

# MUHSEN TOOLKIT

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**MUHSEN.org**



# What MUHSEN Does

Disability affects millions of people in the world today, with numbers that are only growing. Today we are here for our loved ones living with disabilities, but tomorrow we may not be. Our aim is to establish an inclusive and accessible environment for persons with disabilities by assuming an active role in advocacy and education

We provide a range of programs and services across North America to improve the experience within mosques, and engender positive communities for those with disabilities.

## MUHSEN Masjid Certification

We are the unique organization in North America who certifies masjids by ensuring they meet all needs and criteria for disabilities.

## MUHSEN Service Certification

MUHSEN also qualifies organizations & services across North America to help meet the needs of those living with disabilities.

## MUHSEN Respite Care

MUHSEN provides short-term care visits for primary caregivers to take a break from their daily responsibilities.

## MUHSEN Weekend School

We offer educational experiences using exclusive curriculum and specialized materials to help students grow in their Deen.

## MUHSEN Support Groups

Moderated by licensed social workers/therapists, MUHSEN provides an understanding environment for people to find support.

## MUHSEN Adult Day Program

This is the first of its kind program catering to young adults with special needs who share universal values.

## MUHSEN Convention Services

MUHSEN volunteers provide a large range of disability services for everyone to be able to attend conventions.

## MUHSEN Umrah Trip

MUHSEN facilitates an Umrah partnered with Dar El Salam customized for the needs of families living with disabilities.

*Additionally MUHSEN also assumes an active role in advocacy, education, training, workshops, arranging Braille Qurans and ASL services, and educational and recreational activities & events.*

For all general inquiries contact: [info@muhsen.org](mailto:info@muhsen.org)



# Blueprint for a Better Masjid

## NECESSITIES:

- ADA Compliance will be required, including but not limited to accessible parking spaces, wheelchair ramps, doorways, restrooms, etc.
- Safe and accessible entries and exits (and plans) for emergency situations

## OFTEN OVERLOOKED BUT MEANINGFUL CONSIDERATIONS:

- Ensuring safe accessibility for all entrances including women's section
- Wudu area accessibility in men's and women's restrooms including large sinks and/or foot washing area, hoses, safety bars, etc.
- Quiet room - space for special care during events
- Playground/outside area school accessible with safe and adaptive equipment
- Masjid communication on display screens that includes closed captioning
- Signs and room numbers designated with Braille
- Designated classroom space for special needs class in weekend Islamic school program
- Elevator access for multiple stories
- Ramps/tile for ease of entering musallah/prayer area
- Allowance of wheelchairs/strollers/push chairs to be rolled directly onto prayer area (tiled or carpeted)
- Larger family restroom for families with special needs
- Lifts and ramps to access all areas of general assembly (ie stage, elevated platforms, etc.)



Is your masjid MUHSEN-certified? Check our list of certified masajid, or request MUHSEN Masjid Certification completely free of cost: [muhsen.org/muhsen-masjid-certification/](https://muhsen.org/muhsen-masjid-certification/)



# MUHSEN Resource Guide for Best Practices at Events, Classes, Dinners, Conferences and Conventions

This resource guide is intended to comprehensively assist organizers and community leaders in event planning. Below is a list of practices that are approved and endorsed by MUHSEN in order to facilitate inclusion and accommodation at events for individuals and families living with disabilities.

- Accommodations for separate registration or check-in lines to avoid long wait times
- Nearby accessible parking accommodations
- Ample aisle space in halls/venues to maneuver wheelchairs in and out
- Sign Language Interpreter for programs
- Accessible seating near front and sides of hall with ease of access
- Front of hall reserved, designated seating specifically for guests who are Deaf to see ASL Interpreter
- Ramp/lifts/elevators provided throughout venue as appropriate including the stage
- Specialized childcare arrangements for children with disabilities provided by capable, trained volunteers
- Captions on media/videos shown where ASL Interpreter is not available
- Ushering for guests with special needs
- Gentle reminders to those attending (participants, volunteers, presenters) to be respectful, compassionate and helpful to those guests with special needs at all times



## Need help getting started?

Contact our Travel & Events Coordinator at [travel@muhsen.org](mailto:travel@muhsen.org)





# Suggested Topics for Discussions about Disabilities (1 of 2)

These are suggestions and tips for discussions submitted by parents, caregivers and volunteers who would appreciate this dialogue in the community. These are thoughtful contributions to consider, but there are many more possibilities that can be discussed and lead to meaningful conversations and interactions inshaAllah.

- Consider the Islamic perspective on disabilities and varying ability levels—that everybody is a beautiful creation of the Beautiful Creator.
- The Ummah's obligation to care for others in whichever way we are able to.
- Consider the access and inclusion to masjids that we all have and take for granted—wanting and providing that same access and inclusion for brothers and sisters with disabilities.
- Reminder to not take our own health and wellness for granted, as it is an enormous blessing from Allah (swt) and could drastically change at any moment leading to accessibility needs where there wasn't before.
- As a community, we must think about easing the path (figuratively and literally) for others.
- We must not forget our elders as aging-related disability and caring for our parents and grandparents as they grow older is a duty, obligation and privilege.
- Community leaders should try to give practical advice to inspire change.
- A Muslim should want to help anyone who is in need, not just special needs in particular.
- We must think of the next generation of Muslims and talk about inclusion in Masjid to Muslim youth and community groups.
- Practically point to specific examples of when to help special needs families feel included—Eid and Taraweeh Salat accommodations lend toward a true feeling of community.
- Accommodation can be served through financial and emotional means:

**For more MUHSEN accessibility resources:**  
Visit [muhsen.org/muhsen-accessibility-center/](https://muhsen.org/muhsen-accessibility-center/)



# Suggested Topics for Discussions about Disabilities (2 of 2)

emphasizing the fact that to give not just monetarily but also of your time.

- The importance of helping individuals in our own community. If we want to strengthen as a Muslim community in the US, we must support locally as well as internationally.
- Call out to the families of those with disabilities and encourage them to PLEASE come to the masjid. It's very important that these families come out especially if these services and accommodations are being provided and they are welcomed.
- We must address the way some people think of disability. We need action but before that we must change our perspective in order to act effectively.
- Disability is NOT a “punishment”... it is NOT something that needs to be hidden.... it is NOT something that cannot happen to or affect you.
- Sensitivity is not only looking at someone and saying “Alhamdulillah I don't have that disability” but rather acknowledging that people with disabilities and special needs have so much to offer as well.



**For more MUHSEN accessibility resources:**  
Visit [muhsen.org/muhsen-accessibility-center/](https://muhsen.org/muhsen-accessibility-center/)



# How to Create a More Accessible MSA/Youth Group Through Programming

## 1) Host disability awareness events

- a) General awareness on disabilities
- b) Islamic awareness on disabilities from the Quran and sunnah
- c) Lead a khutbah with the topic of disability

## 2) Host events specifically for individuals with special needs

- a) Cultivate a community of support
- b) Support group for people with special needs or siblings with a licensed therapist

## 3) Sensitivity and inclusivity training for board members and volunteers

- a) Contact [info@muhsen.org](mailto:info@muhsen.org) to book this training

## 4) Provide closed captioning services on media & videos

## 5) Provide ASL at events

- a) Contact [accessibility@muhsen.org](mailto:accessibility@muhsen.org) to book an ASL interpreter in your area

## 6) Participate in local community service or advocacy events

## 7) Provide special accommodations for events, salah, etc

- a) Reserved seating
- b) Wide accessible aisles
- c) Ushering available

## 8) Create anonymous polling for individuals with disabilities

- a) Learn the special needs that should be met in your community
- b) Craft events around those needs



## Need help getting started?

Contact [info@muhsen.org](mailto:info@muhsen.org) with all your questions & concerns



# MUHSEN Contact Sheet



**Joohi Tahir**  
Co Founder & Executive Director  
joohi@muhsen.org



**Ayah Hamdan**  
Day Program Coordinator  
dayprogram@muhsen.org



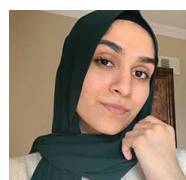
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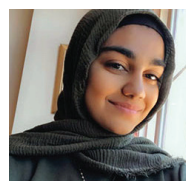
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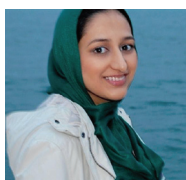
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For all general inquiries contact: [info@muhsen.org](mailto:info@muhsen.org)





# Current Board/Advisors

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## DR OMAR SULEIMAN

FOUNDER

AFFILIATIONS: MUHSEN/Yaqeen

Imam Omar Suleiman is the Founder of MUHSEN and Founder and President of the Yaqeen Institute for Islamic Research, and an Adjunct Professor of Islamic Studies in the Graduate Liberal Studies Program at SMU (Southern Methodist University).

He is also the Resident Scholar at Valley Ranch Islamic Center and Co-Chair Emeritus of Faith Forward Dallas at Thanks-Giving Square.



## JOOHI TAHIR

Co-Founder/Executive Director

AFFILIATIONS: MUHSEN

As a graduate from Boston University with a degree in Business Management, and having spent over 20 years excelling in the corporate world, speaking globally about strategies in the Marketing field in the UK, Saudi Arabia, Dubai, Malaysia, and Turkey, Joohi turned her talents to become a national advocate for Muslims with Disabilities. This led to her involvement in Co Founding and appointment as Executive Director of Muslims Understanding & Helping Special Education Needs (MUHSEN).

MUHSEN is a revolutionary non-profit founded by Shaykh Omar Suleiman. In consult with Shaykh Omar, Joohi laid out, planned and built the organizational Programs and Services which we now know as MUHSEN. With her own family being affected by disability, Joohi has been outspoken over the past 15 years specifically about the need for inclusion for her daughter who is on the Autism Spectrum. She started with small community initiatives, talks, support groups, consulting with masjid administrators and mainstream scholars about the need for our communities to be more aware and be made more accessible for people in our community with disabilities.

As a leader of this organization, Joohi advocates and markets the needs for which MUHSEN implements programs and services across N. America promoting inclusion of all members of the community impacted by special needs through awareness, accommodation and acceptance. She has been a recipient of the MWA 2015 Inspiring Women's Award and Top 7 Muslim American Women to Celebrate 2017.

For all general inquiries contact: [info@muhsen.org](mailto:info@muhsen.org)



## Current Board/Advisors

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### DILSHAD ALI

BOARD MEMBER

AFFILIATIONS: MUHSEN/Haute Hijab/Virginia Autism Project

Dilshad Ali is The Haute Take's Blog Editor and Content Editor. She is an award-winning journalist and editor spanning two decades of covering of Muslims in America for various media outlets, including The New York Times, The Atlantic, Religion News Service, IslamOnline.net, Newsweek, Nieman Reports, Azizah Magazine, Illume Magazine, Islamica Magazine and Beliefnet.

Prior to HH, Dilshad was the managing editor of Patheos Muslim and the editor of Altmuslim, a microsite at Patheos, where she managed a team of columnists, contributors and bloggers, as well as writing on the intersection of faith, family and autism at The Muslimah Next Door.



### SALMAN FAIZ

BOARD MEMBER

AFFILIATIONS: MUHSEN/Optiv Inc

Salman has been an active volunteer on the Muhsen team since 2015. In addition to working with Muhsen, he has and continues to help other non-profit Islamic organizations within the spheres of strategic directives planning and implementation, event management and coordination, and donor relations.

Salman graduated from the University of Illinois at Chicago (UIC) and currently works in the field of Cybersecurity. In his pastime, he enjoys spending time with family and various outdoor activities



### OMER ZAMAN

BOARD MEMBER

AFFILIATIONS: MUHSEN

Brother Omer Zaman has been an active volunteer on the Muhsen team since 2015. He was diagnosed with a form of muscular dystrophy in 2003, known as miyoshi myopathy. This particular dystrophy is known as a distal muscular dystrophy impacting his arms and legs, which has ultimately led to the use of a wheelchair.

Since his diagnosis, Omer has gone on to complete his education with a bachelor's in finance from DePaul University, is currently working in corporate America and most importantly, he is a father of two boys and has been married for over 15 years.

For all general inquiries contact: [info@muhsen.org](mailto:info@muhsen.org)



# Current Board/Advisors

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## RANA OTTALLAH

BOARD MEMBER

A single parent of four children, disability advocate at a local and national level:

- . first Muslim American to serve as a commissioner for the deaf appointed by Louisiana Governor John Bell Edwards.
- . a board member of MUHSEN and Louisiana Chapter Lead, also serves as a board member on several disability and advocacy organization boards
- . a leading force behind legislation to improve services for Deaf and Hard of hearing and Deaf Blind students
- . a strong advocate for disability services, Equal and language access for students and parents with different abilities and racial, ethnic and religious backgrounds



## DR AHMAD JABBAR

BOARD MEMBER

Dr. Jabbar is a practicing interventional cardiologist in New Orleans, LA. He is a native of New Orleans and loves serving his community. Besides treating patients with heart disease, he has a special interest in meditation and stress relief for improving health. He has always had a passion for assisting Muslims with special needs dating back to his childhood. His favorite memory as a teenager was helping walk his blind great uncle to Friday prayer every week while living in Palestine.



## TAYYAB YUNUS

ADVISOR

AFFILIATIONS: Intuitive IT Solutions, Inc.

Fueled by his life's mission to improve the human condition, Tayyab has been providing strategic guidance to both Profit and Non-profit organizations for over 20 years. Tayyab is an expert at "getting things done" with excellence by creating strategy around a shared vision, assembling champion lead teams, driving innovation, facilitating execution, and empowering tactics for any size job.

Tayyab is the founder and CEO of Intuitive Solutions, a Global People > Profit Company (est 2002). He is the President of the Center on Muslim Philanthropy and Adjunct Faculty at Indiana University's The Fund Raising School at Lilly Family School of Philanthropy.

For all general inquiries contact: [info@muhsen.org](mailto:info@muhsen.org)



# Current Board/Advisors

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## MUFTI HUSSAIN KAMANI

### ADVISOR

Mufti Hussain Kamani was born to a Hindu revert-to-Islam and Muslim father in Elizabethtown, Kentucky. With the blessings and du'a (supplications) of his parents, Mufti Hussain Kamani underwent a journey of a lifetime in pursuit of sacred Islamic knowledge. He began his pursuit of the Islamic sciences at the young age of six to memorize the entire Quran at the acclaimed Darul Uloom Madania in Buffalo, New York. By the blessings of Allah, subhanahu wa ta'ala, he was able to complete this momentous task in 1999. Having the growing thirst to quench more knowledge, Mufti Kamani then traveled across the world to the United Kingdom to attain more advanced formal Islamic authorizations in the field of Islamic theology.

He studied at Darul Uloom Bury, the renowned seminary of the great revivalist and scholar of Hadith, Shaykh-ul-Hadith Zakariyya Kandhlawi (Rahmatullahi Alayh). Mufti Kamani completed the traditional six-year curriculum covering the Arabic language, Arabic morphology, Islamic jurisprudence, Tafseer (exegesis) of the Holy Qur'an, Hadith (Prophetic Sciences), philosophy, and Aqeedah (Islamic Creed) under the guidance of some of the pioneer scholars in England, including Shaykh Yusuf Motala, Shaykh Hashim, Shaykh Bilal and Shaykh Abdur Raheem bin Dawood amongst others. Upon graduation he was then specially selected to enter a post-graduate level course in Islamic Law and Legal Verdicts (Fatwa). He completed this course in two years and received formal authorization in it as well.

Alongside his religious studies, Mufti Kamani was blessed with having the opportunity to study the secular and academic sciences. He completed his graduate degree in Business Management from the University of Coventry in England as well.

## OTHER MUHSEN SERVICES

Request a Speaker/Service [Ex: General community awareness; Khutbah Request; Licensed Counselor/Support group; ASL Interpreter; Closed Captioning]:

**[muhsen.org/request-a-speaker-service/](https://muhsen.org/request-a-speaker-service/)**

National Resource Guide:

**[muhsen.org/national-resource-guide/](https://muhsen.org/national-resource-guide/)**

Local Certified Masajid:

**[muhsen.org/where-we-exist/](https://muhsen.org/where-we-exist/)**

Local MUHSEN Chapters:

**[muhsen.org/muhsen-chapters/](https://muhsen.org/muhsen-chapters/)**

For all general inquiries contact: [info@muhsen.org](mailto:info@muhsen.org)





# IRS Determination Letter for MUHSEN



Department of the Treasury  
Internal Revenue Service  
Tax Exempt and Government Entities  
P.O. Box 2508  
Cincinnati, OH 45201

MUHSEN  
3015 BLUESTEM CT  
NAPERVILLE, IL 60565

**Date:**  
06/16/2015  
**Employer ID Number:**  
47-3187591  
**Person to Contact:**  
Dennis C Gruesser  
ID Number: 31992  
Telephone: (877) 8295500  
**Accounting period ending:**  
December 31  
**Public charity status:**  
170 (b) (1) (A) (vi)  
**Form 990 required:**  
Yes  
**Effective date of exemption:**  
March 17, 2015  
**Contribution Deductibility:**  
Yes  
**Addendum applies:**  
No  
**DLN:**  
17053139342015

Dear Applicant:

We are pleased to inform you that upon review of your application for tax exempt status we have determined that you are exempt from Federal income tax under section 501(c) (3) of the Internal Revenue Code. Contributions to you are deductible under section 170 of the Code. You are also qualified to receive tax deductible bequests, devises, transfers or gifts under section 2055, 2106 or 2522 of the Code. Because this letter could help resolve any questions regarding your exempt status, you should keep it in your permanent records.

Organizations exempt under section 501(c) (3) of the Code are further classified as either public charities or private foundations. We determined that you are a public charity under the Code section(s) listed in the heading of this letter.

For important information about your responsibilities as a tax-exempt organization, go to [www.irs.gov/charities](http://www.irs.gov/charities). Enter "4221-PC" in the search bar to view Publication 4221-PC, Compliance Guide for 501(c) (3) Public Charities, which describes your record keeping, reporting, and disclosure requirements.

We have sent a copy of this letter to your representative as indicated in your power of attorney.

Sincerely,

Director, Exempt Organizations

For all general inquiries contact: [info@muhsen.org](mailto:info@muhsen.org)



# LEAN ON US: THE FIRST UMRAH FOR FAMILIES WITH SPECIAL NEEDS MEMBERS

altmuslimah.com

FEBRUARY 12, 2018



*altMuslimah's Zehra Rizavi recently interviewed Joohi Tahir, the Executive Director of the non-profit MUHSEN, an organization founded by Shaykh Omar Suleiman that advocates for families and individuals in Muslim American communities with special needs members. A few weeks ago, MUHSEN launched an endeavor never before undertaken by any other Muslim American organization- taking a group of families with children, as well as adults, who have disabilities for Umrah.*

## **Tell us a bit about yourself. How did you become Executive Director of MUHSEN?**

Let me start at the beginning. Very simply, I never had to think about disability for most of my life, that is, until my second daughter was diagnosed with autism at the age of two. Around the very same time, my dear mother, who was an active and vibrant woman, suddenly woke up one morning to fall out of bed, unable to move properly. The doctors diagnosed her with partial paralysis caused by an inoperable brain tumor. She passed away five months later at the age of 59.

It was at this time in my life that I came to intimately know disability. I watched my precious daughter, now

showing classic symptoms of autism, such as loss of speech, avoidance of eye contact and a decline in socialization, and my dear mother, with her concurrent loss of mobility, independence and speech both become increasingly dependent on their family. It was a painful and abrupt introduction to the world of disability.

It was years later, in 2012, when my husband and I were performing hajj in a group led by Shaykh Omar Suleiman, where I came to the realization that Allah plans our each and every turn in life with loving meticulousness. I unburdened myself to Shaykh Omar, sharing our challenges as parents to a child with autism, when it came to accessing the community and masjid. As an outspoken advocate of special needs individuals (you don't come across many people in the Muslim community willing to share their family struggles with candor), I had spoken over the years with other mothers and at small events about how unwelcome and isolated families like ours felt.

I hoped Shaykh Omar would use his platform as a community leader to help families like mine become more fully integrated into the community. He listened

**For more updates and news from MUHSEN visit:**  
[muhsen.org/our-stories/](http://muhsen.org/our-stories/)



attentively and, having lived with a mother who had suffered from hearing and speech disabilities due to an illness, he felt special empathy for this cause. True to his word, he supported my strategic plan to help families who have members with disabilities gain more access to their community events and mosques. Thus, several months later MUHSEN was launched: Muslims Helping and Understand Special Education Needs. Alhumdulillah.



**One of the major services MUHSEN provides is organizing Umrahs for families with special needs children. How did the non-profit decide on offering this particular service?**

December 2017 was our first ever MUHSEN Umrah. Whether we provide a welcoming space at a masjid, a convention, a dinner or at Eid prayer, those with disabilities deserve to feel a spiritual connection and a sense of community belonging just as much as anyone else. We knew that MUHSEN would need to provide access and support in everyday tasks for these individuals, but that even more support would be needed if these families were to perform Umrah. Having taken my daughter to Umrah years prior, I knew what a spiritually uplifting, calming and amazing experience it had been for her and our entire family, and I wanted that for everyone. Many of the blessed people who live with family members with disabilities long for the chance to perform Umrah or Hajj, but shy away from traditional groups fearing judgment and a lack of supports for their loved ones. MUHSEN wanted to change that.

**Tell us about the umrah that MUHSEN staff and families performed?**

MUHSEN partnered with the Dar el Salam Travel to provide a guided umrah trip for eight nights for a total of 58 individuals. These people joined us from across the country-Texas, New York, Florida and more. Our attendees had a range of disabilities including, down

syndrome, autism, hearing impairment, seizure disorder, intellectual disability and Prader-Willi syndrome. Each family was assigned a trained MUHSEN volunteer. The volunteer members of #TeamMUHSEN were chosen specifically for this trip and had prior experience working with special needs individuals. MUHSEN made sure to have these volunteers, including the spiritual guides, go through sensitivity training as well as emergency medical and CPR training prior to the trip. From the start of the trip, each volunteer was assigned to one specific family.

For the Umrah itself, we split into two groups, with each group performing the Umrah at the same time but in different locations and led by different scholars. One group performed the Umrah in the area directly around the Kaabah, while the other fulfilled the rituals in the wheelchair and stroller-accessible outer level. In fact, some parents were given the opportunity to be in the first group because their selfless volunteers agreed to take the children with wheelchairs up onto the second level for the moms and dads. The three spiritual leaders who traveled with us guided each group on the rituals and requirements of the Umrah with direction on steps, duas and significance. These were some of the most compassionate, kind leaders you will find in our generation mash'Allah. The feedback from those who attended was outstanding, the group was full to capacity and many have reached out to join our next Umrah, in shaa Allah next year.



**What was the most challenging part of the Umrah and what was the most surprising?**

The most challenging part of the Umrah was that this being MUHSEN's first one, we simply could not anticipate every need that would arise. When taking people of all ages and disabilities, some mobile, some less mobile, some verbal, some non-verbal, some children, some adults, it is impossible to predict how any one of these attendees will respond to the conditions,

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the surroundings, the fatigue, lights, and crowds. All in all, the flexibility, resourcefulness and compassion of the volunteers, who knew they were there solely to facilitate and make this an easy, memorable journey for the families, helped ease this process for everyone.

What was surprising to us all, was how well everyone responded and worked together. What was once a group of strangers flying to the same destination became a family. We paired volunteers and families, who then spoke to one another before the trip, but it was only when everyone assembled together in Istanbul did we almost immediately form a bond born of our collective mission.

#### How does one become a volunteer/helper on future Umrahs?

People from across the country who are interested in volunteering for MUHSEN in any capacity—for future Umrahs or otherwise—can sign up to volunteer on our website: [www.muhsen.org](http://www.muhsen.org). We will train them where they live. Volunteers are also needed for events, conventions, weekend school programs designed specifically to serve our community members with disabilities and so much more.

#### Can readers donate to financially support these Umrahs and where?

Yes, we are a registered non-profit organization (501 c3) that depends on the generosity of donors to serve a marginalized segment of the Muslim American community. Donations can be made at <https://muhsen.org/donate/>

#### Can you tell us about the projects and services your non-profit offers apart from an annual Umrah?

Well, MUHSEN guides and certifies mosques around the country in becoming accessible and welcoming for those with disabilities. We also advocate on behalf of families, training others on how to be sensitive to and inclusive of families with members with special needs. We provide weekend classes adapted for children with special needs. MUHSEN also provides ASL interpreters, Braille Qur'ans, matrimonial services, support groups, all of which cater to children and adults with disabilities. We are currently developing a Respite Care Program, among our many other projects, which allows caregivers to take a break from their caregiving duties, whether they go out to lunch, take a nap or go to an event, while we care for their loved one. Our long term goal is to provide Day Programs for Muslims with disabilities who are unable to work or attend higher education programs. Our goal is to offer in a safe, structured environment for these individuals that includes functional training and socialization for them and potentially even residences for those who cannot live independently who need care provided in harmony with their Muslim faith.



*Zehra Rizavi is Managing Editor for altMuslimah.*

**For more updates and news from MUHSEN visit:**  
[muhsen.org/our-stories/](http://muhsen.org/our-stories/)





# ACCOMMODATING DISABILITIES: NO MUSLIM LEFT BEHIND

CIOGC Newspaper

APRIL 08, 2016



No Muslim Left Behind, what does that really mean? To a large group of Muslims with disabilities and their families living in North America, it means that they want to be included in their communities.

When asked, a mother with tears in her eyes after Eid Salat in the Western Suburbs, stated that this had been the first time in 15 years that she was able to pray in a masjid on the day of Eid. This is something many families take for granted as they enjoy family time and celebrate with their communities on every Holiday. It was by Allah's Mercy and the help of MUHSEN (Muslims Understanding & Helping Special Education Needs) volunteers, that this mother of two grown Special Needs children, was able to have the help and assistance she needed to attend Eid prayers.

Launched just over a year ago and founded by prominent Scholar Sheikh Omar Suleiman, MUHSEN set out to remove many Muslim families. Whether physical, neurological, or emotional, many disabilities cause one to be unable to access certain events and situations if supports are not present. In addition, if the general community members themselves are not educated or aware, that often causes one to feel unwelcome.

One major initiative this year is the Masjid Certification Program whereby masajid nationwide can work with MUHSEN to enable their centers to become more

welcoming for members with disabilities, young and old. Various criteria points must be met in order to receive certification in areas such as Masjid Accessibility in Prayer and Wudu areas, Specialized Childcare for events, Braille Qurans and Youth Training to name a few. In an effort to start this, many local area masajid are making strides.

In March, MCC Youth Council, Sisters Steppin' Up, and MUHSEN held a Youth Training session on 'Dealings and Interactions with people with Disabilities'. This type of program has been successful in building relationships among our youth with sensitivity and creating friendships for some children who are often isolated.

Another Masjid Certification goal has been to start the creation of Special Needs Classes in our Islamic Weekend Schools. Here, students with disabilities have specialized curricula, materials to support their learning style and one on one instruction. To date, there are two such classes up and running in Chicagoland every week: Al Falah Academy, Naperville and Muslim Leadership Academy, Villa Park, IL, both of whom are part of CIOGC member organizations ICN and IFS.

Islam teaches us that these individuals with disabilities are signs from Allah (SWT) and are placed among us to test us and remind us to be grateful and of His Power and Mercy, that He is able to do all things.

MUHSEN will be busy during Autism awareness month as they participate in the Chicago Autism Walk on the Lakefront on Saturday, May 14, 2016. Team MUHSEN was the 3rd largest team last year and was given recognition.

Joohi Tahir is the Executive Director of MUHSEN. She is a former Marketing Executive who has always had a personal passion to advocate for Muslims with Disabilities, as a mother of a child with a disability

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# MUHSEN AND REMOSQUE-ING INDIVIDUALS AND FAMILIES WITH SPECIAL NEEDS

patheos.com

AUGUST 28, 2014



Sure enough, they start to stare. Even more than the children, it's the adults who are staring. Sadly, this is a typical reaction to individuals with disabilities who "dare" to enter our mosques. It's not that they've never seen a person with special needs individual before—they surely have. It's that fear, that uncertainty, of what to say, what to do with them.

This is the reality that so many special needs families have experienced themselves or have heard about, causing the majority to stay away. Isn't the mosque meant to be the center of the community, or so it was hundreds of years ago? A meeting place, a place for connecting and making friends as well as for worshiping. Today in America, Muslims with special needs and their families find themselves much farther away from this notion and plagued with a feeling of alienations, loneliness and despair.

Our families with "special" loved ones deserve to have access to faith, we all do—but especially these precious "People of Jannah," who pure and many sinless, unaccountable, as once described by one of our scholars (Sh. Omar Suleiman). Why should others judge the way dabbled individuals worship? Why should their faith be made to feel insignificant? They should be welcomed with a smile, a greeting of salaam (peace) and made to feel comfortable.

## Why does it matter?

Because families are suffering and individuals with special needs are not getting the support they should. As a mother of three daughters, one of whom is on the autism spectrum and is non-verbal, displaying many outward characteristics of the disorder, our family is unable to enjoy family time at the mosque. What if she acts out? Makes loud vocalizations or gets hyper and runs around? Why don't the other kids/youth volunteers want to help out with her? How will we concentrate on our salat (prayers)? What about a community dinner or fundraiser? Where will she sit? Who will watch out for her?

These events are all off our radar, making us unMosqued to a great degree.

## Why Special Needs Families Become UnMosqued

I realized quite recently, when trying to form a parent support group in my area for parents of special needs kids, that most of them did not strive to be a part of the masjid. Each of them had had an unpleasant experience in the past and were not made to feel welcome. Therefore, they never returned. They simply had no place for the mosque in their lives, and an ideal mosque didn't exist.

My unpleasant experience took place when my daughter was eight years old. We took her to a Hajj program that other children had put together. That evening, another mother who sat nearby keenly observed my daughter, and her reactions to my sweet, smiling, peaceful child was to move her daughter away—as if to move her from harm, from something contagious she would catch. Is this Islam, folks? And, if these are our adults, what hope do we have for their kids?

After that experience, my daughter, who is now 14, hardly returned to the community mosque.

Is awareness the answer? Yes, in part along with a great deal of education about what our faith teaches us about inclusion, kindness and these special beloved individuals to God. More than ever, we should study other faiths and how they are embracing this population with special

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services and caretakers and respite help in their houses of worship and Sunday Schools.

There are many good ideas passed around, but in my experience, they are not implemented. Many are well-intended, but disability inclusion is not taken seriously and is not a priority in our mosques today. All it takes is dedication and love.

### **Planting the Seeds**

With this in mind, I am proud to be part of a new organization called MUHSEN (Muslims United for Handicap and Special Education Needs) founded by Sh. Omar Suleiman, scholar, director and instructor from Dallas, Texas (ILF Texas, Al Maghrib). Sh. Omar has a vision and passion for the way model mosques should be—a welcoming “special friendly” place.

If an individual is affected by a disability, whether emotional, physical or neurological, the challenges and difficulties are felt first by them, and then all those around them—family, siblings, friends and the community at large. This platform will, insha’ Allah, help to include all these people and reMosque them.

MUHSEN will strive to advocate, educate, train, and implement programs and services nationwide to improve access to mosques for these individuals as well as acceptance and inclusion by the community in all aspects of their daily lives. Implementation is needed, not just awareness.

MUHSEN will work to lead in creating a better understanding of disabilities in our communities and building a better future for individuals with special needs—where they are welcome, all their needs are addressed and they are accepted by all. Individuals with disabilities are growing in numbers, and we are in denial if we believe that it does not affect us. Childhood disorders and illnesses are at an all-time high, affecting millions, Muslims included.

MUHSEN plans to develop programs to train youth to become peer buddies, closed captioning displays for the hearing impaired, “quiet” rooms for sensory issues and counseling and support groups by trained professionals. We hope to see a day when we can even have job training and our dear family members can be hired within the community as working, contributing members of our society.

Down the road, residential facilities caring for the “Muslim” specific needs, including halal foods and

environments, will be key as the Muslim special needs population ages.

MUHSEN will be launched officially at the ISNA Convention in Detroit, a revolutionary idea for our North African mosques. Will your mosque be MUHSEN friendly?

To learn more or to volunteer, contact us at [info@muhsen.org](mailto:info@muhsen.org). Visit <https://www.facebook.com/MUHSENOrg/> for more information.

Joohi Tahir is the executive director of MUHSEN and a vice president at Crescent Foods. The founder of MUHSEN is Sh. Omar Suleiman.

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# HAJJ 2014—NEVER SAY NEVER: UMRAH WITH OUR AUTISTIC DAUGHTER

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This article is part of Patheos Muslim's and Altmuslim's Hajj 2014 reflection series, which is focusing on the good, the difficult and everything in between about the holy days of Dhul Hijjah, the Hajj pilgrimage and Eid ul Adha, the second major holiday for Muslims. Although this post is about an Umrah trip, it ties into the spirit of the Hajj.

Editor's Note: This post is written by my friend and guest writer, Joohi Tahir, about the Umrah she and her family did a few years back. Joohi's daughter is autistic and nonverbal like my son, Lil D. Travel, especially via airplane, is tough with Lil D, and I've often thought that if I'm ever to subject him to long-distance airline travel again, it will only be to perform Umrah. Reading this piece and the determination of Joohi and her husband to take their whole family for Umrah, including their special needs daughter, touched me in a way that is indescribable. May Allah swt bless all those who have done Hajj and/or Umrah and who are doing so this year. May all our prayers be accepted.

By Joohi Tahir:  
When you've tried every imaginable treatment and

therapy available, you know you want the best for your child and are not willing to give up. Our "special" children, those with special needs, are even higher on the priority list when you have to search high and low for the long-awaited cure that you believe is out there. Well, in our family's case, we never say "never".

After a 15 month stint with a treatment in Dallas, a thousand miles away from home, to help our 12-year-old daughter, Mehreen with her symptoms of autism, I thought to myself, we must have tried everything – why aren't we getting those results that we pray for. Then suddenly I saw things in a new light. The BEST therapy for Mehreen was going to the Kaabah. That was it; it became so clear at that moment — that through all those years of trying treatments and tons of prayers, why had we not considered the best therapy of all? A visit to the house of Allah.

My husband and I had often talked about Hajj, and how we yearned to go. And it was always followed by, but who would watch our daughter, Mehreen, how would we leave her? Should one of us go first and then the other later? Overall, we thought taking her there would

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be impossible and when discussing the idea with others, they agreed — it would indeed be next to impossible. We never even gave Umrah a second thought until that moment.

After all, most children on the autism spectrum cannot handle crowds, noise, unfamiliar surroundings, long plane rides and anything out of their normal routine and comfort zone – going to Umrah would not involve one of these factors, but almost all of them. But, I had made my mind up – this was going to be the ultimate family trip. We really needed to do this, and Allah (SWT) was going to make it possible for us and help us all the way through inshaAllah. If you think about it, what better way to pray for anything, but to go to Makkah and pour your heart out? I wanted my daughter to be able to experience such a blessed place with us.

### Allah Makes it Easy

Every step of this journey became easy for us from the minute we decided to go. We had all the support materials and prepping done, even to the point of showing Mehreen YouTube clips of tawaaf (circling around the Kaabah) and what to expect, so that she knew what we would be doing. We even had her teacher make PECS (picture exchange communication system) cards and a schedule of actions, like salaah (prayer), airplane, hotel and the Kaabah. Once we arrived in Makkah, we noticed all the miracles beginning to unfold – tentative at every point, yet filled with strong iman and hope.

Never say never.

Outside Masjid al Haram, after a 30 hour journey, it was 1 a.m. the night we arrived, Mehreen tugged at our hands. (We never would let go of her hand, as she tends to take off if given the chance. We could not lose her at Umrah.) She started tugging and pulling us toward the entrance door and was anxious to get inside as we stood outside admiring the beauty of the masjid. Once in front of the awe-inspiring Kaabah, Mehreen lit up, she smiled with wonder and was ready. Our hearts were beating with excitement while at the same time uncertainty about what this experience would hold in store for us.

As we had strategized, my husband and I placed Mehreen in the middle and flanked her front and back so that we could keep track of her in the crowds during tawaaf. If the unthinkable happened and we lost her, she would not be able to communicate or find her way back to us or the hotel – she is, after all, non-verbal. We arranged for our other two daughters to be with

family members we were with and in their protection, so that we could focus on keeping Mehreen safe and comfortable.

Her eyes constantly looked up at the sky, never moving her sight for a moment. She complied and walked the entire seven rounds of tawaaf with us, never moving her sight from the sky with that amazing smile on her face. What was she looking at? I kept checking – I saw nothing. I kept making du'a and quietly continued whispering words of dhikr in her ear. Mehreen was more than content and had made a spiritual connection I could not explain. She even laughed and giggled; she was happy and loved the rhythmic movement of the thousands of fellow pilgrims. Those that passed by and saw her felt compelled to smile and touch her head as if to want to be a part of her experience. There was an aura about her, mashaAllah that I will never forget.

Once tawaaf was done and we had all completed the other rites, including drinking Zam Zam and praying two rakats by Muqaam-e-Ibrahim. Then we started towards Mount Safa to walk between Safa and Marwah seven times. I recall praying while locking my arm in hers to prevent her from wandering off. Mehreen, as enthusiastic as ever, not tired, and ready for another incredible experience. She did all the trips back and forth, never taking a break, never losing her energy. I can't say how relieved I was. W

We did it, we actually performed Umrah with her – Alhumdulillah!

The entire trip was a blessing – we took a chance, and Allah never let us down. We prayed before we left, and amidst all our reservations, I wondered how I would perform my own Umrah. All I knew was that if Mehreen got to go there and was OK, I would be happy and that type of ibaadat (worship) and that taking care of her would be enough for me. This experience was so memorable for the entire family that we often talk about going back again all together. All the “what ifs” are gone, and we know it was the best decision ever – Allah's infinite mercy and blessings were with us and still are always.

### Trust in Allah

The lessons learned were that if you put your trust in Allah, anything is possible. Mehreen often asks to go to the Kaabah – she pulls out her picture cards and insists on going back again. For years, Mehreen has understood the concept of submission in our faith – she joins in with us at times in salaah and prostrates, saying “Allahu Akbar”. She calls out “Bismillahir Rahmanir Raheem” at times when struggling, never being taught

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to do this except when eating as we teach small children.

She calls her Lord – it's in her Fitrah to call to her Creator. Mehreen is an eternal reminder that our love for Allah is innate, it is in all of us and the need to worship, each in our individual way, is deep in our souls. We saw that in her connection during tawaaf, her wonderment and amazement. Even while in Madinah, Mehreen was restless one night and couldn't sleep, a little upset. We showed her the Kaabah on the live streaming TV in the hotel, and in that surreal moment she immediately calmed down at the beautiful site, subhanAllah.

These things cannot be explained except for attributed to the Divine plan. To this day, she watches the live feed from Makkah often. A peace comes over her that I cannot describe.

Having just performed our long awaited Hajj this past year with my husband, Alhumdulillah, I felt that peace we all do when blessed with the opportunity to worship there and focus purely on our ibadat with no worldly distractions.

Remember, Mehreen taught us a lesson: Never say never.



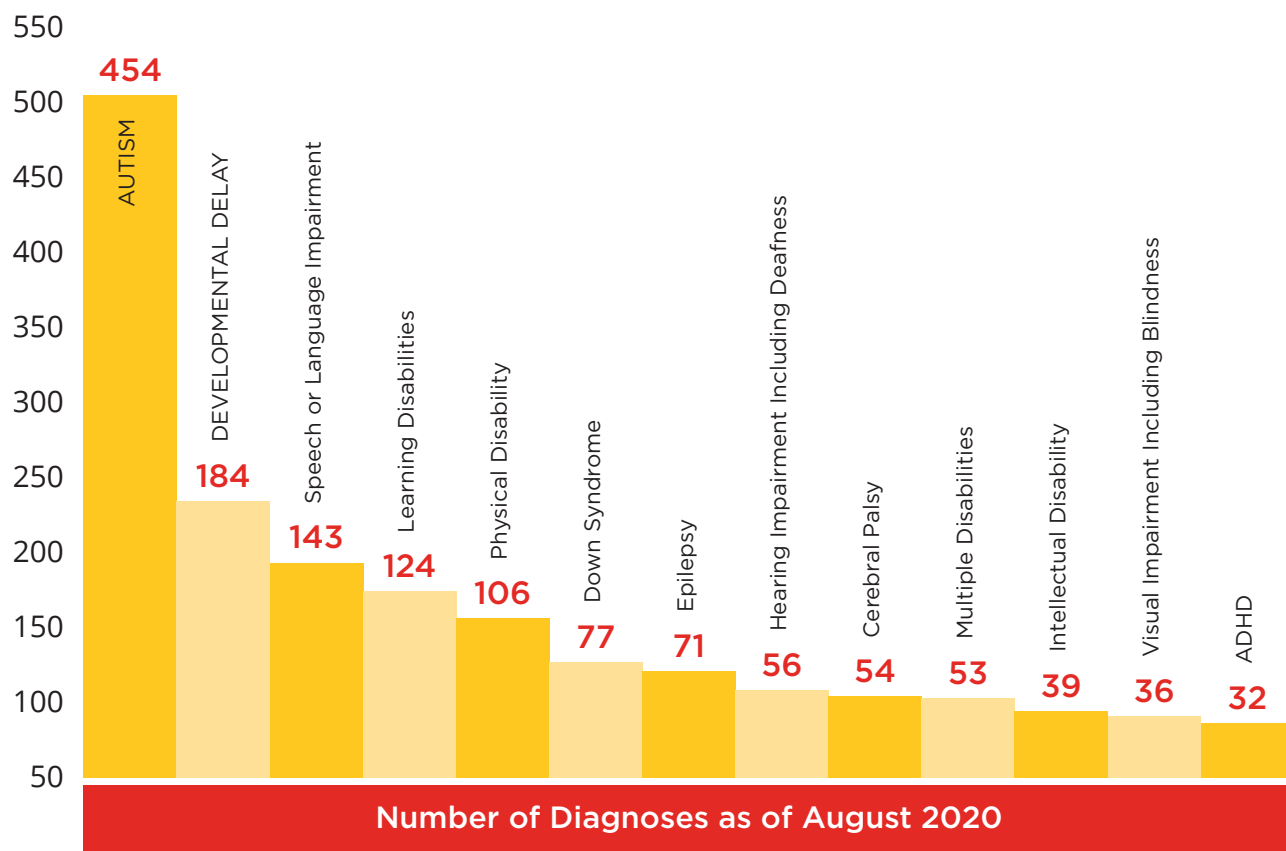
Joohi Tahir is a mother of three girls living the Chicago area, she works in the Halal Industry as well as leads Sh. Omar Suleiman's newly launched non-profit organization for Muslims with Disabilities, MUHSEN.

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# MUHCEN NEEDS SURVEY REPORT

MUHCEN is proud to announce the official release of our Needs Research Report. We have collected data from over 900+ participants living with disabilities in North America, as part of our initiative to improve lives for those living with disabilities. We've invested in research that locates areas of need in order to inform the work we do, and ensure that we meet present and future needs of this community.



## KEY FINDINGS

- 1,677 diagnoses (924 respondents)
- Top diagnoses: Autism, Developmental Delay, Speech or Language Impairment, Learning Disabilities; Other types of diagnoses listed: rare disease, multiple disabilities
- 27% respondents diagnosed with Autism

**Become a part of the MUHCEN family today!**  
[muhsen.org/need-survey/](https://muhsen.org/need-survey/)



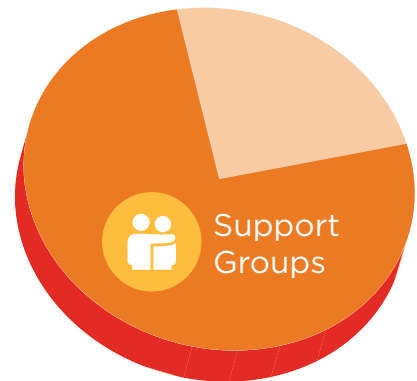
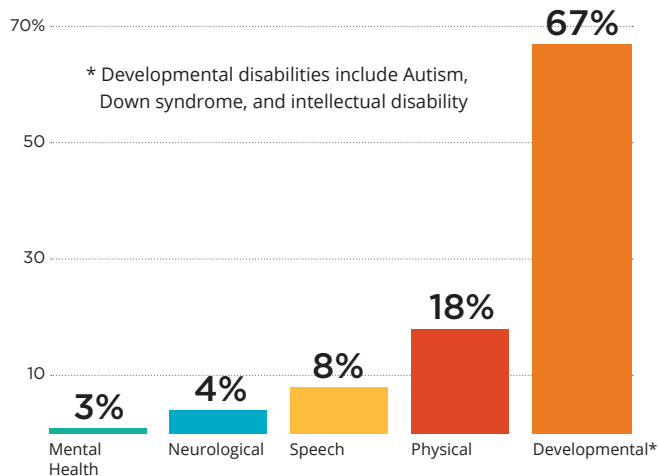
# MUHSEN NEEDS SURVEY FAST FACTS

## 65%

of people living with disabilities **are under 18**



### Percentage of Respondents by Disability Type



**76%** Respondents have interest in Support Groups for parents and caregivers

We asked respondents:  
**On a scale of 1-10 how would you rate...**

### Family member's acceptance in community?

★★★★★★☆☆☆☆ **6.5 out of 10**

### Family member's accessibility to Masjid-related events?

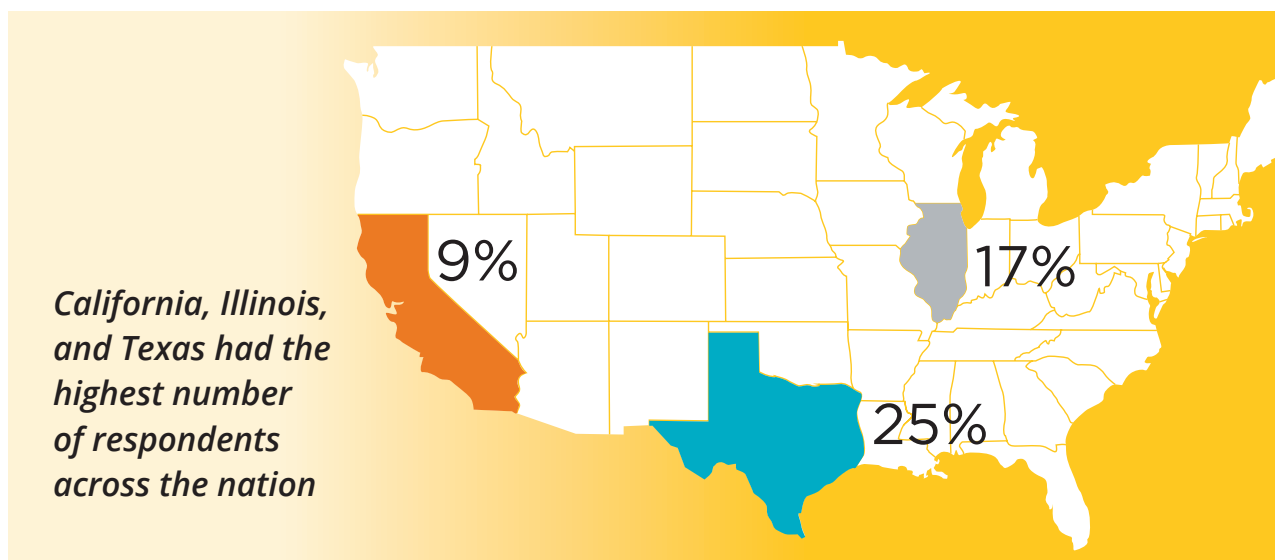
★★★★★★☆☆☆☆ **5.5 out of 10**

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# MUHSEN NEEDS SURVEY FAST FACTS



## TOP NEEDS IDENTIFIED IN STATES THAT HAD THE MOST RESPONDENTS

### Texas:

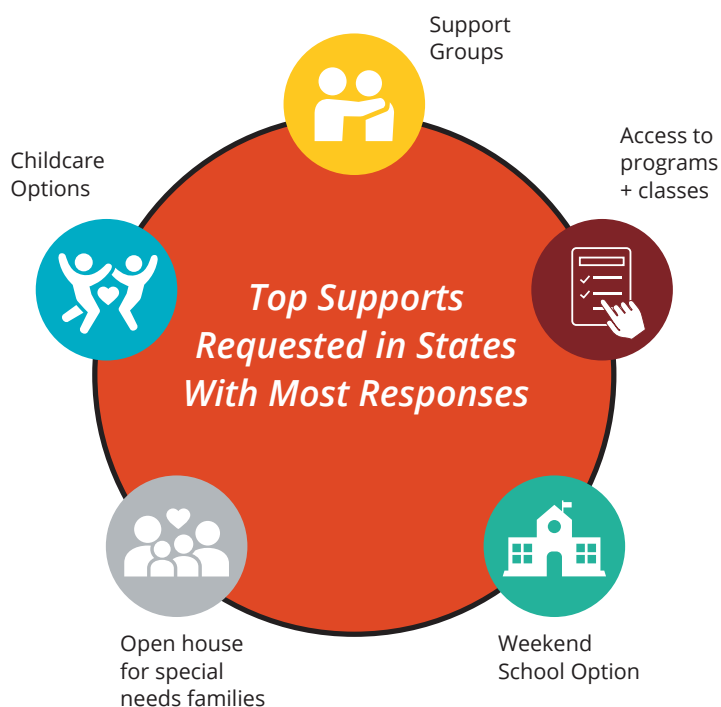
Access to Programs & Classes  
Weekend School  
Awareness & Acceptance  
Social Opportunities for Child

### Illinois

Youth Programs  
Access to Programs & Classes  
Weekend School  
Quiet Room

### California

Open House  
Access to Programs & Classes  
Support Groups  
Childcare Options



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# MUHSEN NEEDS SURVEY *FAST FACTS*

## Top Needs Identified in States With Most Respondents\*



	CALIFORNIA	ILLINOIS	TEXAS
# of Families who completed assessment	87	160	258
Most frequent diagnosis	. Autism . Developmental Delay	. Autism . Developmental Delay	. Autism . Speech Impairment
Most requested programs	. Access to programs and classes . Support groups	. Access to programs and classes . Youth Programs . Weekend School	. Access to programs and classes . Childcare options
Chapters	. Bay Area . SoCal	Illinois	Dallas
Weekend Schools	2 active	6 active	4 active
Volunteers	91	310	495

\* Top areas for opportunities for growth. For full listing, see our certified masajid here: [muhsen.org/muhsen-masjid-certification/](https://muhsen.org/muhsen-masjid-certification/)

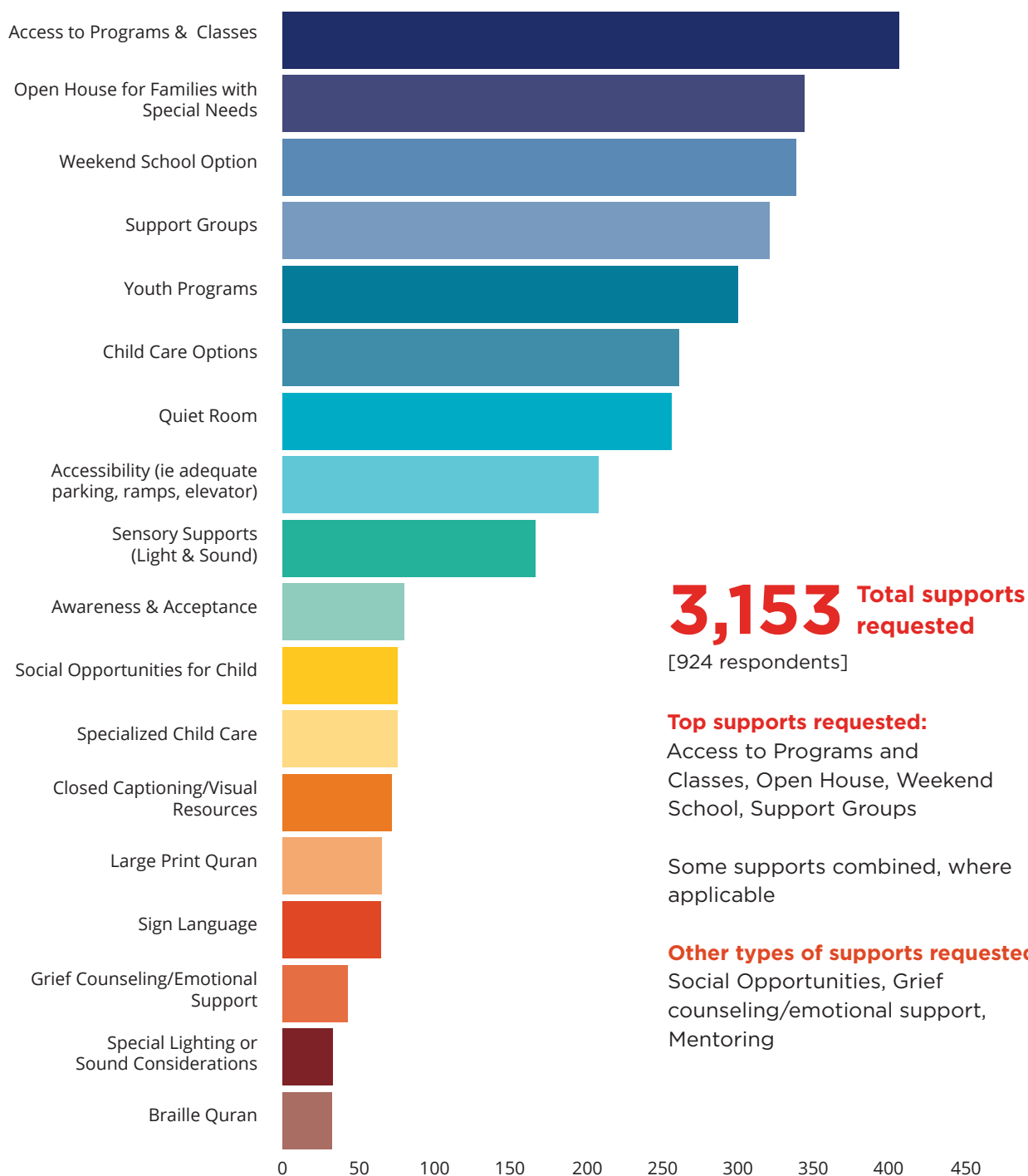
View our full list of MUHSEN Weekend Schools across the United States here: [muhsen.org/muhsen-weekend-school/](https://muhsen.org/muhsen-weekend-school/)

Other notable areas identified include Ontario, Canada, the UK, and New York City.

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# Supports Requested as of August 2020



For all general inquiries contact: [info@muhsen.org](mailto:info@muhsen.org)

