capacities of persons with disabilities.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This study examined the lived experiences of persons with disabilities (PWDs) in accessing government program services in Numancia, Aklan. The findings show that PWDs represent a diverse group with varying needs and conditions, indicating that a uniform approach to service delivery may not adequately address their realities.

Access to government services is anchored on formal recognition through the PWD identification card; however, it is also shaped by interpersonal relationships, local practices, and institutional arrangements. While PWDs are able to exercise rights related to identification, discounts, social assistance, medical support, and access to information, the realization of these rights varies depending on awareness, resource availability, and local implementation.

Despite the presence of government programs, access remains uneven due to limited coverage, selective distribution, reliance on intermediaries, and social perceptions of disability. In response, PWDs rely on family support and personal coping strategies to manage daily challenges and sustain engagement with available services. These findings suggest that while existing programs provide some level of support, there is a need to strengthen service delivery systems to ensure that assistance is more consistent, equitable, and responsive to the actual conditions of PWDs.

In light of these findings, several recommendations are proposed. Local Government Units (LGUs) may strengthen the regularity, adequacy, and inclusivity of assistance by institutionalizing sustained support mechanisms, such as regular financial aid or allowances, and by ensuring that programs are responsive to varying levels of need. Government agencies and service providers may simplify service delivery processes, reduce bureaucratic requirements, and improve coordination among offices to make access more direct and accessible.

Efforts to promote fairness and transparency in the distribution of assistance may be reinforced through clear, needs-based criteria and improved beneficiary identification systems. Health and social welfare institutions may enhance continuous medical support, including the provision of medicines, regular monitoring, and proactive communication with beneficiaries. In addition, PWD Affairs Offices (PDAO), barangay officials, and community organizations may strengthen information dissemination through accessible communication strategies and outreach activities.

Policymakers may consider strengthening disability-responsive policies by expanding social protection mechanisms, promoting inclusive livelihood and employment opportunities, and ensuring consistent implementation of existing laws. Finally, future research may explore similar experiences in other localities or

utilize quantitative and mixed-method approaches to further assess the effectiveness of government interventions for PWDs.

FURTHER STUDY

Future research may expand the scope by including a larger and more diverse sample across multiple localities to allow for comparative analysis of service delivery practices. Quantitative or mixed-method approaches may also be employed to assess the effectiveness of government programs and the impact of proposed interventions, such as regular financial assistance or inclusive livelihood opportunities. Moreover, further studies may explore the perspectives of government officials and service providers to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the challenges and opportunities in improving accessibility and delivery of services for the disability sector.

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