



## Dessa Cosma:

CEW+ Twink Frey Visiting Social Activist at the University of Michigan and Founding Director of Detroit Disability Power

Dessa started Detroit Disability Power to grow the organizing power of the disability community and to continue bridging the gap between the disability community and larger social justice movements. She has particular interest in disability focused political work that is grounded in anti-racism and economic justice.

Dessa is a lifelong social justice activist with experience in the women's rights, LGBTQ rights, environmental and disability justice movements. She has been a social justice worker and organizer for many causes, including economic, reproductive, racial, and LGBTQ justice. While engaged in this work, she often finds herself the only person identifying as disabled - the effect of segregation within progressive movements and the isolation of people with disabilities even within social justice spaces. She is dedicated to building power in disability communities and with other marginalized groups. Her work aims to:

1. Ensure other movements (racial justice, feminism, etc.) are inclusive of their constituents with disabilities and use a disability justice analysis in their work. Politically marginalized groups can and *should* work together; this allows more voices to be heard and the work to be deeper and more effective. People have multiple identities: one may identify as disabled, female, queer, Christian, etc.
2. Disability-focused groups need to be purposefully intersectional in their efforts. People with disabilities are also experiencing other forms of oppression due to their race, sexuality, gender, class, etc. This allows the building of power across issues and creates a stronger coalition of change makers.



*"Power is the ability to get things done. If the disability community is powerful enough, it will become a sought-after constituency and provide a stronger influence in public policy."*

– Dessa Cosma



**Detroit Disability Power** is a membership organization that works to build the political power of the disability community. In order to end disparities people with disabilities face in regards to housing, employment, education, transportation, healthcare and more, the disability community must organize!

**Mission:** Detroit Disability Power's mission is to leverage and build the organizing power of the disability community to ensure the full inclusion of people with disabilities in Metro Detroit.

### Work:

- Organize people with disabilities and allies around local issues that impact daily life
- Collaborate with other organizations engaging in work that affects people with disabilities
- Facilitate Anti-Ableism Workshops for social justice organizations wishing to better understand the systemic oppression of disabled people and that are committed to dismantling able-ism in their work

- Host fun and educational community building events

### **Guiding Principles:**

*Disability is a normal/positive part of human diversity.* Our disabilities are essential parts of who we are, places of power and self-love, giving us great assets to share with the world around us.

*Nothing About Us, Without Us:* We are People with disabilities building power and inclusive social justice movements. We work to dismantle the very real structural and cultural challenges facing us. We organize for the policy and systems change we need and want, therefore, making tangible changes in people’s lives and shifting power to those most affected by issues.

*We organize and serve people with diverse disabilities.* We are committed to no hierarchy of disability in our work, engaging with people across disabilities, including chronic illness.

*Disabled people have other important identities,* which also affect our lived experiences and access to opportunity. Our power building efforts will always be with an intersectional lens and with attention to race, class, gender, sexual orientation, citizenship status, religion, and other identities that affect our lives.

*True Inclusion is Revolutionary.* When we evolve our institutions to fully include disabled people, we inevitably build more equitable, accountable, safe, and compassionate communities that are better for everyone.

### **About Dessa:**

Dessa is a proud Little person; who uses her experience with a disability to challenge ableist thinking and action. She grew up in the Deep South, splitting her time between New Orleans, LA and Augusta, GA. Dessa has undergraduate degrees in Women’s Studies, Anthropology and International Affairs from the University of Georgia, as well as a Masters in Social Justice from Marygrove College in Detroit.

She was the Michigan Program Director for the Center for Progressive Leadership, training hundreds of activists, candidates, and campaign managers across the state. She then became the Executive Director of the Economic Justice Alliance of Michigan, which she helped to start in collaboration with some of Detroit’s most dedicated economic and racial justice champions.



Web: [www.detroitdisabilitypower.org](http://www.detroitdisabilitypower.org) | Email: [dessa@detroitdisabilitypower.org](mailto:dessa@detroitdisabilitypower.org)

### **About the CEW+ Twink Frey Visiting Social Activist Program:**

The Twink Frey Visiting Social Activist (VSA) Program brings to CEW+ a social justice activist whose work affects women and recognizes gender equity issues from an intersectional lens. One goal of the program is to build the capacity and effectiveness of social activists while amplifying the voices of underserved populations. This is accomplished by giving the VSA time, space and support to work on a project that would not be possible under the activist’s usual working circumstances. The VSA program is made possible through a generous gift from U-M alumna Twink Frey and her husband, the late James McKay.



Contact: Alicia Marting, 734-764-7258  
 Web: [www.cew.umich.edu](http://www.cew.umich.edu) | Email: [amarting@umich.edu](mailto:amarting@umich.edu)