

COVID-19 RESPONSES STILL OUT OF REACH FOR THE DISABLED

By Walter Arnold, COO

All 50 states are doing some form of reopening. They are easing restrictions so businesses can reopen safely, customers have confidence to shop, but all will still need to adhere to strict healthcare guidelines of social distancing, practicing good hygiene with frequent hand sanitation, and wearing masks. As reopening begins, government resources must make greater accommodations for people with disabilities.

Many strict healthcare guidelines are difficult to adhere to for the disabled community. According to [Bonnielin Swenor](#), an associate professor of epidemiology and ophthalmology at the Johns Hopkins Wilmer Eye Institute and the Bloomberg School of Public Health, frequent hand-washing may not be achievable for people with certain types of physical disabilities and those who need personal aides and caregivers cannot participate in social distancing in the same way as others. For example, people who use in-home care need a contingency plan in case a caregiver becomes ill.

Nearly all the guidelines also call for those who fall within a vulnerable population to continue to shelter in place, even extending the warning to household member cautioning that by returning to work or reengaging with society they carry the potential of bringing the virus into their home. Some government officials are even suggesting that precautions should be taken to isolate from vulnerable residents inside the home, but with the disabled community this may not be possible.

According to the [United Nations](#), persons with disabilities generally have more underlying health-care needs than others – both standard needs and needs linked to impairments – and are therefore many are considered in the vulnerable class. Indeed, the [UN report](#) released earlier this month noted that persons with disabilities are more likely to contract the virus. Therefore, the disabled community, and their household members, will not be able to fully re-engage with society making them even more isolated. Additionally, the UN report and its global disability inclusion initiative notes accessibility as “fundamental to the inclusion of persons with disabilities in the immediate health and socio-economic response to COVID-19.”

In the United States alone, 20 percent of Americans live with at least one disability. Many may have additional health concerns, so ensuring they are not unduly harmed by the current pandemic must be a focus for governments and businesses alike. When you dig into the data, [Dream Scape Foundation says that](#) of the millions who fall into the category of disabled: 1 million live with severe disabilities, 2 million have a functional limitation, and 5 million are youth.

Unemployment has hit this disability community disproportionately as a result of the COVID-19 outbreak. [The Kessler Foundation’s trends in disability employment report](#) states that the

number of employed people with disabilities decreased by nearly one million workers in April of this year compared to March. As employees return to reopened businesses, people with disabilities face additional obstacles. "As for all workers, COVID-19 may affect the ability of workers with disabilities to go to work," noted John O'Neill, PhD, director of employment and disability research at Kessler Foundation. "Many people with disabilities rely on public transportation systems, which may now offer limited service and represent an exposure risk. Workers with disabilities who use personal care assistance (PCA) services may have difficulty coordinating assistance due to lack of caregiver availability, and the lack of personal protective equipment (PPE)."

People with disabilities, who are among the 38.6 million U.S. unemployment claimants to date resulting from the current pandemic, are facing digital accessibility issues when it comes to obtaining unemployment compensation.

COVID-19 has exposed failures in the accessibility in state government unemployment websites. The Information Technology and Innovation Foundation [assessed the accessibility](#) of state government websites and found 4 of every 10 state unemployment websites to be inaccessible to persons with disabilities. Title II of the ADA requires that state and local government information be accessible to people with disabilities. In addition, several states have passed legislation requiring their Electronic and Information Technology (EIT), or Information and Communication Technology (ICT), accessibility. Unfortunately, their unemployment sites may be in violation of their own state laws as well as the ADA and other accessibility laws.

Ensuring unemployment and other benefits are easily accessible will be critically important to ensuring these families gain access to monetary assistance during this pandemic. These benefits can be a lifeline to these families who have lost their income and who cannot leave their homes to go to food banks.

Another benefit, which is sadly needed, is access to social security benefits if a loved one passes. According to the [Center for Budget and Policy Priorities](#), Social Security benefits play a vital role in reducing poverty in every state. During the COVID-19 pandemic with the increased morbidity rate, access to Social Security and death benefits is critical to keeping many disabled Americans above the poverty line. These documents must be accessible.

People with disabilities own businesses, many of which have been impacted by COVID-19. [State of Small Business Report, May 2020](#), put together by Facebook and the Small Business Roundtable, highlights that small businesses are closing their doors during this pandemic with 31% of owners and managers reporting that their SMB is not currently operating. For personal businesses, the number not operating rises to 52%. With over [8 million small businesses](#) designated as either, Disabled owned, Certified disability-owned business enterprises (DOBEs), Veteran disability-owned business enterprises (V-DOBEs), Service-disabled veteran-owned business enterprises (SDV-DOBEs), or Certified Disability Confident U.S.A., it is imperative that businesses have accessibility to PPP loan benefit applications and information about other

programs. This doesn't only impact the owner who is disabled but could also mean a needed lifeline to their employees who are an important part of the supply chain and economic driver for the United States economy.

Information is coming fast and changing rapidly. Getting information can be more difficult for people with vision, hearing, and even cognitive disabilities, as much-needed information sources may not be fully accessible. Federal and state governments have an even greater responsibility in ensuring their digital assets are accessible to people with disabilities, because social distancing may last much longer for people with disabilities.

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