

New Horizons

Housing That Supports Independence

House OKs COVID-19 Relief Plan With More Payments For People With Disabilities

By Michelle Diamant / Reprinted from Disability Scoop | May 18, 2020

A fresh round of stimulus checks for people with disabilities and billions for home- and community-based services are part of a \$3 trillion relief bill that faces an uncertain future.

The bill known as the Heroes Act, or H.R. 6800, passed the U.S. House of Representatives Friday by a vote of 208 to 199. The measure is unlikely to be taken up in its current form by the Republican-led Senate, but it is seen as a first step in negotiating another relief package to address the fallout from the coronavirus pandemic.

Significantly, advocates say, this is the only major COVID-19 response from Congress so far to consider the needs of people with disabilities who have been deeply affected by the pandemic. “The Heroes Act is the first time in the COVID-19 legislative response that the disability community is being recognized,” said Nicole Jorwic, senior director of public policy at The Arc.

The legislation includes an estimated \$10 to \$15 billion in additional federal funding to states to pay for Medicaid home- and community-based services for a full year beginning in July. The money could be used to cover services for anyone with a disability who qualifies for the program — including those currently on waiting lists — and pay for recruitment and retention of direct support professionals, among other needs.

The bill also recognizes the direct support professionals that people with disabilities rely on for day-to-day needs as essential workers so that they can access personal protective equipment, qualify for hazard pay and other extra benefits.

Sarah Meek, senior director of legislative affairs for the American Network of Community Options and Resources, or ANCOR, a national trade group representing disability service providers, called the legislation a “game changer.” “There is really a recognition that this money for home- and community-based services providers is kind of a must-have in whatever package is next, so I’m optimistic,” she said.

Meanwhile, the measure retroactively grants \$500 cash payments to adults with disabilities who are claimed as dependents. These individuals were excluded from receiving stimulus checks in the last relief package which was approved in March. And, the legislation includes a new round of direct cash payments of \$1,200 per person — up to a maximum of \$6,000 per family — for many Americans earning less than \$75,000 annually, with tiered amounts beyond that. People with disabilities would qualify for the automatic payments even if they are counted as a dependent or if they receive benefits like Supplemental Security Income.

There is also \$200 million in dedicated funding for disability housing in the bill as well as a change to allow siblings and grandparents to qualify for expanded paid leave if they need to take time off from work to care for an adult with a disability due to coronavirus-related closures.



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“My Two Cents”

By Tim Doherty, Executive Director



During this time of the pandemic, many functions and events have been forced to cancel or re-schedule for maybe another time. One of the most heartbreaking is the cancelling of graduation for all our students, robbing them of the chance to relish their achievements. And as sad as that is, every generation has been forced to endure some kind of interruption from events out of their control. This happened to my father in law when he was called up for WWII.

My son recently wrote about his own graduation which he had coupled with his grandfather, 50 years later.

Graduation Moments Deferred

Graduates in the class of 2020 are missing out on one of the great rites of passage. Never in the past would we have thought the ability to stand on a stage in a gymnasium or on a football field filled with our peers and families would seem like such a privilege, but alas only in loss do we sometimes see the value of what we had. While the ceremony itself adds little to the educational accomplishments of the class, that 'graduation moment' somehow acknowledges, celebrates and completes the work of the student, allowing them to begin their next chapter.

While the pandemic is itself without precedent, its disruption to our important life events isn't. I offer a story of a graduate who also didn't cross that stage with his peers, but instead got a more personal opportunity to celebrate his accomplishments.

My grandfather, James Wilson, completed his engineering degree at Lehigh University in 1944. His Lehigh experience was one of a poor kid, commuting from a nearby town, during the tumultuous war years. Everything was focused on the war, even the academic year was altered to a trimester schedule to speed the process of minting graduates for the war effort.

In his last semester, he was selected for an assignment in the Merchant Marine, took his finals a few weeks early and shipped out before commencement ceremonies were held. Like so many who sacrificed greatly for the defense of our country, he never dwelled on missing graduation, but it was none-the-less a part of his story. His degree arrived in the mail in a cardboard tube.

Fifty plus years later, I began my own Lehigh education and grandpa got to observe a different version of 'the college experience'. I lived in a dorm and enjoyed campus life, and grandpa was a frequent visitor and supporter. We enjoyed sharing Lehigh and although already close, were brought closer by this shared bond.

When it came time for me to graduate, I contacted the university president who agreed to the idea-- grandpa should walk in commencement ceremonies with me. It took a little prodding from my grandmother to get him to agree because he didn't want to take away from my graduation. But I can honestly say it was a far more special day because he participated. After my name was called and I walked across the stage, shook the hand of the University president and received my degree, I turned around just as the announcer read "James Francis Wilson." Immediately, the whole arena roared with applause and the crowd gave the 75 year old graduate a standing ovation as grandpa finally had his 'graduation moment'.

While it's impossible to know what either my or my grandfathers graduations would have been like otherwise, the circumstances of his commencement deferred gave us a special opportunity to personalize our experience. I offer this story because it might be the case for the class of 2020 that your 'graduation moment', although deferred, is now yours to choose. Perhaps instead of video commencement or drive thru graduation, the best idea is to offer the class of 2020 the opportunity to participate in a future ceremony (hopefully not 50 years later), maybe with a sibling or at a particular reunion anniversary-- whatever might make it even more meaningful to the individual. I hope the administration of schools and universities will give this some consideration, so that instead of the class of 2020 being the class who didn't have a graduation, they'll be the class who got to have their 'graduation moment' on their own terms.

Written by Tim Doherty Jr.



From Norman's Desk

As I have written many times, June represented the end of school and the beginning of the Summer season for a good part of my life. Even after leaving college too many years ago, June felt like the end of a period of intense work.

This year, everything feels different. As New Jersey and the nation "opens up" after months of being shut-in, masked-up, social-distanced, and video-binging. One would expect to feel relieved or exhilarated to the chance to get out to do something else.

But this June feels darker and foreboding. I'm not looking for ways to get to the Shore or looking forward to going to D.C. to meet with various Congressional staffers and actual Representatives and Senators. No, I'm actually glad that I cannot go this year. Even the Hurricane Season, which "officially" begins June 1, seems more ominous this year

with the prospect of 18 named storms, any of which can turn into another Hurricane Harvey or Katrina.

Yes, this June feels different because it feels "false." This not "my June" of positive expectancy but more like temporary relief with light and warmth. It is pleasant and welcoming but not enough to remove the darkness of the past months. This is probably how people in the military feel between dangerous deployments.

Yet, we need to push through this bland feeling of falseness to enjoy the warmth and light. We need to rest and recharge our bodies and souls gathering physical and mental strength. We need to acknowledge what we have gone through, learn from it, and feel a sense of wary accomplishment that we made it this far. We need to do this for ourselves, for our families, and for those who did not make it to this point.

We can enjoy this summer and still be safe and cautious. It would be irresponsible to ourselves not to enjoy the comforts of Summer. Conversely, it would be irresponsible to others not to be cautious and wary in our actions. We have learned how interconnected we are.

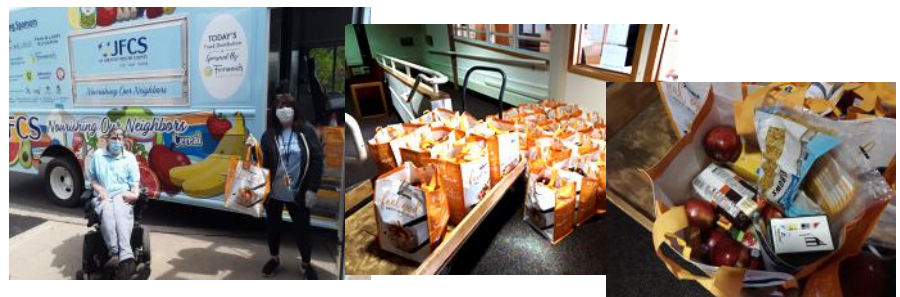
June has also been the month to write about being a father. I have only celebrated Fathers' Day 11 times as a father before this year. Celebrating the day as a father is far different than celebrating as a son with my father. For one thing, a son is trying to show his Dad his love and appreciation that he feels for him while the Dad wants to show his son (or daughter) the wonderment and pride of being Dad. Being Dad to any child is wonderful and awesome. Father's Day is the icing on the proverbial cake when a proud father hear "Happy Fathers' Day, Dad!"

Norman A. Smith, Associate Executive Director –
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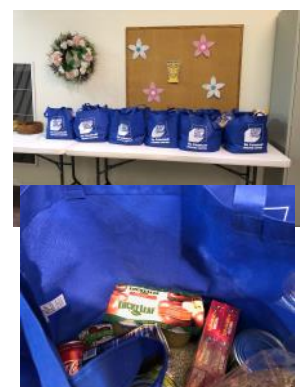
In times of disasters and national emergencies, individuals and organizations have always stepped in to fill the gaps in the response. The COVID-19 response has been no different with individuals making masks or going shopping for people who cannot get to the stores safely.



Community organizations also step up to help out. This was exemplified by the Princeton Corridor Rotary Club. This long-time supporter of Project Freedom sponsored \$1,500 of groceries for the tenants. In the past, this socially-minded club supported the acquisition of a generator for Robbinsville.

Meanwhile, Project Freedom tenants in Robbinsville, Hamilton, and Lawrence were lent a helping hand by the Jewish Family and Children's Services (JFCS) of Greater Mercer County. JFCS is a nonprofit community service agency with a mission to strengthen individuals and families. JFCS' resources include an on-site health food pantry and a wide network of community partnerships.

The JFCS Mobile Food Pantry Truck began bringing the resources of the JFCS brick-and-mortar pantry to distribution sites in Mercer County in January. The pantry-on-wheels delivered bags of fresh food in Wegmans' reusable hopping bags to tenants in Robbinsville. In the following weeks, the truck visited the Hamilton and Lawrence complexes as well.



Another community organization, Arm In Arm, also delivered food to Lawrence, Hamilton, and Robbinsville tenants on a regular basis

DSPs Worry About Protective Equipment, Changed Routines

by Kate Giammarise, Reprinted from Pittsburgh Post-Gazette/TNS | May 12, 2020

PITTSBURGH — Edward Monk’s job was tough — even before a global pandemic hit. Monk is a caregiver for two men with Down syndrome in a residential home. As a direct support professional, he assists those he cares for with tasks like grooming, preparing meals, administering medications and generally helping the men he cares for live in their Mt. Lebanon group home and be part of the community.

Like everyone else, their routines have been upended by stay-at-home orders and social distancing. For the clients Monk cares for, not being able to go to their jobs has been particularly difficult, he said in a phone interview. “One of the guys asks me every day if he gets to go back to work. ... It’s hard to explain, I don’t even have an answer for when that is even possible. I just have to keep reassuring him that someday, his work will come back up.”

Agencies that serve individuals with disabilities are facing numerous challenges — both in terms of trying to stop the spread of COVID-19 and keep their residents and staff safe — as well as dealing with the emotional hardships of lost routines and being unable to see family in-person, said Carol Ferez, director of the IDD division at the Rehabilitation and Community Providers Association, a statewide group representing health and human service providers.

Furthermore, the pandemic is straining what was an already-stressed system of workers and mainly non-profit providers — direct support professionals typically earn low wages and have high job turnover, leading to a number of pre-pandemic vacancies. Providers can’t raise wages without additional reimbursement from the state’s Medicaid program.

Many programs have been paying higher wages and additional overtime because they were under the impression the state would be paying higher rates, though it is unclear if that will happen now. They also have the increased costs of obtaining cleaning products and personal protective equipment supplies, said Mark Davis, president and CEO of Pennsylvania Advocacy and Resources for Autism and Intellectual Disability. “Our community is really at risk of just being decimated. ... We were just not in any kind of position to absorb this,” he said. Providers are hoping for additional funds from the state to cover their costs, he said.

State human service officials say they’re aware the situation has stretched providers — though the state is financially strapped as well. “We realize the financial strain that the COVID-19 pandemic has placed upon providers. Over the past several weeks, DHS has been collecting data from providers on the impact of COVID-19 in an effort to develop plans that will stabilize the provider community and ensure they are able to serve participants once the pandemic is over,” said Erin James, a spokeswoman for the state’s Department of Human Services.

State officials have said they are expecting a budget shortfall in the billions of dollars due to the loss of sales tax and payroll tax revenues. Under the recently-passed federal CARES Act, the state is expecting to receive about \$2.7 billion. “The Governor’s Office will be working closely with the legislature to determine the most appropriate way to distribute these funds to assist providers with their financial needs,” said James.

In the meantime, however, agencies say they have urgent needs now. Obtaining protective surgical and N95 masks has been especially difficult for many agencies, Ferez said. While not considered medical staff, many direct support professionals might be assisting their clients with eating, bathing or other intimate, hands-on care. “You can’t keep a social distance when you are assisting someone eating or bathing. You’re doing personal care with a number of people,” said Ferez.

State guidelines to providers have emphasized hygiene and cleaning, reporting all suspected or confirmed COVID-19 cases and have given guidance on infection control best practices. “We have had a heck of a time (obtaining personal protective equipment), we are really worried about it,” said Davis. Among the items needed by his members: N95 masks, gowns, toilet paper, cleaning wipes and large bottles of hand sanitizer. His concern was echoed by Karen Jacobsen, CEO of Emmaus Community of Pittsburgh, which operates 10 area group homes. Jacobsen said her organization was lucky enough to get donations of medical supplies from the nonprofit Global Links, as well as from Allegheny County. Faced with a hard time buying out-of-stock cleaning supplies, she resorted to asking for Clorox wipes and other supplies on a neighborhood Facebook page, which resulted in a number of donations left on her doorstep.

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Visits From Horses Brighten Locked-Down Days For Those With Special Needs

by Phil Anastasia, Reprinted from The Philadelphia Inquirer/TNS | May 15, 2020



Lauren Maqboul, 22, with her son Cameron Maqboul, 4, as they are visited by Big Mac, a miniature horse from Pegasus Therapeutic Riding Academy. Cameron has autism and is nonverbal and began horse therapy sessions at Pegasus in January before the coronavirus outbreak closed the facility. (Tyger Williams/The Philadelphia Inquirer/TNS)

PHILADELPHIA — Lauren Maqboul said her son was happy. He also was confused. But she called it a “good confusion” for her son Cameron, a 4-year-old with autism and attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD).

She said the surprise visit by two miniature horses from Pegasus Therapeutic Riding Academy made his day and sent a surge of much-needed excitement through her neighborhood in the Oxford Circle section of Northeast Philadelphia. “It was the peak of our quarantine,” Maqboul said of the late April afternoon when Big Mac and Bleu — and their handlers — made an appearance on Pratt Street.

Since January, Cameron had been taking riding lessons every Thursday at Pegasus, which offers equine-assisted activities and programs for individuals with special needs. His interaction with the horses worked wonders. “He is a totally different kid,” Maqboul said of her son’s behavior in the barn and on horseback. “He is calm. He is

quiet. He follows instructions. He is serene, almost.”

Maqboul and Cameron haven’t been able to travel to the barn and riding area on Bustleton Avenue since the outbreak of the coronavirus forced the facility’s shutdown in mid-March. But on a sunny spring Saturday, a crew from Pegasus paid them a visit, as assistant program director Emily Wilmot and a handful of staff members and volunteers brought two miniature horses to the family home. “Cam was so excited,” Wilmot said. “It was so great to see. One of our new instructors, Kylie (Bonelli), she couldn’t stop crying.”

The visit was part of an initiative by Wilmot and program director Teresa Doherty to take Pegasus on the road, arranging for visits by miniature horses Big Mac and Bleu (the French spelling of the color of his eyes) to many of the facility’s regular clients and others looking to brighten their locked-down days. For a \$40 donation, Pegasus staff bring the miniature horses for a 30-minute visit. Social-distancing measures are maintained, so people can’t touch or ride the horses.

Wilmot said the organization has made around 30 visits since the lockdown and have plans for several more. She believes the outings have continued Pegasus’ mission to use the animals to promote wellness. “It meant the world to see them,” said Jillian Hart, 17, of Northeast Philadelphia, who also received a visit on that Saturday. “I really miss them. Just to be able to volunteer and help someone makes me feel like I’m doing something right.”

Hart, a junior at St. Hubert’s High School, is a volunteer for Pegasus but has been unable to work at the facility since the pandemic’s outbreak. “I text the barn manager every day, ‘Can I come back yet?’” Hart said. “I would actually live there if I could.”

Pegasus, which has been in operation since 1982, is a certified member of the Professional Association of Therapeutic Horsemanship (PATH), an international organization that oversees similar facilities and provides training protocols, shares best practices and supplies informational support.

Pegasus has 15 horses on site, and a staff of around 12 people, with close to 100 volunteers. They provide a variety of programs to about 100 regular riders, many of whom have physical, cognitive or psychological disabilities. Pegasus also runs programs for children of first responders to help provide coping skills to “de-escalate stress” that sometimes is present in their homes because of the pressures of their parents’ professions.

Doherty said horses have the unique ability to comfort and connect with riders with special needs. “Horses don’t know how to lie,” Doherty said. “These horses choose to be here. There are horses who don’t want to be therapy horses and we don’t force them. “These horses have unconditional love and acceptance of their people. They make eye contact, unlike many other animals. They look at you and they make that connection: ‘You are my human.’”

Said Wilmot: “Horses are social animals. They look into your eyes. And their movement tends to sync with the body, calming the brain.” Maqboul said the “steady, up-and-down movement” of the horse in motion provides a soothing effect on Cameron, who is nonverbal. “It relaxes his body and seems to relax his brain,” Maqboul said.

Doherty said the visits from Big Mac and Bleu are the next best thing for riders who are missing their regular lessons. “We’ve heard from parents that their kids would be crying out their horse’s name, grabbing riding helmets and trying to go out the door,” Doherty said. “We thought this would be a way to help our riders and also get out in the community, brighten some days, maybe help with fund-raising.”

The visit by Big Mac and Bleu was something special for Cameron, his mother said. “He was so excited, so happy to see them,” Maqboul said. “The people at Pegasus, they have been so wonderful with him, so kind, so patient. “It was a great day. Now we can’t wait until they open again and we can get back there.”

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Not seen, not understood

While Jacobsen said much public attention has rightly focused on critical first responders and hospital workers, she is concerned that the important work of caring for individuals with disabilities is too often not seen and not understood. “The DSP (direct support professional) workforce is rather invisible,” she said. “They will never be recognized publicly for how essential they are. They are working one person in this house, and one person in that house ... every day of the year to keep people healthy, safe, well and engaged.” “I’m not convinced that there is enough understanding of how essential these workers are,” agreed disability advocate and state Rep. Dan Miller, D-Mt. Lebanon. “Everybody knows what a firefighter does, everybody knows what a nurse does ... DSPs are essential. They are life-sustaining.”

Additionally, group homes and their residents have the stay-at-home challenges many others are facing. Most group home residents are now home for far more time during the day, as they are no longer in day programs, activities or jobs. Agencies have been filling the days with activities such as video chats with family and friends, photo contests, cooking, crafts, yard projects and more, said Ferenz. “Routine is pretty important in most people’s lives I would say. But it can be extremely stressful for some of the individuals we work with,” to not have that routine, Monk said. “It’s hard on all of us.”

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YMCA Model UN Students Donate Dental Hygiene Products to Project Freedom



Each year, the YMCA holds a Model United Nations conference in Hershey, Pennsylvania.

Students across the tri-state area prepare for months and come together for one weekend at the beginning of January, to participate in activities such as arguing historical cases and proposing resolutions to improve the world. The goal is to simulate how the actual United Nations is run. The officer corps and youth secretariat corps work year-round to make sure that the conference runs smoothly and organize many aspects of the conference. One main event that the YMCA focuses on is giving back to the community. Every year a different local charity or non-profit is supported, with each school bringing in bags of donations to the conference. During the 2020 conference, Project Freedom was chosen as the non-profit.



The Lead Youth Secretariat for 2019-2020, Katherine Dailey, reached out to Project Freedom in September of 2019 in order to organize a collection of items that Project Freedom's tenants would need. They officially decided to collect dental hygiene products, both travel and full size. This collection occurred over the conference weekend, with each delegation donating supplies to help.

These supplies were recently sorted by volunteers to be distributed out to each of the nine Project Freedom properties, in order to help tenants with the COVID-19 pandemic. Each property was given two large boxes and a bag filled to the brim with mouthwash, toothpaste, toothbrushes, and dental floss. The timing of this donation could not have been better. These donations helped tenants reduce the financial burden caused by COVID-19. Project Freedom would like to extend thanks to Katherine Dailey and the entirety of the YMCA MUN delegations and organizers for their hard work and generosity which will help our tenants navigate the next few months.