



**CONSORTIUM FOR CITIZENS
WITH DISABILITIES**

Independence, Empowerment and Security

The Consortium for Citizens with Disabilities

Employment and Training Task Force Statement of Principles for Re-Opening America and Responding to the Current Economic Crisis

Every American has been impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic in ways large and small. At the end of May, over [40 million Americans were](#) out of work and over 120,000 Americans had died from COVID-19. Now, with a wave of reopening across the country, many states such as [Arizona and Texas](#) are facing major increases in hospitalization as a result of new infections caused by the easing of social distancing and relaxed safety precautions by the public.

These are early signs that however much political leadership and the public might desire a “return to normal”, the post-COVID world will look nothing like what came before. Precautions and vigilance against further spread of the disease must be paramount in our personal lives, our professional efforts and our wider communities.

As businesses and non-profit organizations struggle to turn a profit or secure their revenue streams, many workers are being furloughed. Millions of households are grappling with the bare cupboard reality of lost income and the bone deep insecurity of worrying about what comes next.

The Consortium of Citizens with Disabilities (CCD) is a coalition of national organizations working for public policies that ensure the self-determination, independence, empowerment, integration and inclusion of children and adults with disabilities in all aspects of society. Our collected organizations have been deeply involved with the advocacy efforts around the COVID-19 pandemic. For decades, our members have advocated for the rights and responsibilities of people with disabilities to participate to their fullest extent possible in our nation's workforce.

We have done so because our organizations represent the more than 60 million Americans living with disabilities. That number includes people with visual impairments or hearing loss, people with visible conditions such as spinal cord injuries, and the wide range of non-visible disabilities such as learning disabilities, mental health disabilities, or autism.

As the nation grapples with a new economic reality, states and state leaders are facing new pressures to accelerate their plans to ease social distancing restrictions, reopen their economies and reemploy millions of displaced workers. In response, the Employment and Training Task Force of CCD offers the following principles to draw attention to the broad array of steps that need to be taken now to ensure that people with disabilities are an integral part of our collective economic response to the pandemic.

#1 – Ensure that People with Disabilities and Others with Barriers to Employment are a High Priority in any Economic Recovery Plan.

An [April report](#) published by Kessler Foundation and the University of New Hampshire’s Institute on Disability (UNH-IOD), shows that nearly one million working-age people with disabilities lost their jobs. That represents a 20 percent reduction of the number of workers with disabilities in our nation’s economy. While new data shows some workers with disabilities are returning to work as restrictions ease, there are “concerns that workers who lost their jobs permanently (immediately or after being on furlough for a period of time) will stop looking for work and thus exit the labor force.”

Moreover, the traditional advantages of people with disabilities in attendance and reliability were negatively impacted as social distancing became a matter of life or death, and the public transit on which so much of the disability community depends became a particular safety concern. For the first time ever, data shows an increase in absenteeism as people had to choose between life and work.

Many of those workers with disabilities have only been furloughed. However, how many employers will be able to survive the long-term economic realities of this pandemic? How can state leaders plan *now* to help people with disabilities and other dislocated workers facing economic disruptions?

#2 – Ensure That Workforce Services are Optimized to Serve Workers with Disabilities Who Lost Their Jobs Due to COVID-19.

With over 40 million Americans out of work, the nation’s workforce development system is going to face unprecedented strains. According to the [National Skills Coalition](#), at the height of the Great Recession, “the workforce system experienced a 234 percent increase in the number of Americans seeking reemployment and training services.” In 2009, that system “served more than 8 million people”.

How will this system endeavor to meet the scope of need created by the current crisis? What steps are being taken to ensure that workforce programs will be prepared to meet that need? Do those programs have competency on disability issues (as required by Section 188 of WIOA) or have they implemented successful strategies to help job seekers with disabilities?

#3 – Encourage Employers to Continue to Offer Working from Home / Remote Work Options to Protect Workers (with and without) Disabilities Vulnerable to COVID-19.

The CDC reports that approximately 90 percent of people hospitalized with COVID-19 have underlying conditions. People with disabilities and other historically marginalized communities

are the groups most likely to have these conditions, and are among the most at risk for severe complications from the coronavirus.

People with disabilities have long advocated for more flexible telework or remote work opportunities. Businesses accept telework as a part of professional life and endeavor to make remote work feasible for more workers. This change can mean good news for people with disabilities. As [noted](#) by the National Organization on Disability, “enabling employees to work from home half-time can save an employer \$10,000 a year and an employee \$3,000 annually” and “enable tens of thousands of people with disabilities to enter the workforce.” That is an attractive combination for a business looking to cut costs but still maintain a quality workforce.

The titanic shift of telework allows the opportunity to look at other best practices for employment of people with disabilities and others who may one day acquire them.

#4 – Ensure Access to Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) for Essential Workers with Disabilities

Where possible, remote work should be a priority, but where in-person presence is absolutely required, precautions need to be taken. Access to Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) needs to be part of operational budgets as much as printer ink or mailing envelopes. Temperature checks and access to testing need to become an accepted part of the workday as does building a culture of increase vigilance. Many offices are installing hand sanitizing stations, but are they at a height accessible for wheelchair users? Installing new HEPA filters in an office air system or close-proximity to cleaning solutions might create challenges for people with chemical sensitivities. Such are the considerations that need to be taken now.

States should work with their key employers to ensure that every effort is made to provide adequate PPE for essential workers with and without disabilities. These workers should be protected as much as possible from exposure to COVID-19 for both economic and humanitarian reasons. In circumstances where PPE is not available, social distancing measures still need to be in place and explicitly supported via publicly announced workplace policies. Some employers in the knowledge industries are adopting staggered shifts where half or less of an office pool goes to work on rotating days while the other pool of workers work from home. Such hybrid staff schedules may be tricky to implement in some businesses, but they represent due precautions that employers need to take for the sake of their workers.

#5 – Hazard Pay for Essential Workers with and without Disabilities.

Hazard pay for essential workers is an important idea and one that employers should give serious consideration to supporting. It is a far more meaningful and valuable expression of supporting than empty slogans about heroism in television ads or social media organized pot-and-pan banging sessions. Workers with and without disabilities deserve fair wages for fair work. Now, essential workers are being asked to risk life or death to bear the burden of saving lives, comforting the dying, cleaning our hospitals, preparing our food and delivering our groceries.

While it is firmly stuck in Congress at the moment, the [proposed HEROES Act](#) would establish funding to provide hazards pay for essential workers. This is a uniquely salient issue for essential workers with disabilities as any changes in pay (like hazard pay) should be accompanied by benefits counseling. Given the sad unlikelihood of rapid Congressional action and the dire financial straits faced by most state governments, there is a significant opportunity for private sector leadership. Business leaders have an opportunity to look past their profit margins and directly support the workers who made those profits possible. As such, businesses should look to make more meaningful contributions to their workers' income beyond the pittance offered by [some businesses](#).

#6 – Empower Vocational Rehabilitation Agencies to Successfully Serve PWDs who have lost their jobs due to the crisis or have become PWDs because of COVID.

People with disabilities are among the vulnerable population that is likely to be laid off during the pandemic crisis. The April job monthly report shows that the number of working-age people with disabilities who were employed decreased by 950,000 between March and April, a 17 percent reduction. State Vocational Rehabilitation (VR) Agencies should be prepared to serve those people with disabilities who recently lost their jobs due to COVID-19.

#8 – Recognizing and Planning for the Fact that COVID-19 is Increasing the Size of the Disability Community.

The disability community itself is going to grow because of the pandemic. It will do so because people who have survived the virus face a host of [long-term health](#) consequences. Likewise, a significant number of Americans are developing new [mental health conditions](#). Moreover, as the country faces a recession to rival the Great Depression, more people will apply for benefits through the Social Security Disability Insurance (SSDI) program.

What this means for federal, state, and local policymakers is clear. Efforts need to be undertaken now so that we do not lose the considerable talents, skills, and insights that people with disabilities generally and people who have become disabled because of COVID specifically, have to offer. In terms of the long-term consequences of people who survived the coronavirus, we are barely beginning to understand what that will look like. The best response has to be from professional culture and employer leadership. Encouraging workers who feel sick to stay home and rest needs to be destigmatized and accepted. At the same time, building new professional cultures that reflect living with COVID-19 needs to involve both accountability and equality of work. Now is an opportunity to look at processes that ensure continuity of work from remote settings, policies that support worker health and programs that foster collaboration even via telecommuting software. A [2015 study](#) by the Department of Labor found that “38 percent of people in management, business, and financial operations and 35 percent of people in professional and related occupations did some or all of their work from home.” COVID has necessitated increases in those percentages, but what lessons can be learned about making working from home successful for more and more workers. That in turn, requires efforts to ensure equality of work.

What exactly does that mean? It means that employers in the public, private and non-profit sector have an obligation to avoid creating two categories of work. Remote workers and workers who are mandated to return to their offices need to be given the same work, the same challenges and the same opportunities for advancement. For employees in professional occupations and workers in the knowledge economy, success depends on earned reputation, close collaboration, and trusted relationships. Ensuring that equality will depend heavily on intentional action on the part of leadership.

Beyond the direct deaths of so many Americans because of COVID-19, projections estimate that there might be as many as 75,000 “[deaths of despair](#)” in the months ahead. These second order effects will impact the workplace, the labor force and employers in unanticipated ways. Further, the [violent events](#) of this past June have had unique mental health impacts on African Americans workers. As such, the mental health and the wellbeing of employees with and without disabilities need to be part of both reopening plans and future economic efforts. Employers need to look for partners who can supplement their internal capacity to address mental health issues in the workplace. Just as PPE is now needed in operational budgets, human resource departments need to recognize the mental health dimensions of the “new normal.” How can leaders in positions of trust, speak openly and without fear about their experiences with mental health issues? Even before the current crisis, the global consulting and professional services firm EY had proactively made [destigmazing](#) workplace conversations about mental health part of their brand. Their holistic approach, with its special focus on employee-led efforts, is a [case study](#) for other companies, programs and agencies to follow.

#9 – Transportation Issues in the Post-COVID world and what it means for Workers with Disabilities.

Transit systems are essential for the continued functioning of our economy, the operations of our employers, the logistics of getting supplies such as PPE where it is needed and ensuring people can access healthcare. As such, transit systems and transportation programs need to be in sync with state and local efforts to reopen and move beyond quarantine. It goes without saying that workers cannot return to work, get a new job, or access new training opportunities without secure transportation. Now, access to transportation also needs to be safe and sanitary for riders so they can minimize exposure to COVID-19.

These issues are uniquely salient for employees with disabilities, especially workers who cannot work from home or who have been deemed essential. Paratransit is essential and must continue while meeting the full extent of law, including not restricting destinations and meeting public health requirements. Many of these critical issues were [identified](#) by our colleagues from the Transportation Task Force of the Consortium for Citizens with Disabilities and their ideas deserve close attention as states move through the phases of reopening.

[Section 5310 programs](#) are the only secure means of transportation for many older Americans and Americans with disabilities. While federally funded, these programs depend on local match dollars to expand coverage and meet consumer demand. With state budget facing significant contractions and reduction, these programs need to be protected and supported. Further, continuing access to PPE and clear cleaning protocols remain important for ensuring trust of drivers and riders who depend on public transportation services. If you want people with

disabilities or other underlying health conditions taking the bus or riding the subway, they need to know that transit personnel are being vigilant and proactive. This in turn, means that programs and departments have a responsibility to clearly communicate policies and procedures through multiple accessible channels. Changes in transportation, including service hours, routes, boarding and payment policies, etc., need to get to the hands of riders before they go to the bus stop or transit center. Further, transit personnel need to know to do so that they can accommodate people who cannot wear masks due to age or disability. Lastly, as with so many of the principles articulated above, state and local authorities need to ensure people with disabilities are included in decision making process.

Thank you very much for your attention and hard work. These challenging times require close collaboration and cooperation across all sector of our nation's society. We appreciate your taking the time to hear our concerns and urge you to reach out to any of us co-chairs (Julie J. Christensen, PhD, LMSW julie@apse.org, Alicia Epstein aepstein@sourceamerica.org, Rie Kennedy-Lazotte rkizotte@nasddd.org, or Philip Kahn-Pauli philipp@respectability.org)

We sincerely look forward to working with you to get people with disabilities back to work and getting the economy moving once again.

Sincerely,

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