Human Rights First

NOWHERE TO GO

Internally Displaced People with Disabilities in Ukraine

July 2025

Introduction

Human Rights Defenders (HRDs) in Ukraine say the authorities are failing people with disabilities, including many Internally Displaced People (IDPs), who desperately need better provisions across a range of services, including accommodation and access to bomb shelters.

The HRDs blame a critical lack of housing, plus unnecessarily complicated bureaucracy, for the accommodation crisis, and urge the authorities to urgently address these and other growing problems.

In 2021, the number of persons with a certified disability in Ukraine was 2.73 million (approximately 6.7% of the pre-war population). In 2023, that number increased to 7.4% of the population, but international organizations and local disability NGOs estimate that actual numbers are closer to 16%, and are continuing to rise with the ongoing conflict. According to the International Organization for Migration, in 2023, around 20% of IDP families had a least one family member with a disability.

Before the 2022 Russian full-scale invasion, Ukraine had made notable advancements in disability rights. In 2010, Ukraine became one of the first post-Soviet countries to join the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD). In 2021, the government adopted the National Action Plan to Implement the CRPD by 2025 and the 2030 Strategy for Barrier-Free Environment, which focused on reforming social services and empowering people with disabilities to fully participate in society and enjoy their rights.

But the 2022 invasion was a crushing blow to the momentum of these reforms, and Russia's ongoing war on Ukraine has significantly worsened the situation for people with disabilities. The Russian invasions in 2014 and 2022 have damaged infrastructure, displaced persons with disabilities, and created a heightened risk of institutionalization, particularly for internally displaced persons (IDPs), veterans with disabilities, and children living in institutions.

2025 has been particularly deadly for Ukraine. The UN reported that in the first five months of 2025, the number of civilian casualties in Ukraine was almost 50% higher than in the same period last year. Most recently, on July 24, a Russian air strike attack on Kharkiv left over 40 people injured, including children. The growing numbers of civilian and military casualties mean there is greater demand for services already struggling to cope.

While the implementation of national reforms for disability rights has been largely put on hold, some HRDs are responding to the crisis by creating local initiatives to help. Many are desperate for resources and complain of a lack of government help.

Since Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, Human Rights First has made 20 research trips to Ukraine's eastern front in the Kharkiv region, working with local HRDs in communities under fire, including some occupied by Russian forces in 2022, and others now on the front line, including Balak liia, Borova, Dvorichna, Hirnyk, Izyum, Kivsharivka, Kupiansk, Kurylivka, Lyptsi, Pokrovsk, Prykolotne, Selydore, Tsyrkuny, and Velykyi Burluk.[1] Human Rights First has joined local volunteer teams evacuating people with disabilities and restricted mobility[2] from many frontline communities under Russian attack. In July 2025, Human Rights First drove into the frontline city of Kupiansk under fire to help evacuate people with disabilities.

But once people are brought from the front line to the relative safety of nearby cities or make the long and difficult journey from areas occupied by the Russian army into unoccupied Ukraine, the struggle for safe accommodation begins. Many are elderly, and while some have relatives who can take them in, others do not.

Living on the front line

Many people living on the front line have disabilities and low mobility issues. Human Rights First visited Kupiansk and the surrounding frontline communities in July 2025 and witnessed people using walking sticks and crutches struggling to get up the steps to their homes in apartment blocks. Like in many communities close to the fighting, the electricity supply has been cut, and there are no longer any medical facilities, shops, or running water in people's homes in these areas.

One of the volunteer evacuation teams working in Kharkiv estimates that this year, around 40% of all those they have evacuated from the front line face some degree of mobility difficulties.

[1] 1 In May 2023, Human Rights First reported on how Tsyrkuny, a village north of Kharkiv, survived Russian occupation. Human Rights First released another report in June 2023 on the Russian occupation of the city of Izyum and surrounding villages in the Kharkiv Oblast. In August 2023, Human Rights First published a report from the frontline city of Kupiansk on how locals were holding out against the threat of a Russian re-occupation. In January 2024 Human Rights First reported from Kharkiv on the need for greater psychological support for civilians, including for those who had lived under Russian occupation, and in March 2024 returned to the region to report on demining efforts in the deoccupied area of Balakliia. In June, July, August, October and December 2024, and in February, March and May 2025, Human Rights First reported from Kharkiv on HRDs undertaking evacuations from villages under fire, and in January 2025 released a report detailing the killing of HRD Tigran Galustyan, a volunteer targeted and killed by a Russian drone while evacuating civilians from near Pokrovsk. In May 2025, Human Rights First returned to Kharkiv and assisted HRDs to evacuate people from communities under fire.

[2] The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) defines a person with a disability as someone who has a physical or mental impairment that substantially limits one or more major life activity. This includes people with mobility impairments, which is also referred to as limited or low mobility.

IDPs rescued from the frontlines are helped at a reception center in Kharkiv City.

In July 2025, Human Rights First helped to drive more than 20 people, including around a dozen with disabilities, away from the front line and to the relative safety of Kharkiv city, where a reception center tries to find them accommodation and provides wheelchairs and other aid.

Yuliia Kokhan works for the NGO Helping to Leave and assists people evacuated from frontline communities. In 2024, Helping to Leave reported that it helped evacuate 11,251 people, and in 2025, the NGO has evacuated hundreds more, ranging from 300 to over 600 people each month. She says there are few accommodation options for IDPs with disabilities. "The Ukrainian government facilities are totally full. They haven't been able to take in anybody who has applied since March," she said. She explained that state-owned geriatric facilities segregate their rooms and wings by gender, preventing families from

staying together. “Those who are part of a family have particular problems in that the government won't house, for instance, a husband and wife together, if one of them has a disability.”

Olha Ridna has lived in Kharkiv for 30 years, and when the Russian army invaded Ukraine in 2022, she immediately volunteered at a local hospital in the city, helping the wounded.

By the end of that year, with other volunteers, she was coordinating aid distribution to the injured across the city. This informal network work turned into an organization - The Center of Wounded Civilians - which now has 15 volunteers, including a lawyer and a psychologist. The NGO provides humanitarian aid and legal advice to people with disabilities.

Volunteers bring back IDPs from the frontlines like Kupiansk.

She estimates 40% of the people they help are IDPs. These are people who were injured when their homes were bombed in frontline communities such as Izyum, Lyptsi, Kupiansk, and Vovchansk.

“The Ukrainian government doesn’t help us at all,” she said. “We rely on donations from people in Ukraine and Ukrainians living in America and other places.” She says the main

challenge facing civilians with disabilities is registering their disability, especially if they have a war-related injury.

"The bureaucracy is a big problem. There are too many procedures, everything is confusing, and inaccessible to anyone without a legal education. People are expected to supply all sorts of information to social services."

She says she spends a lot of time every day writing appeals for money and collecting and distributing aid packages around the city.

Leaving Russian-occupied areas of Ukraine

Sofiia Gedzenko works for Helping to Leave and assists people in leaving Russian-occupied areas of Ukraine. Organizing the evacuation journey out of the territories occupied by Russia is an enormously challenging prospect, but it is possible. In 2024, Helping to Leave reported that it had evacuated 586 people from occupied territories, Russia, and Belarus. Since the start of 2025, they report having evacuated at least 100 people from occupied territories.

"Last year, one of the people we evacuated was a 98-year-old woman," she said. "Some people leaving the occupied territories are bedridden, many are elderly, with conditions often found in elderly people. Some have dementia or have had strokes, hip fractures, and have been without access to medical care."

For those with disabilities, getting an ambulance can add more than $1,500 to the cost of the trip. To make their way from occupied Ukraine to unoccupied Ukraine via Russia and Belarus (see Human Rights First's May 2025 report Desperate to Escape: The Fight to Save Civilians in Ukraine), people have to come along a 700-yard track on the final leg of the journey from Belarus back into Ukraine.

"This corridor is really in two parts - one close to the Belarusian side, and then the other part as they get closer to Ukraine," said Gedzenko. "So the first half of the corridor is enormously difficult. At the moment, the Belarusian side restricts ambulances going along there. And so you have to find somebody who are themselves leaving the occupied territories to come back into unoccupied Ukraine. You have to find one of those people willing to push somebody in a wheelchair through the corridor, but they also have to carry their own stuff and the personal stuff for whoever they're pushing."

Once back in unoccupied Ukraine, the accommodation problems begin. "If they have relatives, it's easier, but that's not always the case, because some relatives have their own health problems and sometimes disabilities. Or sometimes relatives also live very close to the front line, and that's not a good option," said Sofiia Gedzenko. "Government nursing homes generally don't offer care for people who have any relatives. Private homes are too expensive, and housing options are rarely wheelchair accessible. For instance, there might be room in a dormitory that's on the second floor with no elevator."

There are people in the Russian-occupied territories who want to leave but have nowhere to go if they make the journey into unoccupied Ukraine.

“The government housing services are generally not viable for people with disabilities. Everybody wants to help children, but old, sad people with disabilities, that’s different - taking care of somebody who's had a stroke, that’s a 24/7 job. There are plenty of people left in the territories, because there's nobody to take them in when they enter unoccupied Ukraine,” said Sofiia Gedzenko.

Her colleague at Helping to Leave, Svitlana Atrokhina says, “Of course, people want to stay close to where they've left in the hope they may be able to return soon. If somebody is mobile, it's easier, but IDPs with lower mobility face much bigger problems. Getting into geriatric facilities is very difficult. The government housing is simply all full now.”

She says Ukrainian government bureaucracy is a major problem. “You need a huge packet of documents, not just for disability housing and geriatric housing. But these are particularly difficult, especially if somebody is looking for accommodation in a different region from the one they are from. It can take two months just to get all the documentation together.”

Yulia Kokhan said those who have been evacuated and who have mental health issues face particular difficulties. “All the government houses are full, and the usual hospitals and institutions are overwhelmed because of the war. And to get somebody admitted, you need a million documents, and in practice, it's impossible, particularly if somebody has a mental health issue and doesn't have any family,” she said.

Even for those with family, there are major problems. “If, for instance, a parent has an adult child who has a mental health problem, and they have managed that issue, as a family, the government accommodation doesn't allow them all to live together. And so, for instance, the person with the mental health issue is likely to be put into an institution, and the parents in separate IDP housing,” says Kokhan.

In January 2024, Human Rights First reported on the urgent mental health crisis in Ukraine (see Hidden Harm: Ukraine confronts psychological cost of war). Despite estimates from Ukraine’s Ministry of Health in 2024 that around 15 million people in Ukraine needed psychological support, there is a severe shortage of trained psychologists. Mental health problems are common and pose yet another difficulty for IDPs.

Access to shelters

As the war rages on, a major challenge for people with disabilities is access to bomb shelters. In 2023, the Ukrainian Interior Ministry found that nearly 900 of over 4,800 shelters were locked or in a state of disrepair, and a majority of the remaining shelters are inaccessible to people with disabilities.

In a report in 2024, the UN Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities stressed that persons with disabilities have not been sufficiently considered in evacuation plans. They also expressed concern at the lack of a comprehensive strategy with goals and timelines for implementing the National Strategy for a Barrier-Free Environment.

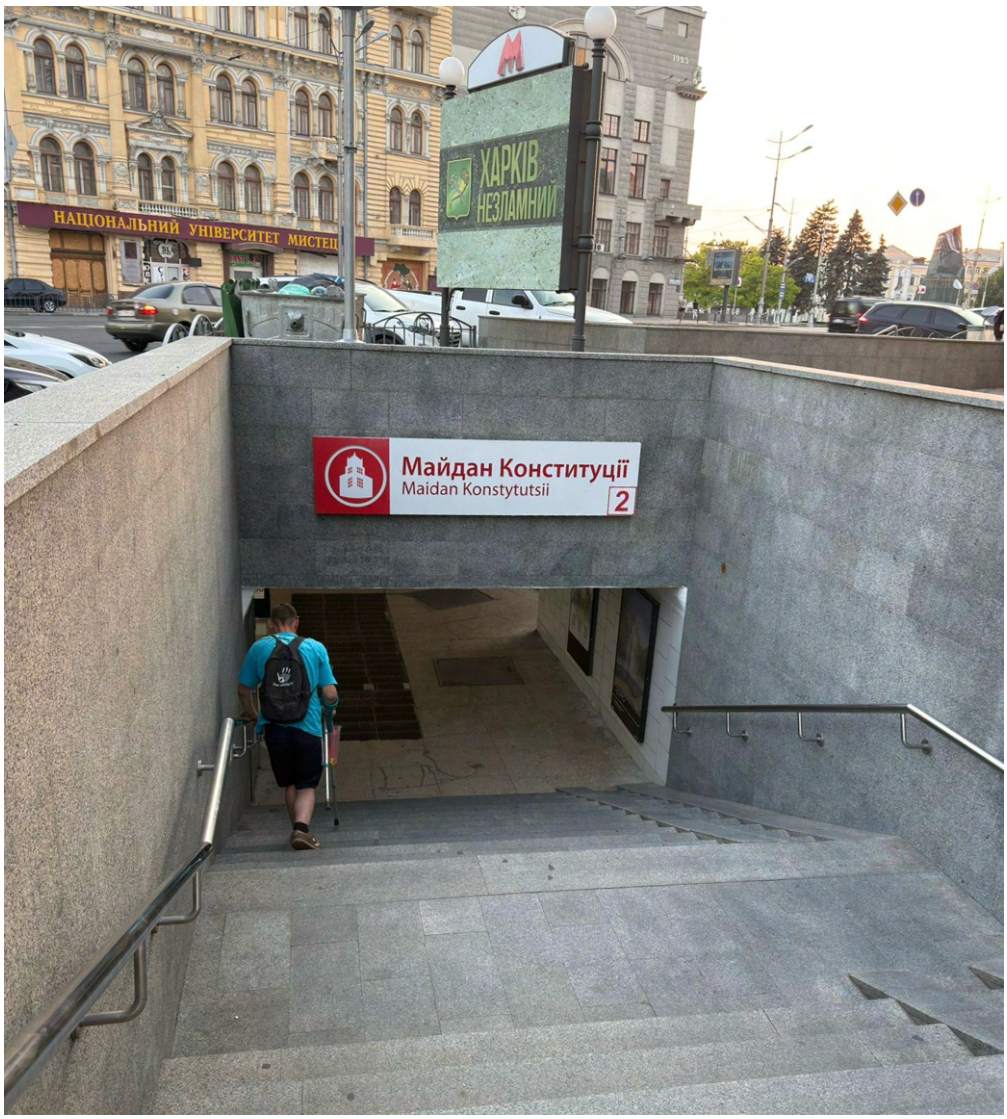
Yulia Kokhan says, "In terms of shelters, you're very lucky if the basement shelter is in your building. In hospitals and other places, in practice, it's up to the people who work there to physically help and carry people with disabilities into the basements."

In a 2023 submission to the UN Committee of Persons with Disabilities, Amnesty International urged the Ukrainian government to "ensure that bomb shelters, basements, and other infrastructure that can provide protection to civilians during an attack is physically accessible to people with all types of disabilities," as in the early months of the 2022 invasion, "many persons with disabilities were unable to seek safety in bomb shelters or basements, which were not typically physically accessible… and [they] were therefore forced to stay in their apartments and faced higher risk during attacks as a result. Many were unable to evacuate from dangerous situations in a timely manner. The transport used for evacuations, as well as the communications used to announce them, were generally not physically accessible to people with disabilities, leaving them reliant on family members or others for help during often long and difficult evacuation journeys."

From January 1, 2025, to June 30th, 421 Russian air attacks hit Kharkiv, injuring 581 and killing 25 people, including one child. June 2025 was one of the most dangerous months for Kharkiv, with the Local Emergency Department recording 142 Russian attacks, killing 15 and injuring 157 civilians. July has been no different, as Russian forces have continued to hit the region with aerial bombs and drone strikes.

Olha Ridna from The Center of Wounded Civilians said, "Most bomb shelters in Kharkiv city are inaccessible to people in wheelchairs." Kharkiv's deep metro system offers emergency shelter to passersby when the city is being bombed, and people urgently rush down into the safety of nearby metro stations when explosions are happening. But locals say only one of the city's 30 metro stations is accessible to wheelchair users.

There are typically dozens of steps down into Kharkiv metro stations. For example, getting down to reach escalators and taking people deeper into the safer areas at train level typically means negotiating between 24 and 35 steps at the city's metro stations. At the Vokzalna metro stop connecting to the main railway station, there are 33 steps up from the underground train level and then another 15 up to the concourse at the overground rail station.



People with disabilities struggle to access bomb shelters located in metro stations.

While there are ramps on most of these steps, “they are too steep for wheelchairs,” said Ridna.

Faced with the local authorities' inaction on making the metro stations accessible, some local activists are researching whether stairlift-type solutions are feasible.

Some NGOs are forced to circumvent the slow, official processes of applying for ramps to be built to access their buildings, and they have made makeshift ramps themselves so that people can access their buildings and services.

EU standards and UN criticism

Galustyan was an HRD, evacuating civilians away from communities under fire, protecting the rights of others, notably the rights to life, adequate housing, and medical care.

Following the full-scale Russian invasion in 2022, Ukraine submitted its membership application to the European Union (EU) and was quickly granted candidate status under the "fast-track" procedure. In 2024, Ukraine began ascension negotiations with the EU, marking a pivotal step towards EU membership.

A key condition for EU membership is the respect and advancement of human rights, including the rights of persons with disabilities. The EU's "Enlargement Package" places particular emphasis on a country's progress in ensuring a non-discriminatory and equal environment for everyone, including persons with disabilities. The European Commission has identified several priorities for disability reform in Ukraine, including the need for deinstitutionalization[3] of children, lack of accessible infrastructure, and limited employment opportunities for people with disabilities.

It has also called on the Ukrainian government to make sure that all rebuilt infrastructure is accessible.

The UN's Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities has criticized provisions for IDPs with disabilities in Ukraine. They highlighted in a 2024 report that the over 205,000 IDPs in Ukraine with disabilities face systemic discrimination, including limited access to adequate housing, social programs, and essential services. They note that many have been displaced for prolonged periods and are especially vulnerable to violence, marginalization, and institutionalization.

The Committee criticized the lack of consultation with disability organizations in making evacuation plans, which have largely excluded the needs of persons with disabilities. Evacuation points and emergency shelters are often inaccessible, leaving many IDPs with disabilities at heightened risk.

It also criticizes a bureaucratic process that lacks a streamlined process for obtaining conflict-related disability status, leading to unequal access to social entitlements and long-term rehabilitation services depending on the region.

The Committee urged Ukraine to adopt a human rights-based approach, ensuring that IDPs with disabilities receive timely assistance, accessible shelters, and equitable access to benefits and healthcare. It calls for the inclusion of persons with disabilities in the planning and monitoring of recovery and development projects to ensure their rights are fully realized.

[3] Institutionalization is a discriminatory practice against persons with disabilities that often results in the segregation, abuse, and neglect of persons with disabilities. The Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities states that people with disabilities have the right to live independently in the community and not be segregated in institutions.

Some positive steps

Throughout the world, it is notoriously difficult to hold the killers of HRDs to account, and impunity for these crimes only fuels more attacks. The various legal protections that should have protected Galustyan failed. He will be further failed if those responsible for his death are not brought to account.

Despite these difficulties and setbacks, there have been some encouraging developments for disability rights in Ukraine. In February 2025, Ukraine adopted a law expanding employment opportunities for people with disabilities. As a result of advocacy from disability rights groups in Ukraine, including the Kyiv-based League of the Strong, the law's provisions include new services for people with disabilities in the workplace, stronger incentives to hire people with disabilities, and increased employment opportunities in government agencies.

Ukrainian volunteers and NGOs across the country are making vital contributions to enabling persons with disabilities to claim their rights, albeit often without much support from the Ukrainian authorities.

The League of the Strong is a collaboration of several NGOs working on these issues, including advocacy on employment issues. Their long-term goal in this area, says League of the Strong's Executive Director Daria Sydorenko "is to reach a 50% employment rate for people with disabilities, similar to European countries."

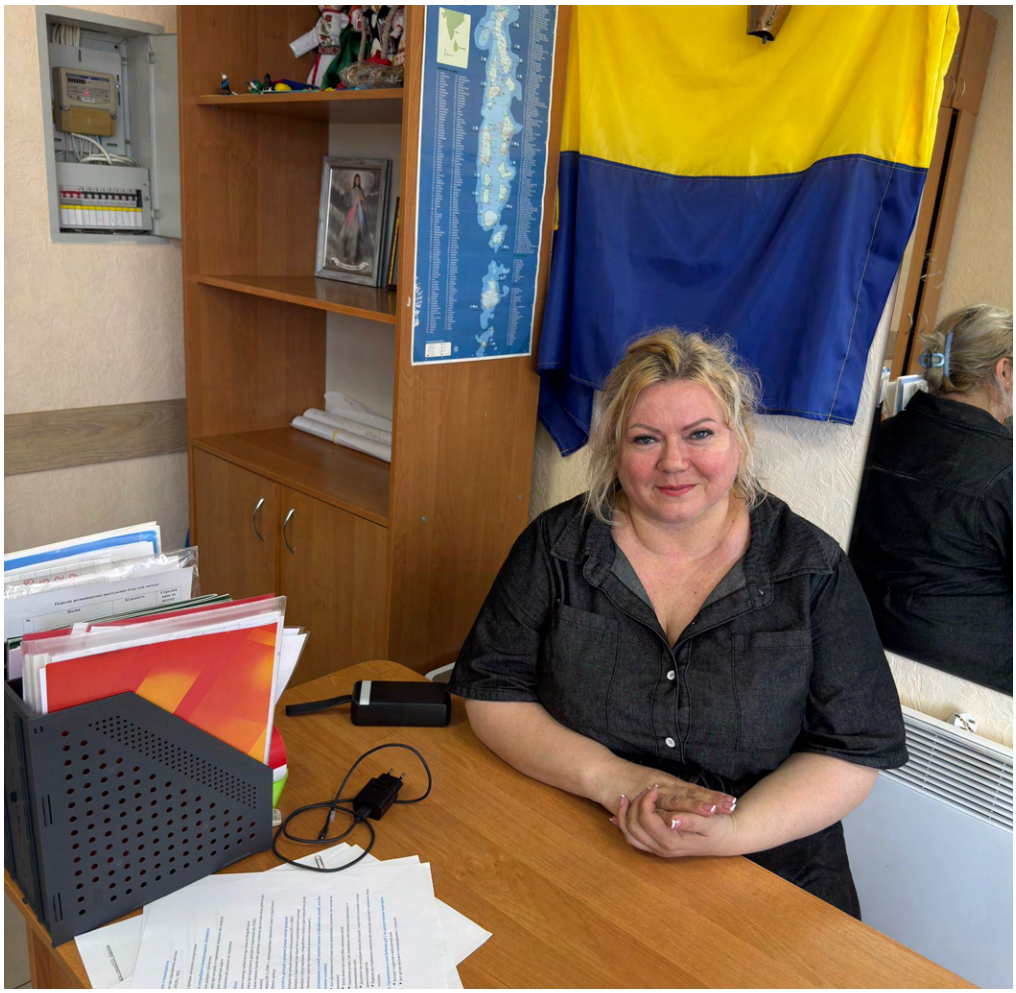
To counter stereotypes, ill-informed reporting, and unhelpful language in the media's coverage of disability issues, it has produced training materials for journalists on ethical storytelling about people with disabilities. "Journalists play a crucial role in shaping public opinion. It's important to talk about people with disabilities not through the lens of pity or stereotypes, but with respect for their rights and dignity," says the NGO.

In 2022, Human Rights First worked with local feminist media and other women's rights experts in Ukraine to produce a guide for journalists on how to responsibly report war-related sexual violence in Ukraine, because much of the media coverage of that issue also pushed similar unhelpful stereotypes and unethical storytelling.

In Kharkiv, architect Olga Kleitman has created a home for elderly people with disabilities. Within weeks of the 2022 invasion, she joined with others in Kharkiv to establish the NGO Through The War. "We rescued elderly people, often with disabilities, who were left alone, sometimes in bombed-out houses without electricity," she said. With money raised privately from local, national, and international donors, she has established a care home in Kharkiv, installed elevators, and made radical improvements to the former factory workers' dormitory to comply with EU standards of accessibility and other requirements.

She has plans to expand the home into a village for people with disabilities and to establish a ceramics art therapy workshop. But, like other local activists, her work faces constant challenges of lethal danger and a lack of money.

Despite getting no governmental help, Olha Ridna of the Center of Wounded Civilians says they still manage to provide a mix of legal, psychological, and medical help to around 600 people every month.



Olha Ridna from the Center of Wounded Civilians.

Many other local initiatives in Kharkiv and elsewhere across the country are managing to provide aid and services to persons with disabilities despite the ongoing Russian attacks, and often despite much support from the Ukrainian government.

Recommendations

- Donors should properly resource the work of HRDs evacuating civilians with disabilities from the front lines and Russian-occupied territories.
- Donors, international NGOs, diplomats, and others should visit front-line communities to witness for themselves the realities faced by persons with disabilities and the HRDs working with them.
- The Ukrainian authorities should urgently reform bureaucratic processes to make applications for accommodation and other provisions easier to access.
- The Ukrainian authorities should urgently adapt accommodation facilities to provide for people with disabilities.
- The Ukrainian authorities should urgently make bomb shelters accessible for people with disabilities and low mobility.

Mission statement

Human Rights First works to create a just world in which every person's intrinsic human rights are respected and protected, to build societies that value and invest in all their people. To reach that goal demands assisting victims of injustice, bringing perpetrators of abuse to justice, and building institutions that ensure universal rights.

Human Rights First is a nonprofit, nonpartisan international human rights organization based in Los Angeles, New York, and Washington D.C.

Acknowledgments

This report was researched and written by Brian Dooley and Maya Fernandez-Powell and formatted by Camila Rice-Aguilar.

Thanks also to Will Gronefeld, who assisted with the research for this report.

Cover photo: IDPs with disabilities face huge challenges in Ukraine. Courtesy of NGO Helping to Leave.

This report is available online at humanrightsfirst.org