



Discovering Alternative Straw Use for People with Disabilities: *Survey Findings & Analysis*

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Introduction

In the summer of 2018, California’s cross-disability community mobilized against cities and counties advocating for or officially passing “straw bans”: the banning of single use plastic straws. The Disability community’s response was not rooted in a fight against the environment, but a fight to ensure that people with disabilities who need straws can access them. In fact, many people with disabilities need straws to have their basic needs met - this includes eating and drinking. Access to straws, including single use straws, can be a key accommodation that Disability community members need in order to access independence, community integration, and public life. Californians should not have to choose between supporting the environment and supporting people with disabilities. The public outcries for and against the “straw ban” is an invitation for the Environmental and Disability communities to come together to determine how we can preserve our environment while ensuring that all people with disabilities have what they need to live their lives.

As the media outcry erupted and exposed the multiple perspectives on the “straw ban”, the Monterey County Independent Living Center, Central Coast Center for Independent Living (CCCIL), and the Disability Organizing (DO) Network met with the Monterey Bay Aquarium (Aquarium) to connect about straws and the ban’s impact on people with disabilities. This dialogue sparked an important question: do alternative straws work for people with disabilities? Moreover, what solutions, including alternative straw use, are possible for decreasing environmental degradation and preserving access to straws that members of the Disability community need to survive?

The Aquarium, CCCIL and the DOnetwork have partnered to explore straw alternatives and to hear directly from the experiences of people with disabilities. Surveys were conducted across California to determine which alternative straws work best for the Disability community. This report explores the methodology, demographic information, the summary of findings, and an analysis. The conclusion incorporates what public eateries and facilities, including the Aquarium, and policymakers can consider when providing access to people with disabilities while also preserving the environment.

Methodology & Participant Demographics

The Aquarium's culinary partner, Service System Associates, donated 100 straw kits to the DOnetwork to run straw tests:

- A: 7.75" Compostable Paper Straw – Straight (single use straw)
- B: 7.50" Compostable Paper Straw – Bent (single use straw)
- C: 8.25" Compostable Plastic Straw – Bent (single use straw)
- D: 10.5" Stainless Steel Straw w/ Silicon (reusable straw)
- E: 9" Stainless Steel Straw – Bent (reusable straw)
- F: 9" Plastic BPA-free Straw – Bent (reusable straw)
- G: 10" Silicone Straw- Bent (reusable straw)

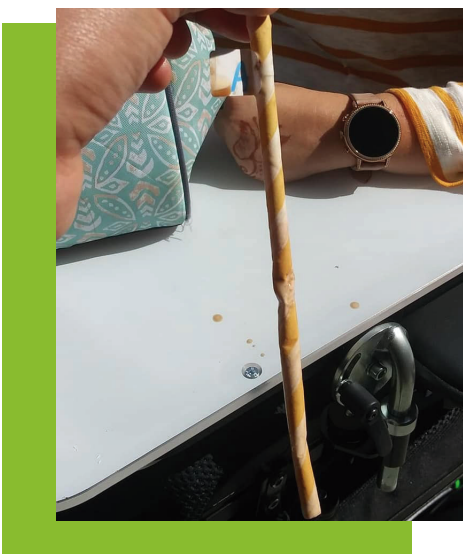
The goal of each survey was for the respondent to use a combination of cold, warm, hot, thin, and thick beverages with each straw to determine which straw is most effective and accessible for regular use. The research was coordinated by the Disability Organizing (DO) Network, which is made up of advocates and organizers across California who are connected to or work at the 28 Independent Living Centers, organizations run for and by people with disabilities. Each survey respondent was asked to report their experiences on the survey provided in the straw kit and return it to their local Independent Living Center's Systems Change Advocate/Community Organizer. If additional space was needed to capture the straw test experience, individuals used additional paper - whether it be electronically or hand-written. The local Systems Change Advocates then sent all survey results to the DOnetwork's State-wide Community Organizer to summarize and analyze the results.

Due to CCCIL and the DOnetwork working and organizing with the cross-disability community- not all of the survey respondents required straws as an accommodation. Yet, the local Systems Change Advocates prioritized engaging respondents who need straws daily. Through the questions asked on the survey, the demographic information included was:

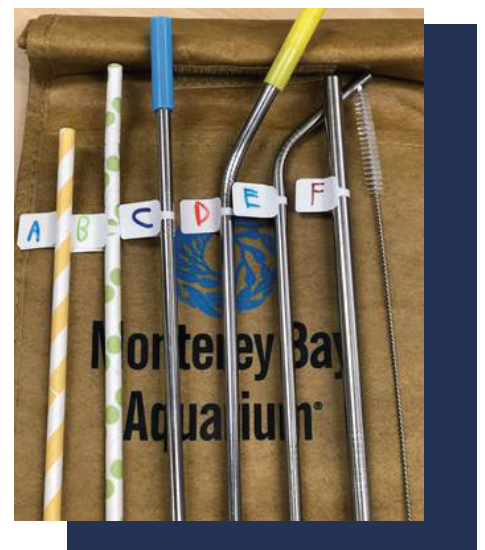
- Geographic area
- Whether someone has a sensory-related disability
- Whether someone has limited dexterity
- Whether someone relies on a straw
- Whether someone already utilizes a non-plastic straw

The demographic information gathered by total number of respondents includes:

- The survey respondents were located across all major regions of California: Southern California, the Central Valley, the Central Coast, the Bay Area, and Northern California.
- 25% of respondents identified as having sensory-related disabilities.
- 56% of respondents identified as having their disabilities impact their dexterity.
- 44% of respondents currently rely on a plastic straw.
- Nine respondents currently use non plastic straws and only four specified their straw type: plastic and metal, BPA-free straw and stainless steel straw, steel straw, and a 12mm wide, 9 inch stainless steel straw.



Compostable straw A collapses during straw testing.



*Straw A - F from each donated straw kit displayed.
Straw G not in photo.*

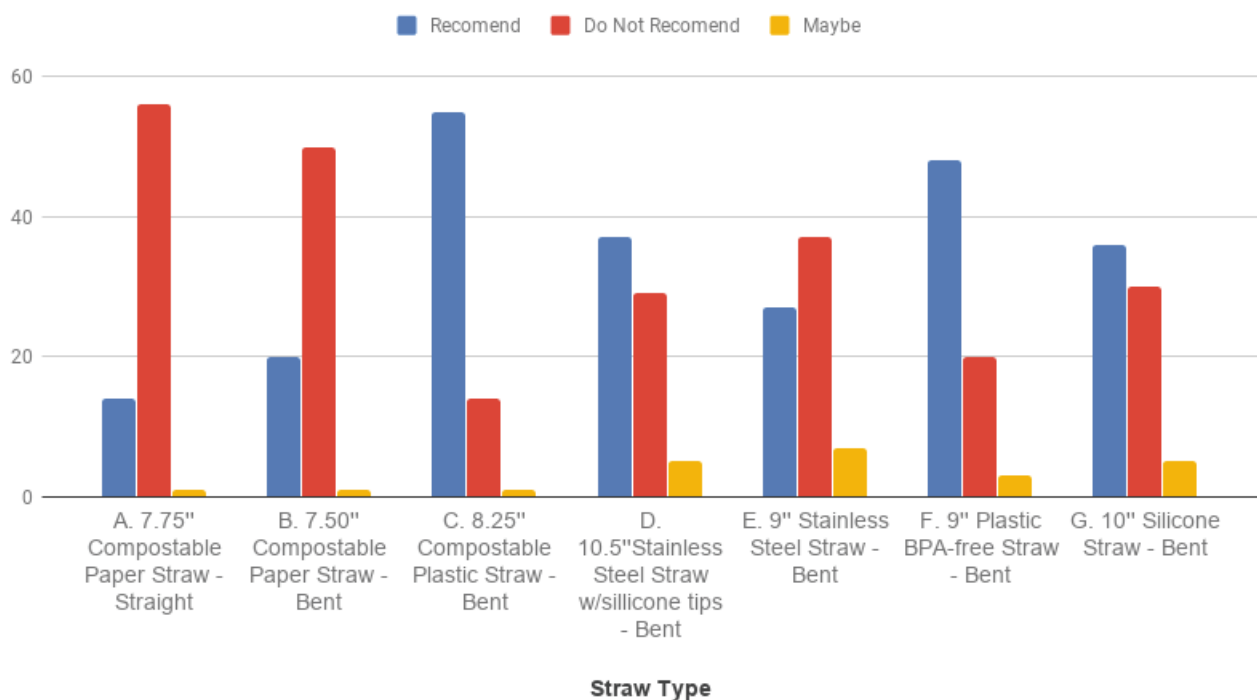
Survey Results: Summary

First and foremost, when answering the initial research question: Do alternative straws work for people with disabilities? According to the research findings, the answer is yes, but only certain types of alternative straws.

The number of participants who completed the research was a total of 71 people with disabilities. The survey results demonstrate that the most preferred straw is the 8.25” compostable plastic straw- bent (single use), with 77% of respondents recommending this type. The second most preferred straw is the 9” BPA-free Straw-Bent (reusable), which had a 67% approval rating. The least preferred straw was the 7.75” compostable paper straw - straight (single use) with a 78% disapproval rating, followed by the 7.5” compostable paper straw (single use) bent with a 70% disapproval rating. Straws the respondents were most mixed about, receiving between 38-52% approval ratings, were the 10.5” Stainless Steel Straw w/ Silicone, the 9” Stainless Steel Straw - Bent, and the 10” Silicone Straw- Bent (all reusable).

Please review the graph below, which summarizes the data.

Straw Type Results



Survey Methodology

Due to the 71% survey completion rate, it is important to analyze the methodology. With a goal of 100% completion, DOnetwork advocates identified the future best practice will be to conduct and complete surveys in groups, at the same time. This would enable survey locations to provide consistent beverage options. Due to the lack of oversight, there was discrepancy on which respondents used multiple beverage options. Additionally, conducting online surveys would facilitate greater access to respondents, and would increase tracking and data collection capability. Lastly, survey participants who rely on straws and who continued to use the straws after the research, shared that their opinions of the straws changed over time. This is another factor to consider for future research on alternative straw use and people with disabilities; that usability of straws can shift over time.

Survey Results

The survey results highlighted the true diversity of the Disability community and the necessity of straw access and usability. The nuanced detail of respondents' survey results demonstrate the vast knowledge and experiences they have with straw use. Disability is extremely diverse, and even folks with the same impairments have different needs. This vastness of experience and need can be proven through the variety of respondent straw preferences. Even so, there were several consistent factors that were most noted by respondents:

- Durability, which includes reusability,
- Width and length of straw, which impacts different liquids and how easy or challenging it is to suction,
- Weight of straw,

- Flexibility, which impacts one's ability to adjust the straw depending on their body and head's positioning,
- Sensitivity to temperature,
- Straw material, which impacts durability, how the material's taste interferes with the taste of the liquid, and one's ability to bite the straw (which many respondents noted as something important to their straw use).

When analyzing the highest straw approval with the lowest, it directly aligns with the factors above. The straws that were lightweight, flexible, and durable for re-use and different temperatures were the highest recommended. Additionally, due to the highest level of need for straws and the most commonly used straw being single use plastic, the highest rated straws resembled plastic or were plastic. For respondents who need straws to meet their basic needs, it was evident through commentary that using straws that are familiar and already accessible is ideal. With that being said, the DOnetwork also received feedback from respondents that their experiences with the straws evolved since the initial research. This amplifies the nuanced needs of the Disability community and that it takes time to determine what accommodations work best, and that individual's needs and accommodations can change over time.

Honoring the diversity of Disability cannot negate the overwhelming majority which disapproved of compostable paper straws. This leads to a concrete conclusion that compostable paper straws do not meet the needs of the Disability community and cannot serve as an appropriate alternative.

Conclusion

This groundbreaking research on alternative straw use for people with disabilities continues to invite a strong dialogue and partnership between the Disability community and the Environmental Conservation community. Throughout California, survey respondents repeatedly expressed excitement and gratitude for this intentional research and the opportunity to try alternative straws, especially because there can be minimal public access to these straws. Moreover, the respondents were eager to learn about how they can access their straws and reduce waste. The survey findings can guide advocates, policy makers, business owners, and the general public in making informed decisions about straws and the potential “bans”. This research and analysis can also provide direct guidance to straw-related policy and practice-offering cleaner environmental solutions and necessary accommodations to members of the largest minority in California, people with disabilities.



“An essential part of my independence is being able to use straws and lids when I am out with friends or enjoying a quick lunch at school. Taking them away will limit me and have me become more dependent on others. I care for the environment but I also care for my independence and that of my friends.”

– Jonny Vallin, Southern California

“I use plastic straws because I can’t hold a drink to my mouth. Plus they don’t melt in hot drinks, unlike compostable ones. This doesn’t mean I don’t care about the environment & reduce waste in other ways ”

– Alice Wong, the Bay Area



Additional Resources

If you would like to learn more about the straw impact on the disability community we invite you to search the following hashtags;

#SaveOurStraws #SuckItAbleism #StrawBan.

Blogs about the issue published by disabled writers:

- Alice Wong - <https://www.eater.com/2018/7/19/17586742/plastic-straw-ban-disabilities>
- Benna Houck - <https://www.eater.com/2018/7/12/17555880/plastic-straws-environment-pollution-banned-alternatives-ocean-sea-turtle-viral-video>

Examples of traditional media articles:

- LA Times piece by Patrick McGreevy - <http://www.latimes.com/politics/la-pol-ca-plastic-straw-limits-california-20180823-story.html>
- The Guardian article by Vivian Ho - https://amp.theguardian.com/us-news/2018/aug/25/plastic-straw-ban-california-people-with-disabilities?__twitter_impression=true



Special Thanks

Center for Resources for Independent Living (CRIL)

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Dayle McIntosh Center (DMC)

Disability Community Resource Center (DCRC)

Disabled Resources Center, Inc. (DRC)

FREED Center for Independent Living

Independent Living Resource Center of the Tri-Counties (ILRC-Trico)

Independent Living Resources – Solano & Contra Costa Counties (ILR-SCC)

Resources for Independent Living (RIL)

Resources for Independent Living, Central Valley (RICV)

Rolling Start, Inc.

Service Center for Independent Life (SCIL)

Silicon Valley Independent Living Center (SVILC)

All people with disabilities who participated in the research

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