

# New Horizons

Housing That Supports Independence



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## Feds Pump Millions Into Disability Housing As Part Of Coronavirus Relief

Reprinted from DisabilityScoop by Michelle Diamant | June 9, 2020

Federal officials are funneling millions of dollars into new housing opportunities for people with disabilities across the nation.

The U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development said it is making available nearly \$77 million to support as many as 8,300 housing vouchers for this population.

The funding for what's known as the Section 811 Mainstream Housing Choice Voucher Program was announced late last month and is part of the CARES Act, a large coronavirus relief package approved by Congress in March.



As part of the government's response to the pandemic, more money will go toward helping people with disabilities access affordable housing in the community. (Thinkstock)

"As we continue to fight this invisible enemy, we are working quickly and effectively to ensure public housing authorities nationwide are receiving the necessary funding needed to keep their residents safe," said Secretary of Housing and Urban Development Ben Carson. "This wave of relief funds will provide additional housing choice vouchers to residents living with disabilities, allowing them to live safely and independently through these unprecedented times."

The new housing vouchers will ensure that more people with disabilities can reside in community-based settings as the COVID-19 pandemic continues, officials said.

HUD is distributing the funds to local housing agencies in nearly every state which are being encouraged to partner with health and human service agencies to coordinate services and supports so that people with disabilities can live independently.

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# “My Two Cents”

By Tim Doherty, Executive Director



These past months have been some very difficult ones, having to deal with this Covid-19 virus. Many of us have had to schedule work hours so that we would reduce the likelihood of personal interactions with others. We have reduced our general freedom to travel or visit, opting for staying home, or at least limiting the places that we go to. My day out seems to be our weekly visit to the grocery store, then back home. So, for me, work, home or grocery store, and that has been it.

For those who have been laid off, or who have had their work hours reduced, that has also reduced the amount of income they are now getting. For some of our tenants this is true. Yet we are constantly approached by outside agencies and groups who perceive the need, and then try to answer the call.



At Project Freedom we have been fortunate to have some local agencies provide food and other household goods for our tenants. The local organization called “Arm in Arm” has, on a regular basis, dropped off bags of groceries for our tenants. They have delivered to all of our Mercer County sites several times during this pandemic. Another local agency, the Jewish Family & Children’s Service (JFCS) has also brought food supplies to our Mercer County sites with their mobile Food Truck. They were referred to us by Board member, Bob Buda Jr. who helped us with their connection. We received a check for \$1,500 from the local Princeton Corridor Rotary for tenant supplies and our local pizzeria, in conjunction with Nottingham Insurance Agency, Varsity Pizza also brought 42 pizzas, last Thursday, for our tenants at Lawrenceville.

Arm in Arm food bags being delivered These good works continue to happen as we make our way through this pandemic. Americans have always risen to the occasion when necessary, and we are seeing that today. That is why, through this column, I want to publicly thank Beth Englezos of the JFCS, David R. Fox of Arm in Arm and members of the Princeton Corridor Rotary for their support in these challenging times. And to small business owners, such as Kevin Murphy of Varsity Pizza and Jack and Greg Blair from Nottingham Insurance for their community support and their work for Project Freedom. We will survive this virus and come back stronger as a community and nation. So, for now, let’s just take care of one another.



Food donation from Arm in Arm



## ***From Norman's Desk***

Our nation celebrates its Declaration of Independence from Great Britain on July 4th. We celebrate the idea that this nation wanted to be free from rules, regulations, and laws created without input from the Colonies. This year the celebration will be different for me.

We will try celebrate the concept that each person has equality in the eyes of the law even though we know that it is not reality for many. People are treated differently because of skin color, race, gender, gender identity, age, and, yes, disability.

I live with a disability, so I focus on those inequities in my writing. Nevertheless, the struggle for racial equality has never been far from my life. I lived in Philadelphia in 1962 at a school for kids with disabilities. The direct care staff was made of African-Americans, and I remember watching the Civil Rights struggle on the TV news with them. I remember their tears and their quiet anger. I remember trying to make sense of why black people were being beaten. It didn't make sense to me.

The turbulent 60's went by with all the racial, social, and political strife, and in the mid-70s I found myself at Long Island University riding an elevator with a schoolmate. The schoolmate was black, male, and in NYPD handcuffs. I knew him well since we served on the Dorm's Council together. He was arrested by a white police officer for (I later learned) a minor charge. My schoolmate said something to me in greeting and was promptly shoved violently against the elevator wall by the officer.

I was shocked and angered. My schoolmate later returned to warn me not to say anything about the shoving. He said it would make his case more difficult. I agreed, but this incident opened my eyes to what "equality under the law" actually means.

As we celebrate Independence Day, we need to remember equality is not universally applied. We need to remember the sacrifices of those who have died for the concepts of independence, liberty, and freedom. Sometimes they died without enjoying those lofty concepts. Sometimes they didn't die but moved into my world to endure additional inequalities of a disability.

We must also remember that the fight is not over for many people. Expecting the promise of freedom to be obtained or kept without struggle and sacrifice is foolhardy. Our history teaches that participatory governance over oneself or one's country means stepping up to participate and sacrifice. Individuals must take up the cause of freedom, work together, and battle for the promise to be kept. This is true now for many people with and without disabilities.

So, while we celebrate what happened 244 years ago, let us remember for many of us the struggle for freedom continues!

Norman A. Smith, Co-Founder & Associate Executive Director



# ***Day Programs Wonder When They Should Reopen — And if They'll Survive***

by Caitlin Andrews, reprinted from the Bangor Daily News/TNS | June 2, 2020

BANGOR, Maine — The groups that run day programs for those with intellectual disabilities and autism are wary of returning to normal operations as Maine begins to reopen without more detailed instructions from the state. Since the coronavirus reached Maine in March, many of those organizations have had to switch to online options or close down completely for fear of people getting sick. The state is roughly a month into a gradual reopening of its economy, regularly rolling out new guidelines outlining how different kinds of businesses can restart.

But there have not yet been specific guidelines for the day programs designed to get clients with disabilities out into the community and allow them to have social interactions. Without that direction, some providers say they are uncomfortable with the idea of reopening, but also worry about their financial solvency the longer they wait.

Maine Department of Health and Human Services spokesperson Jackie Farwell said day programs and employment service providers can follow the state's general business checklist and guidelines for health care providers if they wish to reopen. The department is planning to release specific guidance for day programs, she said.

Part of the challenge is how to navigate social distancing, said Rebecca Emmons, executive director of Mobius Inc., which runs day programs and provides other services for people with disabilities in the Damariscotta area. Some of the organization's clients require help to eat or use the bathroom — assistance that staff members cannot provide from six feet away. Some have underlying medical conditions that put them at particular risk for complications from the coronavirus. "Until there is widespread testing and surveillance, we don't have confidence that grouping high-risk people together would be safe," she said, noting some individuals may have sensory issues that prevent them from being able to wear masks.

Transportation also presents challenges, said Ray Nagel, executive director of the Independence Association, which provides both residential services and community programming for people with intellectual disabilities in southern Maine. Many clients attend day programs using public transportation, raising the possibility that someone could be exposed to the coronavirus while in transit, he said.

At least one provider has continued to operate its day program through the pandemic, and doesn't share the same concerns about scaling operations back up. Jon Mazarro, director of adult community services for Morrison Center Maine, which provides services in 12 counties. He said the organization's day programs never really "closed," but became smaller when some clients stopped attending. One Morrison Center day program remains active with four clients. Clients wear masks, there are temperature checks, and there's frequent communication with guardians on how a person is feeling. "I think the way it's been going, I have everything I need to put in place new policies and procedures," he said. He expected most clients to return around June 1, with the expectation that they will stay away if they do not feel well.

Day program providers also face financial pressures to reopen. According to an April survey conducted by the American Network of Community Options and Resources, a national organization that represents service providers for people with disabilities, 68 percent of organizations had to close a service due to the pandemic and had seen revenue decline as a result. Day programs made up 54 percent of those closed services, followed by supported employment at 31 percent and transportation at 19 percent.

Nagel said his organization has lost \$200,000 in revenue from closing down its four day programs, which the state reimburses through a Section 29 MaineCare waiver. The organization has invested money into technology to hold programming through Zoom, but the service does not bring in the same revenue as traditional day program services, he said.

Maine was recently approved for a federal waiver allowing intellectual disability, autism and brain injury service providers more flexibility in how they deliver services and a temporary rate increase. But although Maine is allowing community support programs to be held in alternative settings — such as hotels, shelters and participants' homes — and allowing organizations to provide some services remotely, Emmons said the telehealth model does not translate into nearly as many billable hours. "Some providers may not survive the pandemic, period," she said. "The service model is built on the concept of group service. It's not clear if providing that service through telehealth is financially sustainable."

# ***School Groups Want Flexibility On Special Ed Spending Due To COVID-19***

By Michelle Diamant | Reprinted from May 29, 2020 Disability Scoop

Federal law requires school districts to spend at least as much each year on special education as they did the last, but in light of the pandemic, school leaders want Congress to ease up on this mandate.

Officials with a half-dozen education groups say that the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act requirement known as “maintenance of effort” is unreasonable in the current climate. Under the law, there can be financial consequences if school districts do not keep pace on special education spending.

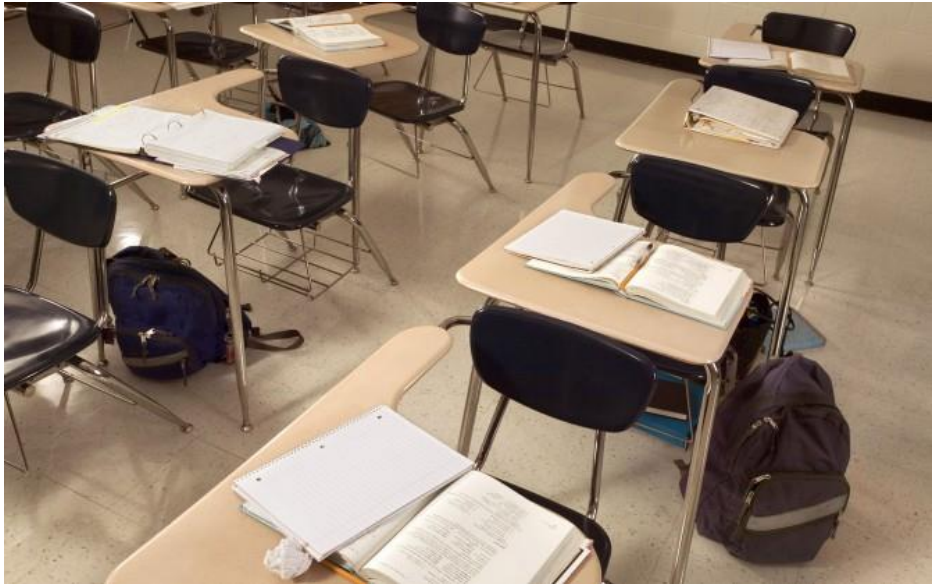
In a letter to leaders of the U.S. Senate and House of Representatives this week, the school groups said that COVID-19 has required districts to unexpectedly allocate extra dollars toward remote learning, computers for students and staff training, among other needs.

Personnel who typically assist students with disabilities on buses have instead been tasked with food preparation and delivery while those who provide special education assistance in the classroom have been bringing instructional packets to students’ homes. “Unfortunately, the maintenance of effort requirements in IDEA do not have a pandemic exception,” reads the letter signed by AASA, The School Superintendents Association, as well as the Association of School Business Officials International, the Council of Administrators of Special Education, the National Association of State Directors of Special Education, the National Association of School Psychologists and the National School Boards Association.

“Specifically, the IDEA local maintenance of effort requirements do not allow districts to adjust their special education funding that they had previously, and in good-faith, dedicated to special education efforts.” The groups are asking Congress to grant flexibility so that districts don’t have to return money spent during this school year. They note that states are already able to receive waivers for their IDEA funding requirement from the Department of Education if they are in financial distress and argue that similar accommodations should be made for local school districts.

The request comes after Secretary of Education Betsy DeVos declined last month to seek the ability to waive core tenets of IDEA as a result of the coronavirus. Rather, DeVos said in a report to Congress that only “additional flexibilities on administrative requirements” were warranted.

Disability advocates have forcefully pushed back against efforts to introduce any IDEA waivers in response to the pandemic, arguing that such measures are unnecessary. And, they said that tinkering with maintenance of effort would open up long-term issues since less funding could mean that districts reduce the number of positions for special educators and other professionals who serve students with disabilities. “We are discussing how you can allow flexibility in funding for this school year to be forwarded into the next fiscal year — that seems reasonable — but reducing the level of effort in the coming and subsequent years is problematic,” said Denise Stile Marshall, CEO of the Council of Parent Attorneys and Advocates, or COPAA, a nonprofit that represents special education attorneys. “We understand this is a challenging time but we want to discuss solutions that infuse funding into special education so that trained professionals are available in schools and districts that can provide students with the services and supports outlined in their IEPs and to make up for lost progress during the crisis,” she said. “Reducing district (maintenance of effort) will not help us accomplish this for students.”



Facing budget challenges resulting from the coronavirus, some school officials are asking lawmakers to reconsider the “maintenance of effort” requirement in the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act. (Thinkstock)

# Google Offering New Tools To Help Those With Disabilities

by Shaun Heasley Reprinted from May 28, 2020

Google is introducing new technology to simplify smartphones for those with cognitive disabilities and it's beefing up its map program to make it easier to know if destinations are accessible.

The company said this month that it is releasing an app called **"Action Blocks" for Android devices** that's designed to make routine smartphone tasks — like calling mom or turning the lights off — less cumbersome.

**With the app, users can create a one-touch button that displays on their home screen to complete actions that typically require multiple steps.**



"For people with cognitive disabilities or age-related cognitive conditions, it can be difficult to and remember each of these steps," wrote Ajit Narayanan with Google's central accessibility team and Sharlene Yulan of Android Accessibility in a posting about the app. "Create an Action Block for any action that the Google Assistant can perform, like making calls, sending texts, playing videos and controlling devices in your home." Google is adding new accessibility features to its array of offerings. (Thinkstock) relate-

**Separately, Google said that it is also launching a feature in Google Maps called "Accessible Places." When enabled, users see a wheelchair icon prominently displayed to denote if a location has an accessible entrance.**

**In addition to details about entrances, the maps program offers information about whether a place has accessible seating, restrooms or parking. Google Maps will also indicate if it has confirmed that a business or other destination does not have an accessible entrance, the company said.**

**"With this feature 'rollout,' it's easier to find and contribute wheelchair accessibility information to Google Maps. That benefits everyone, from those of us using wheelchairs and parents pushing strollers to older adults with tired legs and people hauling heavy items,"** wrote Sasha Blair-Goldensohn, a software engineer with Google Maps, in a posting about the development. **"And in this time of COVID-19, it's especially important to know before you go so that you won't be stranded outside that pharmacy, grocery or restaurant."**

At present, Google said it has accessibility information for more than 15 million places around the world, a figure that has doubled since 2017. The new offerings come as Google is also bringing improvements to Live Transcribe, an app that provides real-time transcription for conversations, and Sound Amplifier, which clarifies the sounds around you.



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# Sneek peak at PF Robbinsville Town Center Site

