



TECHNOLOGY AND DISABILITY POLICY HIGHLIGHTS – MARCH 2020

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OVERVIEW

With the pressing concerns of the coronavirus pandemic (COVID-19), this issue covers many of the ways in which COVID-19 impacts the disability community. A departure from only reporting on wireless technology access activities, we include a range of COVID-19 resources and initiatives for people with disabilities. For example, the select provisions of the *Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security (CARES) Act* are outlined, focusing on funds directed towards ensuring services for people with disabilities continue. Also, [the Administration for Community Living \(ACL\) has created a web page dedicated to providing COVID-19 information and resources for people with disabilities and older adults.](#) In light of the massive migration to remote work, the Deaf and Hard of Hearing Technology Rehabilitation Engineering Research Center published [accessibility tips for a better Zoom/virtual meeting experience.](#)

In the regulatory space, the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) has waived Lifeline Program rules to help low-income consumers stay connected during COVID-19. Further, the FCC's *Keep Americans Connected Initiative* is working to ensure that Americans, regardless of socioeconomic status or disability status, can comply with social distancing measures through the use of affordable communications. The Commission also relaxed regulations so that relay service providers can preserve communications access for people with hearing disabilities. In a move to ensure public engagement, the filing deadline for stakeholders to inform the *2020 Biennial Report on the Twenty-First Century Communications and Video Accessibility Act* [CG Docket No. 10-213] was extended to April 15, 2020.

The Wireless RERC has postponed our 2020 State of Technology Forum. However, the important work of the Wireless RERC continues, and we turn our focus to producing a more robust *Assistive Technology Journal* Special Issue. We are currently accepting paper abstracts. Read the full [call for papers](#) for details and deadlines. The Wireless RERC also continues data collection for our [2020 Survey of User Needs](#). If you haven't already, please consider taking this [survey](#).

This issue also includes news about hearing aid compatibility, inclusive medical care, educational access, broadband, the 2020 Census, disability inclusion, accessible transit, apps, AI, and more.

LEGISLATIVE ACTIVITIES

COVID-19 STIMULUS PACKAGE AND PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES

March 27, 2020 - President Trump signed the *Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security (CARES) Act*, the most substantial stimulus bill in modern history, into law. The \$2 trillion-dollar stimulus package is intended to “provide emergency assistance and health care response for individuals, families, and businesses affected by the 2020 coronavirus pandemic.” While the CARES Act does not address some critical issues, it does include provisions for people with disabilities.

The most direct form of financial relief for Americans is the Recovery Rebate. The Recovery Rebate is a one-time cash payment sent from the government to U.S. residents with adjusted gross incomes up to \$75,000 (\$150,000 if you are married), with a phase-out for incomes between \$75,000 and \$99,000 (\$150,000-\$198,000 if you are married), who are not a dependent of another taxpayer, and have a Social Security Number. The amount of the check will be \$1,200 for eligible individuals and \$2,400 for people who are married, plus \$500 per dependent child. **This check is characterized as a rebate, which means it will NOT be counted against the asset limits faced by people with disabilities if spent within 12 months of receipt.**

As it pertains to financial relief for those who are unemployed, the CARES Act provides unemployed workers with and without disabilities a \$600 increase in their weekly checks. The bill also created Pandemic Unemployment Assistance (PUA) that expands coverage. **Notably, this coverage includes self-employed workers, gig workers, and independent contractors.**

School districts that have elected to continue distance learning are struggling to ensure that they are providing an equitable education to all students. In response, CARES gives states more than \$30 billion to provide Emergency Education Relief grants to help schools accomplish this feat; allowing for a portion of the educational relief funds to be used to provide summer learning, supplemental after-school programs, **the purchase of assistive and adaptive educational technologies, and accessible online learning for students with disabilities.** To ensure compliance, CARES requires the Secretary of Education to report to Congress within 30 days about where, how, and why waivers are being used, and students with disabilities’ access to online learning.

The Aging and Disabilities Services Programs will receive \$955 million from the CARES Act. This **money is directed to support nutrition programs for people with disabilities and older Americans with food deliveries as well as direct support for family caregivers.** From the \$955 million, \$50 million will be allocated to Centers for Independent Living (CILs). While \$15 million of the \$955 million will be distributed to support initiatives that house people with disabilities. The CARES Act also allows state Medicaid programs to pay for Direct Support Professionals (DSPs)

to help people with disabilities who end up in the hospital. [Sources: Philip Pauli via RespectAbility; 116th Congress].

ADDITIONAL INFORMATION:

[Stimulus Package Becomes Law – Here’s What It Means for People with Disabilities](https://www.respectability.org/covid-19/)

<https://www.respectability.org/covid-19/>

[CARES Act – Full Text](https://assets.documentcloud.org/documents/20059055/final-final-cares-act.pdf)

<https://assets.documentcloud.org/documents/20059055/final-final-cares-act.pdf>

REGULATORY ACTIVITIES

2020 BIENNIAL REPORT ON ACCESSIBILITY UNDER THE 21ST CENTURY CVAA

The FCC’s Consumer and Governmental Affairs Bureau released a Public Notice requesting stakeholder input on the *2020 Biennial Report on Accessibility Under the Twenty-First Century Communications and Video Accessibility Act* [**CG Docket No. 10-213**]. A directive of the CVAA requires that the FCC evaluate the effectiveness and impact of the CVAA and submit a report to Congress on the state of industry compliance.

Among other things, the FCC seeks comments on whether the input, control, and mechanical functions of telecommunications and advanced communications services and equipment are locatable, identifiable, and operable (1) without vision, hearing, speech, or color perception; (2) with limited vision, hearing, color perception, manual dexterity, reach and strength, or cognitive skills; (3) with prosthetic devices. They also seek comment on any new developments on the issues and conclusions that the Bureau considered in the *2018 CVAA Biennial Report*.

In 2018, the Bureau concluded that covered entities continue to include people with disabilities in product and service design and development. The FCC seeks comment on the extent to which manufacturers and service providers have involved people with disabilities and consumer disability organizations in their market research, product design, testing, pilot demonstrations, and product trials since the *2018 CVAA Biennial Report*. The CVAA requires the Commission to include in its biennial report, an evaluation of the extent to which any accessibility barriers exist with respect to “new communications technologies.” In the *2018 CVAA Biennial Report*, the Bureau noted the promise of new communications technologies such as 5G, RTT, text-to-911, HD voice, the Internet of Things, and Bluetooth, and also reported on concerns about whether virtual and augmented reality technologies are accessible. The agency invites comments on developments in the accessibility of these new products and services. The filing deadline has been extended from March 30, 2020, to April 14, 2020. [Source: FCC]

ADDITIONAL INFORMATION:

[Comment Period Extended for CVAA 2020 Biennial Report](#)

<https://www.fcc.gov/document/comment-period-extended-cvaa-2020-biennial-report>

Public Notice: [Docx](#) -- [Pdf](#) -- [Txt](#)

KEEP AMERICANS CONNECTED INITIATIVE INCLUDES LIFELINE PROGRAM PARTICIPANTS

March 17, 2020 - The FCC notified the public of changes made to the Lifeline program, which is the latest addition to the agency's Keep Americans Connected Initiative, to ensure that consumers stay connected during COVID-19. In the Order [**WC Docket No. 11-42**], the Wireline Competition Bureau waives the Lifeline program's recertification and re-verification requirements for participating low-income consumers for 60 days. This waiver will prevent the de-enrollment of any Lifeline subscribers who would otherwise have been required to certify their continued eligibility to the National Verifier. Thus, this waiver will impact Lifeline subscribers with anniversary dates that fall on or between April 14, 2020, and August 14, 2020. The Bureau also waives for 60 days the 2019 Lifeline Order's requirement that participating carriers' enrollment representatives register with the Lifeline program administrator, the Universal Service Administrative Company (USAC). This waiver expires on May 25, 2020. At this time, all enrollment representatives will be required to register with the USAC pursuant to section 54.406 (a) of the Commission's rules unless otherwise notified by the Bureau. In a follow-up statement, FCC Chairman Ajit Pai shared that it is imperative "during times of crisis, [that we] maintain connections to family and friends, medical professionals and educators, and your coworkers."

The FCC executed widespread changes under the Keep Americans Connected Pledge to which broadband and telecommunications providers committed to not terminating service to any residential or small business because of an inability to pay their bills due to the disruptions caused by COVID-19; waiving any late fees that these customers incur because of their economic circumstances related to COVID-19; and opening their Wi-Fi hotspots. Further, the FCC urged the expansion of low-income broadband programs like Connect2Compete. Companies without such programs are highly encouraged to adopt broadband programs directed at improving connectivity for low-income households. [Source: FCC]

ADDITIONAL INFORMATION:

[FCC Waives Lifeline Rules to Help Keep Low-Income Consumers Connected](#)

<https://www.fcc.gov/document/fcc-waives-lifeline-rules-help-keep-low-income-consumers-connected>

News Release: [Docx](#) -- [Pdf](#) -- [Txt](#)

Order: [Docx](#) -- [Pdf](#) -- [Txt](#)

FLEXIBILITY OF REGULATIONS FOR TRS AND VRS PROVIDERS

March 16, 2020 - The FCC issued a News Release granting increased flexibility to telecommunications relay service (TRS) providers to preserve communications access for Americans with disabilities. TRS providers were given temporary waivers that allowed American Sign Language interpreters to work from home to maintain uninterrupted relay services during COVID-19. However, because the nature of VRS providers' work varies from TRS providers, the FCC provided specific waivers for VRS workers. From March 13 through May 15, the FCC also waives the following provisions of the at-home VRS pilot program and permanent rules:

- The cap on the percentage of a VRS provider's conversation minutes that may be handled by at-home communications assistants (Cas).
- The requirement that at-home CAs have at least three years of experience as a call center CA (under the pilot program rules) or as an interpreter (under the permanent program rules).
- The requirement that virtual teaming be available to at-home CAs for any VRS call.
- The requirement that CA's home workstation access be restricted solely to the CA.
- The requirements that the VRS provider (1) inspect and approve each at-home workstation before activating it for use by the CA, and (2) conduct random and unannounced inspections of at least five percent (5%) of activated at-home workstations during each 12-month period. The waiver of the workstation inspection requirement is conditional on such inspections being made upon the expiration of the waiver period for all at-home workstations that remain in use.
- The requirement to equip at-home workstations with monitoring technology.
- The requirement that if multiple CAs simultaneously using a CA's home or other worksites, must be identified and reported as a call center (provided that such worksites comply with all non-waived at-home rules).

The VRS waiver stipulates that such access being restricted solely to the CA and other provider personnel (including other CAs) during their working hours. Further, the FCC notes that the Commission has previously clarified that neither the pilot program rules nor the permanent at-home rules require installation of a separate broadband access line dedicated solely to handling VRS calls from an at-home workstation to a VRS provider's network. [Source: FCC]

ADDITIONAL INFORMATION:

[FCC Grants Flexibility to TRS Providers During Coronavirus](#)

<https://www.fcc.gov/document/fcc-grants-flexibility-trs-providers-during-coronavirus>

News Release: [Docx](#) -- [Pdf](#) -- [Txt](#)

Order: [Docx](#) -- [Pdf](#) -- [Txt](#)

NEW PROPOSAL ON HEARING AID COMPATIBILITY STANDARDS

March 6, 2020 – In a Further Notice of Proposed Rulemaking (FNPRM), the FCC proposes the adoption of a new hearing aid compatibility (HAC) technical standard and making related implementation revisions. The Commission’s HAC rules currently use a 2011 version of ANSI’s HAC standard (2011 ANSI Standard) to guide the manufacture of HAC handsets. The 2011 ANSI Standard specifies testing procedures for determining the ratings of digital wireless handsets that operate over frequencies in the 698 MHz to 6 GHz bands. This standard evaluates how hearing aid compatibility is determined between wireless handsets and hearing aids that use acoustic or inductive coupling, including cochlear implants. However, these ANSI standards are now out of date. Recently, the ANSI Committee has asked the FCC to incorporate the recently-adopted 2019 ANSI Standard into their wireless HAC rules.

In this FNPRM, the FCC proposes to incorporate the 2019 ANSI Standard and, after a two-year transition period, make it the exclusive testing standard for hearing aid compatibility. In addition, they propose to extend the current volume control deadline so that the requirement coincides with the start of the exclusive use of the 2019 ANSI Standard. Finally, they propose to remove unnecessary or superseded rules and seek comment on ways to simplify and update the regulations.

Some questions posed in the FNPRM include: Do commenters agree that the new standard is consistent with the requirement that handsets produce sound levels suitable for persons with hearing loss (including persons with and without hearing aids), improve the measurement of potential hearing aid interference, and reduce the testing burden? Would adoption of the standard impose costs on manufacturers or service providers that are reasonable in light of its benefits?

Also, the FCC recognizes that the 2019 ANSI Standard does not cover frequencies above 6 GHz and wants to utilize this opportunity to fulfill their statutory obligation to assess whether to continue to exempt handsets operating in frequencies above 6 GHz from the HAC requirements. What is the effect, if any, on hearing aid users’ mobile handset operations in the mmW frequencies? What is the impact on individuals with hearing loss of excluding frequencies above 6 GHz from the compatibility requirements? As a practical matter, do higher frequencies pose the same interference concerns as the lower frequencies? Is compliance with the HAC standards technologically feasible for devices operating over 6 GHz?

Interested parties may file comments on or before April 6, 2020, and reply comments on or before April 20, 2020. [Source: Federal Register]

ADDITIONAL INFORMATION:

[Hearing Aid Compatibility \(HAC\)](#)

<https://www.fcc.gov/hearing-aid-compatibility-wireless-telephones>

WIRELESS RERC UPDATES

CALL FOR PAPERS (UPDATED MARCH 20, 2020)

In consideration of the recent World Health Organization declaration of the COVID-19 (coronavirus) outbreak to be a pandemic, we have decided to postpone the 2020 State of Technology Forum. The important work of the Wireless RERC continues, and as such, we see the postponement as an opportunity to produce a more robust *Assistive Technology Journal* Special Issue. The Issue reflects the Wireless RERC's forthcoming 2020 State of Technology Forum themes: Include, Innovate, and Transform. These three cross-cutting elements have been chosen as particularly characteristic of the rapidly advancing, technology-driven field over the last 20 years.

We invite short papers (1500-2000 words) that are intended to provide background and context for the Forum. Selected papers will be asked to expand the article to a target 4000 - 6000 words for a special Forum issue prepared for *Assistive Technology Journal*. Paul M.A. Baker, Ph.D., Editor, Helena Mitchell, Ph.D., and Salimah LaForce. M.S., Associate Editors.

For a list of topics and other details, read the full CFP:

<http://www.wirelessrerc.gatech.edu/call-papers-wireless-inclusive-merc-state-technology-forum-2020>

IF YOU HAVEN'T ALREADY, TAKE AND SHARE THE LATEST SURVEY OF USER NEEDS!

The SUN is the Wireless RERC's cornerstone survey on wireless technology use by people with disabilities. This latest version has been updated in response to changes in technology. In addition to questions about cell phone and tablet use, this version of the SUN collects information about wearables, "smart" home technologies, and other next-generation wirelessly connected devices.



Your responses will:

- Help designers and engineers make more accessible wireless devices, features, and services for people with disabilities, and
- Inform recommendations to better ensure inclusive policies and practices.

If you have a disability, please consider taking this survey. If you know someone who has a disability, please send the survey to them.

Take the survey online at <http://bit.ly/wRERC-SUN2020>, or

Scan the QR Code to open the survey on your mobile device, or

Take the survey via phone, call 404-839-8741.

OTHER ITEMS OF INTEREST

RESOURCES FOR THE DISABILITY COMMUNITY DURING A GLOBAL PANDEMIC

March 24, 2020 - The Administration for Community Living (ACL) recently published COVID-19 guidelines for older adults and people with disabilities. ACL indicated that these groups have a higher risk of developing severe COVID-19 symptoms due to the increased prevalence of compromised immune systems or underlying health conditions that make it harder to fight off diseases and infection. Compromised immune systems also make it more challenging to cope with and recover from illness. Therefore, the ACL and CDC recommend that high-risk individuals stay home as much as possible if COVID-19 is spreading in the community and make sure that they have access to several weeks of medications in case staying home is mandated. Ultimately, these individuals should seek to reduce exposure. To accomplish this aim, ACL recommends creating a household plan to protect your health, disinfect frequently touched surfaces, and comply with local social distancing recommendations. [The ACL has created a web page dedicated to providing COVID-19 information and resources for people with disabilities and older adults.](#)

RespectAbility has been closely monitoring developments and collecting new resources to help impacted communities. They hosted a webinar on COVID-19, Disability & Mental Health. [Watch the recording with open captions, download the PowerPoint, or read the transcript.](#) RespectAbility has also outlined the following critical action steps they recommend to address COVID-19's impact on people with disabilities.

- **Stop the spread:** Leaders at every level need to advocate for and implement measures that will prevent the spread of the virus, including access to testing for people with disabilities.
- **Protect frontline responders:** Ensure front line responders and caregivers get the protection, testing, and resources they need to serve those most at risk of experiencing COVID-19.
- **Enable people with disabilities who are living in the community to have access to food & supports:** Clear guidance and protocols are needed among the caregiver and patient community to actively minimize COVID-19 transmission. This needs to include in-home protocols to care for people with disabilities who develop COVID-19, and require their standard care, but are not sufficiently ill to require a hospital bed. Expand food security measures to people who are especially at risk from the virus and/or whose disabilities limit their ability to access food at this time, including alternative delivery options if standard delivery is suspended.
- **Ensure people with disabilities can keep their jobs and/or gain employment when the crisis is over:** Ensure the unemployment resources/stimulus efforts explicitly provide

additional support for people with disabilities who may lose their job as a result of lockdowns, social distancing, or other pandemic-caused economic disruptions.

- **Ensure accessibility & transportation:** Ensure that resources and information about the spread of this virus are accessible to people who are deaf, blind, and/or have cognitive disabilities. Work that is moved from in-person to online should be made accessible to people who are deaf and/or blind. Also, there must be options for people who have the virus and have physical disabilities to be transported to hospitals and testing sites.
- **Offer online mental health supports:** Pay special attention to the effect of social distancing on people with disabilities as well as the mental health consequences of social distancing and teleworking.

The Centers for Disease Control (CDC) have been widely distributing information and guidance on how to respond to COVID-19.

- [Learn more about the symptoms associated with COVID-19.](#)
- Older people and people with severe chronic conditions should [take special precautions](#) because they are at higher risk of developing severe COVID-19 illness.
- For people who are ill with COVID-19, but are not sick enough to be hospitalized, please follow [CDC guidance on how to reduce the risk of spreading your illness to others.](#)
- People who are mildly ill with COVID-19 are able to [isolate at home during their illness.](#)
- [Discontinuation of Home Isolation for Persons with COVID-19.](#)
- Older people and people of all ages with severe chronic medical conditions — like heart disease, lung disease, and diabetes, for example — seem to be at [higher risk of developing serious COVID-19 illness.](#)
- [Preparing for COVID-19: Long-term Care Facilities, Nursing Homes.](#)

The American Association of People with Disabilities (AAPD) published an article expounding on the implications of the CDC's recommendation that people at high risk should stock up on prescription medication. The AAPD acknowledges that this advice is not practical for many people with disabilities because of insurance restrictions. Many insurers typically refuse to cover refills on 30-day prescriptions until about three to seven days of medications remain. In a global pandemic, these coverage restrictions place many people with disabilities at risk.

Notably, however, some insurance companies have taken measures to protect patients. In both Massachusetts and North Carolina, Blue Cross Blue Shield has waived early refill limits on 30-day maintenance prescriptions. The Washington state insurance commissioner issued an emergency order requiring insurers operating in the state to cover early refills. On March 10th, the Center for Medicare and Medicaid Services [issued guidance](#) to Medicare Part D plans to remind them of their ability to relax restrictions on early refills and lift barriers to obtaining prescriptions from out-of-network pharmacies.

The AAPD encourages people to reach out to their state's insurance commissioner to urge them to follow Washington State's lead in requiring early refills and to take other measures designed to ensure at-risk populations can follow the CDC's guidance. The AAPD prepared a [template](#) for advocacy organizations to use to urge their state's insurance commissioner to take these common-sense measures to protect those most at-risk.

AAPD will be maintaining a page keeping track of advocacy efforts and policy measures to protect the disability community for the duration of the crisis and encourage organizations to share details about their efforts using [this form](#).

Longtime advocate and thought leader Andrew Pulrang recently published an informative op-ed in *Forbes* about the coronavirus and the disability community's concerns around online education of students with disabilities, medical rationing, and more. We encourage you to [read the article](#).

The Partnership for Inclusive Disaster Strategies has provided COVID-19 Advocacy Tools:

- [National Disability Rights Call To Action](#)
- [Community letter to the White House COVID-19 Task Force](#)
- [COVID-19 Recommended Actions for personal assistance services](#)

On Capitol Hill, many advocates pushed for legislative solutions that would ensure people with disabilities would be included in whatever actions Congress takes to mitigate the long-term damage caused by these uncertain times. For example, the Real Emergency Access for Aging and Disability Inclusion for Disasters Act (READDI) and The Disaster Relief Medicaid Act (DRMA) are getting renewed attention. You can learn more about [READDI](#) and [take action in support of READDI](#).

COVID-19 is bringing renewed public attention to the problem of food insecurity and food access. Those that have the opportunity are urged to find and support local food banks: <https://www.feedingamerica.org/find-your-local-foodbank>. There are a host of other efforts that are detailed later in this newsletter. [Sources: RespectAbility, USER1st, CDC, ACL, Forbes, AAPD]

ACCESSIBILITY ACROSS DIGITAL PLATFORMS

March 24, 2020 - The Deaf and Hard of Hearing Technology Rehabilitation Engineering Research Center (DHH) published accessibility tips for a better Zoom/virtual meeting experience. These tips are focused on the needs of meeting participants who are deaf and hard of hearing in the virtual meeting space. Many of these recommendations have been tested in cross-disability meetings. The DHH Technology Rehabilitation Engineering Research Center notes that this resource will continuously be updated to cover additional scenarios. The tips for accessible meetings include:

- Keep meetings as small as possible.

- Have well-defined roles in running the meeting, especially for larger groups (e.g., chair, turn-taking manager, note-taker).
- Turn-taking management is critical.
- In larger meetings, default to video-off except for chairs, interpreters, turn-taking managers, and people who have the floor.
- Get a second screen, if at all possible.
- Run Ethernet cables instead of WiFi, if at all possible.

ADDITIONAL INFORMATION:

[Accessibility Tips for a Better Zoom/Virtual Meeting Experience](https://www.deafhhtech.org/rerc/accessible-virtual-meeting-tips/)

<https://www.deafhhtech.org/rerc/accessible-virtual-meeting-tips/>

THE NEED FOR INCLUSIVITY IN THE COVID CONVO

March 24, 2020 - The National Council on Disability (NCD) recently penned a series of letters to federal agencies, and the White House focused on the inclusion of people with disabilities in conversations about COVID-19 and addressing the concerns of the community. The first letter addressed President Trump requesting that the White House Coronavirus Taskforce use sign language interpreters during its public briefings to make these speeches more accessible to people with hearing disabilities. The letter expressed how vital it is that millions of people with hearing disabilities can obtain the critical information that the Taskforce provides.

The NCD also penned a letter to the Office for Civil Rights (OCR) regarding non-discriminatory access to life-saving medical care for people with disabilities who contract COVID-19. The letter requests that the OCR quickly issue a notice to physicians and hospitals specifying the applicability of nondiscrimination requirements of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act, and Section 1557 of the Affordable Care Act in making treatment decisions. The letter references [their extensive reports and long-standing discourse regarding discrimination by medical practitioners](#) who, make “discriminatory assumptions that the lives of people with disabilities are of poorer quality than those of people without disabilities, and due to misperceptions about the ability of people with disabilities to comply with post-operative care.”

The NCD urged the OCR to include a statement in the notice about the historic and deep-seated biases and stereotypes about people with disabilities that have resulted in eugenics and lack of life-saving care and ask physicians to be mindful of this when making medical treatment decisions—making it clear that even in an environment where health care resources are limited, the civil rights of people with disabilities cannot be suspended or reduced.

In the final letter in the series, the NCD requested that the Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services (CMS) remind the states of the availability of Medicaid waivers to assist in the retention of Direct

Service Providers (DSP). Independent of the COVID-19, there is a DSP workforce shortage. As day programs are being shuttered because of COVID-19, DSP workers from these facilities are not receiving a paycheck. States need Medicaid flexibility via a waiver to provide an incentive to retain DSPs who have been displaced by actions enacted to mitigate the impact of the COVID-19. Medicaid waivers 1115,1135 and 1915c appendix K are assets states have at their disposal, upon request, to modify its Medicaid program. NCD implores CMS to do everything within its power to assist and encourage states to avail themselves of these significant Medicaid tools. [Source: NCD]

ADDITIONAL INFORMATION:

[NCD 2020 Letters and Publications](#)

<https://ncd.gov/publications/2020/ncd-letter-WH-re-taskforce-interpretors>

[Bioethics and Disability Report Series](#)

<https://www.ncd.gov/publications/2019/bioethics-report-series>

DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION GUIDANCE FOR STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES

March 21, 2020 - The U.S. Department of Education (DOE) has issued a supplementary fact sheet addressing COVID-19 impacts on students with disabilities in preschool, elementary, and secondary schools. This factsheet offers guidance, technical assistance, and information on any available flexibility within the confines of the law “to ensure that all students have access to meaningful educational opportunities.” The factsheet is in response to the Department’s Office for Civil Rights (OCR) and the Office of Special Education and Rehabilitative Services (OSERS) addressing misconceptions about federal disability law. Some educators believe that federal disability law presents insurmountable barriers to remote education. The OCR and OSERS, in partnership with the U.S. DOE, seeks to debunk this notion.

Simply stated, ensuring compliance with the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act (Section 504), and Title II of the Americans with Disabilities Act should not be interpreted in a way that prevents schools from offering educational programs through distance instruction. Many disability-related modifications and services may be effectively provided online. These may include extensions of time for assignments, videos with accurate captioning or embedded sign language interpreting, accessible reading materials, and many speech or language services through video conferencing.

School districts must provide a free and appropriate public education (FAPE) consistent with the need to protect the health and safety of students with disabilities and those individuals providing education, specialized instruction, and related services to these students. The determination of how FAPE is to be provided may need to be different in this time of unprecedented national emergency. Finally, although federal law requires distance instruction to be accessible to students with disabilities, it does not mandate specific methodologies.

The Department encourages parents, educators, and administrators to collaborate creatively to continue to meet the needs of students with disabilities. Consider low- tech strategies that can provide for an exchange of curriculum-based resources, instructional packets, projects, and written assignments. OSERS has provided a list of information on those IDEA timeframes that may be extended. The link for this guidance can be found below.

ADDITIONAL INFORMATION:

[Supplemental Fact Sheet: Addressing the Risk of COVID-19 in Preschool, Elementary and Secondary Schools While Serving Children with Disabilities](https://www2.ed.gov/about/offices/list/ocr/frontpage/faq/rr/policyguidance/Supple%20Fact%20Sheet%203.21.20%20FINAL.pdf?utm_content=&utm_medium=email&utm_name=&utm_source=govdelivery&utm_term=)

https://www2.ed.gov/about/offices/list/ocr/frontpage/faq/rr/policyguidance/Supple%20Fact%20Sheet%203.21.20%20FINAL.pdf?utm_content=&utm_medium=email&utm_name=&utm_source=govdelivery&utm_term=

MAINTAINING SOCIAL CONNECTIONS DURING SOCIAL DISTANCING

March 20, 2020 - Enable Ireland is an organization that works in partnership with those who use their services to achieve maximum independence, choice and, inclusion in the community. Their focus is on the person, not the disability, and believe that access, inclusion, and equality are fundamental rights for all people. Enable Ireland also asserts that society must recognize and accommodate individual needs. In alignment with this mission, Enable Ireland has compiled a resource page of creative uses for everyday technologies to assist people with disabilities, their families, and those who support them during the current pandemic. These tools do not only provide support to people with disabilities during this global crisis but also helps mitigate the effects of social isolation.

To reduce the adverse effects of social distancing, some suggestions that appeared on Enable Ireland's blog page include familiar outlets, such as WhatsApp or Viber groups, and some innovative options like setting up an online radio station. Through online radio or podcasts, they could play music, have on-air chats, or share the latest news relevant to them. Another unique suggestion was for those who live in rural areas with access to isolated nature walks provide virtual tours. '*Necessity is the mother of invention*' and staying connected using digital platforms is increasing during this critical time where personal health and safety are of utmost importance. [Source: Colm Gorey via siliconrepublic]

ADDITIONAL INFORMATION:

[How assistive technology can help those with disabilities get through a crisis](https://www.siliconrepublic.com/enterprise/assistive-tech-disabilities-enable-ireland-coronavirus)

<https://www.siliconrepublic.com/enterprise/assistive-tech-disabilities-enable-ireland-coronavirus>

SCHOOL DISTRICTS ARE ADDRESSING EDUCATIONAL INEQUITY ACROSS THE COUNTRY

March 19, 2020 - Around the nation, in response to the coronavirus outbreak, schools have attempted a variety of approaches to continue learning. Many schools across the country have elected to close for the remainder of the academic year as concerns arise about an inability to design plans for distance learning that are equitable for students with disabilities. In cities such as New York and Los Angeles, such severe measures have not been taken. These large school districts have been among the minority of educational systems that have designed distance learning plans with students with disabilities at the forefront of the planning. Meanwhile, other schools simply have not figured out what is the most feasible route. As of Wednesday, March 18th, 39 states have closed all of their schools.

The most pressing issue that is causing such a variety of responses from school districts is the federal mandate that people with disabilities have an equal opportunity to participate in everything schools provide. In fear of violating federal civil rights laws, if districts don't accommodate students, they risk losing federal aid, so some have opted to suspend learning for all students rather than address complaints from parents and disability rights advocates. The Department of Education (DOE) reminded school districts across the country about these laws with their guidance released last week that stressed they must make sure students with disabilities can access online materials in this new era of distance learning. This limited guidance has caused schools to do the best they can. "One of the things that we know about online learning and virtual instruction is that it can increase some of the gaps that we have in education, especially around equity issues of low socioeconomic status students and more affluent students," said Liz Kolb, a professor of education technologies and teacher education at the University of Michigan. Some school districts, such as L.A., have provided high-tech and low-tech solutions to reach all students with meaningful learning opportunities. While other districts are unsure of how to proceed. [Source: Erin Richards via USAToday]

ADDITIONAL INFORMATION:

[Is online school illegal? With schools closing from coronavirus, special education concerns give districts pause](https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/education/2020/03/19/coronavirus-online-school-closing-special-education-teacher-distance-learning/2863503001/)

<https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/education/2020/03/19/coronavirus-online-school-closing-special-education-teacher-distance-learning/2863503001/>

CELEBRATING TEN YEARS OF THE NATIONAL BROADBAND PLAN

March 16, 2020 - Ten years ago, the FCC actualized the National Broadband Plan that was conceived by Congress. The National Broadband Plan had four guiding principles, which include focusing on barriers to adoption, broadband in the home, connectivity across an entire community, and inevitable changes in technology. Though the global pandemic has halted the planned celebrations,

many scholars have reflected on the progress and lessons over the last ten years and shared them virtually.

One such scholar notes that the FCC has maintained these principles well after ten years and has helped shape a digital inclusion ecosystem that consists of surviving Broadband Technology Opportunity Program (BTOP) projects, private sector initiatives, and those supported by cities and foundations. Progress has been evidenced in the results of the American Community Survey regarding broadband showing that today, 69.6% of households have a wireline broadband subscription.

After ten years, four salient lessons are worth highlighting: the importance of “demand-pull” and scalable private-public partnerships, and moving “the dial” as demand for digital inclusion resources is likely to grow. The first lesson, “demand-pull,” focuses on how successful broadband plans meet needs that emerge from the communities that they serve. Similarly, the second lesson shows that it is imperative to cultivate community-based solutions. The last two lessons highlight the value of research and digital skills training. As this pandemic clearly indicates, there is an opportunity to continually improve the effectiveness of the national broadband plan initiatives and infrastructure to address our changing workforce and educational needs as life goes online. [Source: Benton Institute for Broadband & Society]

ADDITIONAL INFORMATION:

[The National Broadband Plan at 10: A decade of lessons on increasing home broadband adoption](https://www.benton.org/blog/national-broadband-plan-10-decade-lessons-increasing-home-broadband-adoption)
<https://www.benton.org/blog/national-broadband-plan-10-decade-lessons-increasing-home-broadband-adoption>

THE IMPORTANCE OF BEING COUNTED: THE 2020 CENSUS

March 11, 2020 - The United States Census is a critical count used to allocate over \$675 billion federal dollars for states and communities over the next ten years. The U.S. Census Bureau counts every resident, regardless of age, nationality, or ability, to determine the needs of the population. “Communities’ health, well-being and political power rests on a just and correct census count. Elected officials cannot make informed decisions about how to distribute federal tax dollars fairly and effectively without an accurate accounting of the population. The decennial census determines allocations for real-life necessities critical to people with disabilities including Medicaid, Medicare, State Children’s Health Insurance Programs, Head Start and Early Head Start, special education grants, and vocational rehabilitation services.”

To ensure everyone is included and empowered to participate in the Census as a form of political engagement and social representation, the 2020 Census is the first decennial census in U.S. history

to have a full internet option. It is also the first U.S. Census to use technology extensively to manage and conduct fieldwork.

However, numerous factors can contribute to people with disabilities' reluctance to complete census forms. These reasons include fear of stigmatization and privacy, concerned that crucial information about identity will be shared. But several groups and nonprofits are promoting the importance of participation for people with disabilities through service centers nationwide, home visits, and community partnerships. One such organization, Easterseals, is doing just this. Easterseals is a national network of 68 affiliates that delivers services and advocacy for children, adults with disabilities, veterans, seniors, and their families, that is advancing census participation through its more than 500 community-based centers nationwide.

There are various ways people with disabilities can ensure they are included independent of these outreach initiatives through direct access to www.2020census.gov as the Census website has a variety of accessibility tools. These tools include video guides in American Sign Language (ASL), with closed or open captioning, Braille and large print versions of the questionnaire, telephone access, and an option for those who are deaf or hard of hearing to request a visit from a census taker who is fluent in ASL [Source: Angela Williams via The Hill].

ADDITIONAL INFORMATION:

[Complete the 2020 Census](https://2020census.gov/?cid=20003:2020%20census:sem.ga:p:dm:en:&utm_source=sem.ga&utm_medium=p&utm_campaign=dm:en&utm_content=20003&utm_term=2020%20census)

https://2020census.gov/?cid=20003:2020%20census:sem.ga:p:dm:en:&utm_source=sem.ga&utm_medium=p&utm_campaign=dm:en&utm_content=20003&utm_term=2020%20census

[Americans with disabilities must be counted in 2020 Census](https://thehill.com/opinion/healthcare/486087-americans-with-disabilities-must-be-counted-in-2020-census)

<https://thehill.com/opinion/healthcare/486087-americans-with-disabilities-must-be-counted-in-2020-census>

ENVISIONING EQUITY AND INCLUSIVITY IN HOLLYWOOD

March 13, 2020 - The nonprofit, RespectAbility, perhaps most known for its Hollywood Disability Inclusion Toolkit (<https://www.respectability.org/hollywood-inclusion/>), is hosting its second annual innovative Lab series for emerging entertainment talent, as well as a track for mid-level career professionals. After experiencing success last year, with 5 of the 16 emerging track participants finding employment at Paramount Pictures, Sony Pictures Entertainment, and the Walt Disney Company, RespectAbility has decided to make this an annual event. The target group for this program is people with disabilities interested in and with experience in development, production, and post-production, including careers as writers, directors, cinematographers, animators, and other production roles. "Great entertainment requires authentic stories and genuine

representation of all people. This includes diverse people with physical, cognitive, sensory, mental health and other disabilities.”

During this 5-week, ten-session summer lab series, there are two tracks for participants to consider: emerging or mid-career. The former track, emerging, is created for young professionals with an internship or first job experience aspiring to become writers, directors, producers, animators, and other production positions. While the latter track, mid-career, is mentorship for more established individuals with disabilities who wish to take part in the program for the networking opportunities and to serve as mentors for the younger professionals. Each lab session will include guest speakers and leaders in the industry. In addition to studio executives, 2019 speakers included individuals from Creative Artists Agency, Film Fatales, GLAAD, Geena Davis Institute on Gender in Media, Muslim Public Affairs Council Hollywood Bureau, the Sundance Institute, Writers Guild of America West, and others.

From June 15 through July 17, virtual sessions will be held on Tuesday and Thursday afternoons and evenings. Entertainment professionals, with hiring power, will meet a group of qualified individuals with disabilities and potentially experience a shift in their mindsets and equity goals for hiring. RespectAbility will provide ASL interpreters for all educational and related networking events during lab program hours and welcomes other accommodations requests. Up to 30 participants will be accepted into the Lab. Learn more and apply: www.respectability.org/respectability-la-lab.

ADDITIONAL INFORMATION:

[Summer Lab Program for Entertainment Professionals with Disabilities](http://www.respectability.org/respectability-la-lab/)

<https://www.respectability.org/respectability-la-lab/>

IMPROVING HEARING AIDS TO COMBAT THE COCKTAIL PARTY EFFECT

March 11, 2020 - Many of the existing hearing aids are unable to “focus” on what another person is saying in noisy environments. The inability to mentally follow a select person’s voice while filtering out distracting background noise is known as the “cocktail party effect.” What most existing hearing aids do is amplify all sound in a room equally. However, a new prototype may change this if it reaches the production phase. The present prototype takes the form of a headset, and plans for trials on users with hearing loss are in the works.

The scientists at German’s Fraunhofer Institute for Digital Media Technology are addressing this problem through the three-year “mEEGaHStim” research project. The mEEGaHStim project roughly translates to “mobile EEG-based brain stimulation for better hearing.” This project has produced a wearable device that incorporates an EEG (electroencephalograph), which analyzes the electrical activity of the wearer’s brain to determine the direction in which they’re currently focusing their hearing. It also uses a technique called transcranial electrostimulation, a very low electrical current

used to stimulate the auditory cortex of the user's brain, which improves the ability to focus on a select speaker's voice [Source: Ben Coxworth via New Atlas].

ADDITIONAL INFORMATION:

[Voice-following hearing aid both reads and stimulates the brain](https://newatlas.com/health-wellbeing/meegahstim-hearing-aid/)
<https://newatlas.com/health-wellbeing/meegahstim-hearing-aid/>

INCLUSIVITY IN LEARNING DURING THE DIGITAL AGE

March 11, 2020 - "The New Accessibility: Students With Disabilities and Access to Technology" is *Inside Higher Ed's* latest compilation of incisive and practical articles. Lieberman (2019) notes that many colleges lack formal policies for digital accessibility, leaving students with disabilities at a disadvantage. However, a new set of quality indicators could lay the foundation institutions need. These seven indicators, recommended for implementation, include:

- The institution has a coordinated system for offering students with disabilities tools that meet their needs.
- Students who require support receive it promptly.
- Written guidelines clearly outline procedures students can follow to receive support.
- Materials for students with disabilities come from a variety of sources and methods.
- A "systematic data collection process" monitors the institution's commitment to its accessibility goals.
- Data collected from the above process informs subsequent decision making about improvements to accessibility offerings.
- Accessibility efforts are supported by "sufficient fiscal, human and infrastructure resources."

McKenzie (2019) discussed the legal dispute over video captions after court rejects requests by MIT and Harvard University to dismiss lawsuits accusing them of discriminating against people who are Deaf. Two high-profile civil rights lawsuits filed by the National Association of the Deaf (NAD) against Harvard University and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology are set to continue after requests to dismiss the cases were recently denied for the second time. In this case, the two aforementioned universities were accused by the NAD in 2015 of failing to make their massive open online courses, guest lectures, and other video content accessible to people who are deaf or hard of hearing.

Judge Katherine A. Robertson of the U.S. District Court of Massachusetts largely rejected the universities' second attempt to dismiss the cases. On March 28, Robertson denied the institutions' pleas for the exclusion of their websites from Title III of the Americans With Disabilities Act and Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act. Title III of the ADA prohibits disability discrimination by "places of public accommodation." Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act prohibits discrimination based on disability in programs that receive federal funding. Judge Robertson did, however, agree

that the universities could not be held responsible for the accessibility of third-party content on their websites under the Communications Decency Act. The case details can be found in the “The New Accessibility: Students With Disabilities and Access to Technology” compilation.

Several other articles address topics such as the practicality of high-tech instructional materials for students with disabilities, ADA lawsuits that changed the landscape of digital learning for students with disabilities, and how technology can address access barriers. [Source: Doug Lederman via InsideHigherEd]

ADDITIONAL INFORMATION:

[The New Accessibility: Students With Disabilities and Access to Technology](https://www.insidehighered.com/content/new-accessibility-students-disabilities-and-access-technology)

<https://www.insidehighered.com/content/new-accessibility-students-disabilities-and-access-technology>

MOBILE APP HELPS LOCALS WITH DISABILITIES NAVIGATE CITY INDEPENDENTLY

February 28, 2020 - In the City of Chattanooga, the Department of Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities (DIDD), in partnership with CARTA, Orange Grove Center, and AbleLink Smart Living Technologies, released a joint initiative designed to support people with cognitive disabilities in Hamilton County. This initiative aims explicitly to increase the independence of people with cognitive disabilities through assisted public transportation navigation via mobile-app technology. The app uses AbleLink’s WayFinder SMART Travel system to navigate the transit system. Recently, the City implemented a pilot program comprised of participants identified through the Orange Grove Center. These participants underwent assessment and training to learn how to use the app with confidence before their first independent ride. Since the program’s launch in May 2018, more than 100 people are using the app to live and work more independently [Source WTVC].

ADDITIONAL INFORMATION:

[App aims to help Chattanooga with cognitive disabilities ride CARTA system independently](https://newschannel9.com/news/local/app-aims-to-help-chattanooga-with-cognitive-disabilities-ride-carta-system-independently)

<https://newschannel9.com/news/local/app-aims-to-help-chattanooga-with-cognitive-disabilities-ride-carta-system-independently>

GEORGIA TECH RESEARCHERS RECEIVE GOOGLE AI AWARDS

February 24, 2020 - The annual Google Faculty Research Awards, a program focused on supporting outstanding technical research in computer science, engineering, and related fields, received 917 proposals from approximately 50 countries and over 330 universities. Georgia Tech researchers were among the recipients who received these prestigious awards. Congratulations to:

- Systems: Alexandros Daglis, College of Computing
- Machine Perception: Melody M Jackson, College of Computing

- Algorithms and Optimization: Mohit Singh, Industrial and Systems Engineering
- Structured Data: Chao Zhang, College of Computing
- Machine learning and data mining: Tuo Zhao, Industrial and Systems Engineering

These awards allow Google researchers to partner with faculty who are doing impactful research, additionally covering tuition for a student. After an extensive review process, Google funded 150 proposals across a wide range of research areas, with 27% of its recipients identified as a historically underrepresented group within technology. [Source: Maggie Johnson via Google AI]

ADDITIONAL INFORMATION:

[Announcing the 2019 Google Faculty Research Award Recipients](https://ai.googleblog.com/2020/02/announcing-2019-google-faculty-research.html)

<http://ai.googleblog.com/2020/02/announcing-2019-google-faculty-research.html>

AI SUITCASE FACILITATES INDIVIDUAL TRAVEL

February 24, 2020 - A consortium of five companies, including IBM Japan, Shimizu, and Mitsubishi, collaborated to develop a suitcase-shaped robot to help facilitate independent travel for people with vision disabilities. This robot operates primarily as a navigation tool that uses artificial intelligence (AI). The AI suitcase helps with finding the optimal travel route based on the user's location and map data, uses video and other sensor information to help people avoid obstacles, alerts users of nearby stores, and helps with actions like joining a line. This consortium of companies was inspired by a prototype created by IBM fellow Chieko Asakawa at Carnegie Mellon University on a navigation robot called CaBot. The researchers working with Asakawa evaluated CaBot using the feedback of usability testers who are blind. The latest AI suitcase created by the consortium is set to have a public pilot in June 2020. [Source: Shelby Brown via CNET]

ADDITIONAL INFORMATION:

[Robot suitcase uses AI to help visually impaired travelers](https://www.cnet.com/news/robot-suitcase-uses-ai-to-help-visually-impaired-travelers/)

<https://www.cnet.com/news/robot-suitcase-uses-ai-to-help-visually-impaired-travelers/>

FUNDING ACCESSIBILITY APPS TO INCREASE USAGE

February 19, 2020 - Be My Eyes is a free mobile app launched in 2015 that has more than 2 million volunteers who act as on-call visual interpreters for people who have vision disabilities. Companies will partner with Be My Eyes and offer free expert support for products and services; however, it is unlike the traditional customer service centers where one calls and attempts to describe an issue. All calls are conducted by live video through the individual's mobile camera. This functionality makes it easier for the customer/technical service agent to understand and troubleshoot the problems. Since its inception, Be My Eyes has expanded with a "specialized help" component, which connects users to firms like Microsoft, Google, and Procter & Gamble.

Now Cultivation Capital, a St. Louis-based venture capital firm, has led a \$2.8 million Series A funding round for Be My Eyes. The on-demand app is fully staffed by volunteers, but Be My Eyes has looked to corporate partners, to keep its product free “and sustain its ‘purpose and profit’ operating model.” These funding efforts are aimed at ensuring the longevity of the accessibility app, Be My Eyes. [Source: BeMyEyes; Nathan Rubbelke via BizJournals].

ADDITIONAL INFORMATION:

[St. Louis VC firm invests in mobile app designed to help visually impaired](https://www.bizjournals.com/stlouis/news/2020/02/19/st-louis-vc-firm-invests-in-mobile-app-designed-to.html)

<https://www.bizjournals.com/stlouis/news/2020/02/19/st-louis-vc-firm-invests-in-mobile-app-designed-to.html>

BRIDGING THE SERVICE GAP BETWEEN LAW ENFORCEMENT & PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES

February 6, 2020 - The Town of Amherst Police Department started giving officers video remote sign language interpreter technology to better communicate with the deaf and hard-of-hearing community. The pilot program will grant police digital access to American Sign Language interpreters, working remotely across the country via a FaceTime-esque app. The app is provided in partnership with Deaf Access Services, a Buffalo nonprofit that includes video remote interpreting. There will also be a tablet computer, preloaded with the app at the police stations for walk-in reports and complaints. This system is an advancement over the traditional visor cards or pen and paper method that the Amherst police typically used to communicate with citizens who are deaf and hard-of-hearing. The system is also a step in the right direction as the Americans with Disabilities Act mandates those with disabilities get the same law enforcement services as everyone else. [Source: Tom Dinki via WBFO NPR]

ADDITIONAL INFORMATION:

[Amherst Police to use video remote sign language interpreters to communicate with the deaf](https://news.wbfo.org/post/amherst-police-use-video-remote-sign-language-interpreters-communicate-deaf)

<https://news.wbfo.org/post/amherst-police-use-video-remote-sign-language-interpreters-communicate-deaf>

UPCOMING EVENTS

2020 M-ENABLING SUMMIT [NEW DATES]

The M-Enabling Summit will convene from September 14 to 16, 2020, in Washington, D.C. Summit presenters will cover topics such as robotics, wearables, virtual and augmented reality, artificial intelligence, and IoT.

ADDITIONAL INFORMATION:

[M-Enabling Website](#)

<https://m-enabling.com/>

TECHNOLOGY AND DISABILITY POLICY HIGHLIGHTS, MARCH 2020

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The Technology and Disability Policy Highlights (TDPH) is a monthly newsletter that reports on national public policy events and tracks emerging issues of interest to individuals with disabilities, researchers, policymakers, industry, and advocacy professionals. The Wireless RERC is a research center that promotes universal access to wireless technologies and explores their innovative applications in addressing the needs, user experiences, and expectations of people with disabilities. For more information on the Wireless RERC, please visit our website at [<http://www.wirelessrerc.org>]. For further information on items summarized in this report, or if you have items of interest that you would like included in future editions, please contact this edition's editors Salimah LaForce [salimah@cacp.gatech.edu] or Dara Bright [dara.bright@cacp.gatech.edu]. If you wish to update your email address, send an email to salimah@cacp.gatech.edu.

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