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The Need for Accessible Remote Health Services During the Pandemic

WASHINGTON (April 15, 2020) - The Federal Communications Commission (FCC) recently made available \$200 million to support health care providers in purchasing telehealth services and devices to address the surging demand for telehealth in wake of the coronavirus pandemic. The Telehealth Program intends to enable health care providers to treat patients remotely through website portals and applications, limiting unnecessary exposure to the coronavirus. However, the surge in telehealth services could leave some of the most vulnerable people without access to essential healthcare because many websites, portals, and apps are currently not digitally accessible to persons with disabilities.

Digital accessibility connectivity solutions can ensure hospitals and other health centers reach every patient in need, especially those with disabilities. For example, over 7 million people over the age of 16 in the United States have a visual impairment, some which need the use of a screen reader to access website information. Take for instance a visually impaired patient showing signs of illness, but non-COVID19 symptoms, and trying to schedule an appointment through their mobile or desktop device. Without digital accessibility, their health providers' website could block someone with a screen reader from making an appointment or finding the location of a health facility.

“Doctors, nurses, and emergency medics battling this deadly virus all treat patients not their symptoms. Accessibility, like healthcare, is about treating people. With these available funds from the FCC, health providers now have the means, motive, and opportunity to ensure their digital assets are accessible to persons with disabilities,” said spokeswoman for User1st Raegan Bartlo. “With the FCC Telehealth Program, health providers can now include accessibility as part of their digital improvement strategies to reach some of the most vulnerable people in our communities.”

For all patients, telehealth can be instrumental in providing initial guidance and care if possible, especially in a COVID-19 environment where personal protective equipment (PPE) is in short supply. For patients with disabilities, they are at greater risk of not receiving medical care from the safety of their home.

“In this trying time being a person with a disability is tremendously scary. Our hospitals and communities must do everything they can to be able to best serve all patients who may exhibit

symptoms of Covid-19. This includes individuals with disabilities,” said Matthew Shapiro, Founder and CEO of 6 Wheels Consulting who lives with cerebral palsy. “However, the challenge also comes into play that many of these individuals are not leaving their houses because of other underlying medical issues or because of the risk of infection. Thus, we must be able to make our web pages and online medical appointments accessible to all individuals because this may be the only way that the most vulnerable people can receive healthcare services during this crisis. We can and must do better.”

One organization always striving to do better for persons with disabilities is Kessler Foundation. But like many organizations, the COVID-19 pandemic has presented challenges to the Foundation’s clinical studies in vulnerable populations. “The pandemic has resulted in restrictions that impede clinical research dependent on personal interactions between researchers and participants,” explains Rodger DeRose, president and CEO of Kessler Foundation.

“At the Foundation, our studies focus on the rehabilitative needs of people with disabilities,” DeRose emphasizes, “a population with higher risk for COVID-19 infection. As a result, our researchers are placing greater emphasis on the use of interactive technology and telecommunication tools for engaging with this vulnerable population. As technology becomes implemented, tele-studies will enable greater participation in research for people with disabilities, and more options will be developed for delivering rehabilitative care.”

The Foundation’s recently released podcast called “Moving Forward while Staying Home: The Past, Present and Future of Rehabilitation Research,” address the shift to tele-research, tele-rehabilitation, and virtual conferencing. Olga Boukrina, PhD, research scientist in the Center for Stroke Rehabilitation Research, Nuri Erkut Kucukboyaci, PhD, associate research scientist in the Center for Traumatic Brain Injury Research, and research scientist Ekaterina Dobryakova, PhD, detail the adaptations being made to move forward with their rehabilitation research, and the opportunities for these challenges to drive innovation in remote data collection and telerehabilitation. Learning from the Kessler Foundation adaptations to teleresearch could prove useful in the consumer market for telehealth.

The consumer movement to online health services was already rising prior to the coronavirus. According to a survey by United Healthcare, 83% of users visit a hospital website before scheduling an appointment and 39% of consumers expect to use online consultations with their doctors. But many websites and other digital assets are not designed with accessibility in mind, making access frustrating and even impossible for millions of persons with disabilities.

Notably, accessible digital health services are not just an ethical matter of providing equal access and care to individuals with disabilities. Various laws at the federal and state level applicable to health care providers and their digital assets prohibit discrimination on the basis of disability, including the Americans with Disabilities Act, Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act, and Section 1557 of the Affordable Care Act. Health care providers should check with their

regulatory or legal counsel to ensure they are following all applicable discrimination laws when providing and building out their telehealth offerings.

Ensuring Accessibility

Technology has advanced medicine in operating rooms, hospitals and doctor's offices. And in today's digital world, patient care begins online. Hospitals and health service providers should ensure proper diagnosis of their websites through automated and manual testing for a complete accessibility diagnostic result. Automated testing only detects up to 40% of errors. If a health provider's digital assets haven't been properly manually tested with assistive technology, this could present major barriers for users with disabilities.

Once the errors are diagnosed, websites and other digital assets need treatment, or remediation. There is an internationally recognized standard for creating digitally accessible content – the Web Content Accessibility Guidelines (WCAG). This framework offers health providers a strong foundation for delivering digital accessibility.

Health providers will want their sites to be perceivable so the user can identify content and elements by means of different senses. If they cannot see, can they hear with a screen reader or feel with a braille reader?

Sites should be fully operable so that a user can successfully use controls, buttons, navigation, and other necessary interactive elements without the use of a mouse. The page should be logically designed so that navigation is possible by using just a keyboard.

Websites need to be understandable in their presentation and format, and predictable in its design and usage patterns. Are pages logically designed, or does an individual have to relearn how to navigate each page because of a lack of consistency? Think of the contact information being in the same place no matter which page you navigate to.

And finally, sites need to be robust enough in their design to function on all appropriate technologies, like a screen reader or voice to text. Users should be able to choose the technology they use to interact with websites, online documents, multimedia, and other information formats.

Like much of digital health, digital accessibility is cost effective to implement and provides an improved standard of care for patients and communities. Adding accessibility to health sites enhances health providers' standard of care when patients have become reliant on online services.

User1st, the provider of the most innovative web accessibility solutions on the market, aims to help health providers give patients with disabilities the service they need through accessibility technology solutions. To this end, User1st is offering special rates to health providers' digital assets to ensure access during COVID-19.

Doctors, nurses, emergency providers, hospitals, and health centers are on the front lines of the coronavirus crisis battlefield. Digital accessibility in telehealth will ensure that some of the most vulnerable people, including senior citizens and persons with disabilities, have the access to telehealth they need in order to reduce exposure to the coronavirus.

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About User1st:

Founded with the purpose of making the power of the internet accessible for persons with varied and changing abilities, User1st provides the most advanced web accessibility solutions on the market for testing, remediation, monitoring, and compliance. User1st's solutions are deployed in a variety of industries worldwide, including financial services, retail, government, education, and healthcare. For more information, visit <http://www.user1st.com/> and follow User1st on LinkedIn, Facebook, and Twitter @User1st.

About 6 Wheels Consulting, LLC:

6 Wheels Consulting, through professional consulting, dynamic public speaking, and lobbying services, strives to educate and guide organizations of all types in both the public and private sectors with the goal of strengthening their understanding of disability culture and the issues that affect this population. We do this through inclusive, common-sense, cost-effective, solutions to disability related concerns. This enhanced education hopes to broaden the understanding and appreciation for those with disabilities. For more information on 6 Wheels Consulting, visit www.6wheelsconsulting.com; Contact: Matthew Shapiro, 804-317-0819; matthew.shapiro@6wheelsconsulting.com

About Kessler Foundation:

Kessler Foundation, a major nonprofit organization in the field of disability, is a global leader in rehabilitation research that seeks to improve cognition, mobility, and long-term outcomes--including employment--for people with neurological disabilities caused by diseases and injuries of the brain and spinal cord. Kessler Foundation leads the nation in funding innovative programs that expand employment opportunities for people with disabilities. For more information on Kessler Foundation's research, visit KesslerFoundation.org. Contacts: Carolann Murphy, PA; 973-324-8382; CMurphy@KesslerFoundation.org