

# Making Accommodations

The legal profession should do a better job supporting attorneys with disabilities.

WRITTEN BY HANNAH CRAMER

I recently attended my first in-person hearing since February 2020. None of my clothes fit, but not for the reason you might think.

Allow me to elaborate. I was diagnosed with Crohn's disease in high school. In September 2021, I had a Crohn's-related surgery that resulted in an unfortunate and life-changing complication. I woke up with an ostomy bag. An ostomy is a bag attached to your stomach into which you expel waste because your intestines don't work. What was supposed to be a two-week medical leave turned into three months of on-and-off leave with multiple emergency room visits.

I feel like I came back to work in a different body. When I passed the Texas bar exam in 2019, I had lived with Crohn's disease for more than 10 years. I learned to always have safe food with me in case I became fatigued. I knew to spot the nearest bathroom as soon as I walked into a new building. I knew how to succeed while keeping my disease invisible, and in return, very few of my professional colleagues knew about my diagnosis. As I was preparing for my first in-person hearing (post-pandemic and post-surgery—basically, a different world), I knew I could not continue surviving under the radar.

I needed to ask for an accommodation from the court. I emailed the court and opposing counsel to request a bathroom accommodation. It was very intimidating, and somewhat embarrassing, to ask a judge for a pre-scheduled bathroom break, especially considering the adversarial nature of the legal profession. Some of my opposing counsels are routinely aggressive due to my age and gender, and this intensified the insecurities I had about my new medical device. I did not receive a response to my accommodations request.

I have advised many clients on how to ask for reasonable accommodations in school and work settings. I learned the hard way that asking for an accommodation is easier

advised than done. I will remember my personal experience the next time I advise a client to “just ask for an accommodation.”

This led me to question what other lawyers with ostomies do. I asked mentors, friends, and colleagues to help me find another lawyer with an ostomy. I wanted the camaraderie, and I wanted to brainstorm ideas on accessibility. Although our search efforts were unsuccessful, I learned that there are other experiences that require similar accommodations. For example, pumping breast milk and injecting insulin.

It is hard for me to believe that I could be the only Texas attorney with an ostomy. This leads me to believe either the legal profession is not accommodating to people with medical devices, or that attorneys are so afraid to share their experience—they worry it may be seen as a weakness—that they end up suffering in silence.

As a profession, we must do better to support attorneys with disabilities. You never know what your colleague across the aisle, across the hall, or across the country might be dealing with. Although our disabilities may not be visible, we appreciate your willingness to accommodate our medical needs, whether at trial, in the office, or during a virtual meeting.

Our profession is one that helps and advocates for our clients—we should also help those within the profession by making it more accessible. **TBJ**



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