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New Horizons

Housing That Supports Independence

36th Anniversary
Project Freedom INC

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Lyft Settles Disability Discrimination Claims With Justice Department

By Shaun Heasley / Reprinted from Disability Scoop | June 24, 2020

Lyft is agreeing to change its ways after being accused of denying rides to people with disabilities in violation of the Americans with Disabilities Act.

Under a settlement reached this week with the U.S. Department of Justice, the ride-sharing service will update its policies to ensure that people using foldable wheelchairs and walkers have equal access to rides.

The company said it will notify new drivers and regularly remind current drivers about the revised policies and create an educational video.

The resolution is the result of an investigation launched after a man who uses a wheelchair filed a dozen complaints with Lyft indicating that Los Angeles-area drivers either treated him rudely, refused to drive him or could not transport him because of his wheelchair, according to the U.S. Attorney's Office for the Central District of California.

Lyft has agreed to implement a complaint procedure that adheres to federal law and hold drivers responsible for complying with its wheelchair policy "with punishment including possible termination." Riders who make "plausible complaints of discrimination" will see their charges refunded and receive a $10 credit under the arrangement with the Justice Department.

In addition, Lyft will pay between $4,000 and $30,000 in damages to the four individuals with disabilities whose complaints led to the settlement and the company will pay a $40,000 civil penalty to the government.

Lyft will also issue biannual reports to the Justice Department over the next three years outlining its efforts to comply with the ADA.

In the settlement, Lyft denied being subject to the ADA, discriminating against any of the complainants as well as any wrongdoing.

"We're glad that through this agreement, we will continue improving our policies and making it easier for people with foldable wheelchairs and other collapsible mobility devices to get around using Lyft," a company spokeswoman said in a statement. "Lyft is committed to maintaining an inclusive and welcoming community, and we're proud that many people with disabilities who were previously underserved by existing transportation options now use Lyft as a reliable, safe and affordable way to get around."

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“My Two Cents”

By *Tim Doherty, Executive Director*

Many of you know that our daughter, Jen is disabled and lives at our Hopewell Project Freedom community. Jen started her adult life in 2003 when she moved into our Lawrence site, and lived there until moving to Hopewell in 2015. So, since that time, she has been for the most part, on her own, with Mom and Dan providing emergency support when needed. Having that personal care support has been critical to her living successfully on her own, out in the community, as well as for many of our tenant consumers.

I have often been asked why Project Freedom didn’t provide that service along with our housing. This is usually the case with agencies that provide and run, Group Homes. The Group Home model works very well for many disabled consumers, and it consists of three or four unrelated individuals who live at the home with a care giver. These homes usually provide 24/7 care by a live in aide or aides, and for many families, this model works very well. The only problem comes when a consumer is not happy with the care provider, and wants to change that provider. To do that may require moving to another location or to another different service provider, something that most consumers do not wish to do.

So, when Project Freedom set out to create our housing, we sought the ability for the consumer to have the most independence possible. In essence to be “Master of his/her own universe” and to choose how one would live life with as much independence as possible. If the person needed personal assistance, then it was up to them to choose and decide who they would work with and with what agency.

So, at Project Freedom housing, the individual is not tied to one particular living situation but can change service providers at any time. The only thing we require is that they pay their rent and their utilities, and obey our housing rules, which is what is required at any apartment complex. This promotes independence and choice for our consumers without the risk of losing their present housing or apartment if they choose a different personal care provider.

Finally, those of us who are part of the disability community and those families served, need to recognize the tremendous service that these personal care workers provide to our loved ones. Because of their efforts, they contribute to the independence and freedom that our families and consumers enjoy. Furthermore, these workers are not paid a rate of pay that reflects their worth, and often have to work two jobs today to make ends meet. These folks are also our “ Front Line workers “ who have had to meet the demands of today’s COVID -19 days, with their service in our hospitals and other vital service areas.

So, hats off to all those who serve in this line of work—you need to know that because you are out there, people with a disability can live a full and independent life, out in the community.

From Norman's Desk

For the thirteenth time in my life, I will vote again this year to elect the President of the United States of America. I remember in in 1972 being forced to vote two weeks ahead of time by absentee ballot because my polling place was in accessible. I remember in 1992 being challenged at the poll because of my disability, and I remember the empowerment I felt by calling a state hotline while at the poll to "fix" the situation to my satisfaction.

Times have changed for people with disabilities in terms of voting ease. Now most polling places and polling booths are accessible, but this year COVID-19 is forcing many states to encourage voting by mail for everyone in many states. Yes, there are still barriers to voting—especially this year in other states, but there is no excuse for any person with a disability not to vote. Nothing about us without us, right?

But I want to talk again about something besides voting. I want to talk about people with disabilities getting involved with political campaigns. Of course, COVID-19 is preventing this kind of activity this year, but it is important to see how you can become involved through technology and Social Media.

I became involved with campaigns twice when I first starting out as a disability advocate. I worked on a statewide Republican campaign for governor and a county campaign for a Democrat. They both lost, and that may be a commentary of the type of person I support.

Nevertheless, these campaigns opened doors for me, and, more importantly, these candidates, their staffers and supporters gained a greater understanding of my needs as a person with a disability. This was a great asset in advocating on disability issues through these same people over the years.

The disability community has a saying: "Nothing about us without us!" It means that people, programs, agencies, and governments shouldn't make decisions about people with disabilities without our involvement in the decision process. Well, the decision process for the 2020 elections is moving ahead on all levels of government. We need to be involved!

We need to vote on November 3!

Norman A. Smith, Associate Executive Director

Face Mask Exempt Cards Citing ADA Are Fake, Justice Department Says

by Shaun Heasley / reprinted from Disability Scoop / July 7, 2020

Federal officials have issued multiple warnings about cards and flyers circulating online that falsely claim to exempt people with disabilities from wearing face masks.

With an increasing number of cities and states across the country requiring people to wear face masks to slow the spread of COVID-19, the U.S. Department of Justice has put out at least three notices to alert the public that the documents are fraudulent.

“I am exempt from any ordinance requiring face mask usage in public,” reads one of the cards created by a group called the Freedom to Breathe Agency. “Wearing a face mask posses a mental and/or physical risk to me. Under the Americans with Disability Act (ADA), I am not required to disclose my condition to you.”

People walking in Orange, Calif. wear face masks due to the coronavirus. (Gary Coronado/Los Angeles Times/TNS)

In addition to misspelling “poses” and including an inaccurate name for the Americans with Disabilities Act, the card features the Justice Department seal and a legitimate phone number for the government’s ADA information line. The card warns of fines ranging from $75,000 to $150,000 for violating the ADA. A Facebook page advertising the cards has been taken down.

Federal officials say that the materials were not created or endorsed by the Justice Department.

“Do not be fooled by the chicanery and misappropriation of the DOJ eagle,” said U.S. Attorney Matthew G.T. Martin of the Middle District of North Carolina. “These cards do not carry the force of law. The ‘Freedom to Breathe Agency,’ or ‘FTBA,’ is not a government agency.”

Furthermore, officials said that people should not rely on information contained in these types of postings or flyers.

“The ADA does not provide a blanket exemption to people with disabilities from complying with legitimate safety requirements necessary for safe operations,” the Justice Department warning indicated.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention recommends that people wear cloth face coverings when around individuals they do not live with to help prevent the coronavirus from spreading. The agency acknowledges that individuals with developmental disabilities may have challenges wearing face coverings and should talk with their health care provider for advice.

Face coverings should not be worn by children under the age of 2 or “anyone who has trouble breathing, is unconscious, incapacitated or otherwise unable to remove the mask without assistance,” the CDC says.

How People With Special Needs Are Coping With The Pandemic

Reprinted from DisAbility Scoop by April Rubin, Miami Herald/TNS | July 28, 2020

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MIAMI — Giovana Izzo hasn't seen her son, Antonio, since March. For the past four months, Antonio Izzo, 25, has lived in a group home around the clock. And his family is feeling the consequences of the separation, his mom said.

Before the pandemic, he'd spend every weekend back home with his parents and three younger siblings. They'd laugh at how he loved to sing in the shower and talk about the public transit system. During the week for the past four years, Antonio, who has autism, lived at a group home in the Redland to gain independence. But COVID caused isolation has created loneliness in Antonio Izzo and the rest of his family. It's just one of the many challenges that people with disabilities have faced during the pandemic.

Isolation And Technology

Giovana Izzo, who lives near Brickell, said the hardest times are when she realizes her son feels abandoned. "This is his house and he has a bedroom here, too," she said. "So when he says things like, 'How come you're not picking me up?' or 'I feel left behind,' it's painful." Antonio Izzo said he feels connected to his family through FaceTime and virtual games. And virtual sessions with speech and occupational therapists also keep him connected to other people. "They always tend to make me feel better," he said.

Before looking at a computer, TV or phone, he braces himself for the excitement of talking to family or the worry about COVID-19 news. "I close my eyes and say, 'Keep it together, keep it together,' and eventually it works," he said.

Giovana Izzo also has to remind herself to keep it together, not knowing the next time she'll get to hug her son. Andi Allen's biggest concern when the pandemic started was how people with disabilities, who frequently feel marginalized, would cope with social distancing.

Allen, based in Fort Lauderdale, is the Florida state director for Best Buddies, an organization that promotes inclusiveness for people with intellectual and developmental disabilities. Her job over the past several months has involved shifting Best Buddies programming to a virtual environment. "There was a lot of work to do and a responsibility to the community to make sure that we made the necessary shift so that we can continue to promote inclusion, even if it's virtual," she said. Best Buddies hosts virtual gatherings multiple times per week, Allen said. Some are for job training, others for social media etiquette or how to deal with emotions. And there's also some fun like virtual dance parties and games.

Allen's 19-year-old sister has Down syndrome and lives in Michigan with their father. She usually goes to school year round, but hasn't been able to because of the pandemic. Allen said she's benefited from connecting with some of the Best Buddies in Florida instead of her usual social experiences. "When you encounter someone with an IDD (intellectual and developmental disabilities), I encourage you to be inclusive and be yourself," she said. "Treat them like you would any one of your friends. If you open up your world to their world, your world will be greatly enhanced."

Remote Therapy And School

Despite the benefits of virtual platforms, Patricia Ruiz, Miami Speech Institute director, said it doesn't work for everyone. Younger children aren't in the ideal age range for teletherapy, and many in-person therapies have been put on hold. "My therapists face a lot of challenges," she said. "It's very hard. And parents sometimes need to remember that we're doing things virtually for the first time. It's new for everyone."

Ruiz also said virtual support could also deepen dependency on technology for kids. Michael Alessandri, University of Miami Center for Autism & Related Disabilities executive director, said virtual therapy, despite improvements, can't replicate in-person support. "What COVID has done is stripped away the routine and it greatly diminished the dosage of treatment," he said. "So there's regression, there's an active loss of skills on a regular basis."

Previously, children's lives and outlets were balanced between school, therapy, extracurriculars, other caregivers and the home, Alessandri said. Now, everything is at home, and parents are getting overwhelmed and disappointed in the regression. "The layers of heaviness for a family are quite exhausting," he said.

Changed Routines

Randy Greene, 25, uprooted his life in Jacksonville to move back to Cooper City, where his mother lives. In March, the two decided that it would be safer for him to social distance from home in Broward County. Greene, who has Down syndrome, lived independently with a roommate in a community for people with developmental disabilities. He said he loved his job as a greeter at Mercedes-Benz. "Toward the middle of March, it started to weigh on Randy a bit," said his mother, Nina Greene. "He got anxious and it was hard for him to figure out how to deal with it. We thought it best for him to come home for what we thought at that point would be a much shorter period of time." He has kept busy and engaged by staying in touch via Zoom with his friends from high school, peers in Best Buddies and co-workers from Jacksonville. Nina Greene said "he's lighter" after touching base with other people. He has also spoken with a therapist a few times since March. "I've felt really anxious," Randy Greene said. "It was really tough, but I manage it, and I'm trying to stay safe."

"It's a community that can feel exceptionally isolated to begin with," Nina Greene said. "So now you've taken this community and they are even more isolated because they're doing quarantine like everyone else. But that makes it harder for them to have interactions with other people."

Reshma Naidoo, pediatric neuropsychologist at Nicklaus Children's Hospital near South Miami, said this uncommon time has allowed for reinventing her practice, which treats people with epilepsy, acquired brain injuries and non-general ADHD. "A lot of the families that I work with have used this period to do a lot more hands-on instruction with their kids and develop skills in areas that were challenging for them," she said.

Face-to-face meetings in her practice would take from 75 minutes up to 10 hours, which would place both patient and provider at high risk for COVID. So they've switched to telehealth and hybrid models of treatment for neurorehabilitation. But still, families with fewer resources have had difficulty with technology, dropped calls and privacy, Naidoo said. Access continues to be an issue not only with medical treatment but also school and work for many groups. "When you hit a crisis and you have to shift completely," she said. "We've become a lot more efficient in doing what we need to with a minimal amount of contact."

Moving Forward

As virtual therapy continues, therapists have the benefit of seeing children in their natural environments rather than a clinical or school setting, said Mandy Alvarez, speech and language therapy director at Integrated Children's Therapy in Miami. "We're able to take daily routines and really make those opportunities for rich interaction with parents," she said. But as people return to work and feel tired of the online work, she has noticed parents less engaged in the therapy than in March and April. And there's added anxiety as the pandemic worsens in South Florida, and there is concern about what the school year will look like. Alvarez added that in most years, the late spring and summer is used to get kids "school ready," but that process was lost this year.

Broward's superintendent announced that the district is considering exceptions to virtual learning for students with special needs, recognizing the challenges that online settings present. These classes would be self-contained because research has shown that people with disabilities such as cerebral palsy, Down syndrome and autism are most likely to become infected by and die from COVID-19, especially at younger ages. "If we have to do remote for children with special needs in the fall, particularly significant special needs, I think it's going to be really problematic in terms of longer implications on their development," UM's Alessandri said.

Diana Abril said that will be the case for her 4-year-old son, Lucas, who has autism. When school went remote in the spring, his preschool teacher sent work home, but the plans were for his neurotypical peers, not personalized. His therapists also "basically abandoned him," she said. "He needs these therapists. He needs the individualized in-person instruction," said Abril, an attorney who lives in Palmetto Bay. "He's not going to learn otherwise. … This was not a tenable situation for a home with working parents, small children and specifically a child with a disability."

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Apple Invests In Housing For People With Developmental Disabilities

Reprinted from Disability Scoop by Shaun Heasley / July 21, 2020

Technology-giant Apple is putting up money for housing for people with developmental disabilities.

The company said this month that it will create more than 250 new affordable housing units “many of them reserved for veterans, the homeless or formerly homeless and residents with developmental disabilities.”
The move is part of a broader $2.5 billion initiative announced in 2019 to help address the housing crisis in California, where the company is based.

This year, Apple said it will allocate $400 million toward assistance to California homeowners and affordable housing projects, including the units for individuals with developmental disabilities. At a time when so many members of our community are facing unprecedented challenges, we believe it’s critical to make sure that their hopes for the future are supported through tangible programs and results,” said Kristina Raspe, vice president for global real estate and facilities at Apple. “As cities and states have been forced to pause many of their long-term affordable housing investments amidst the current public health crisis, Apple is proud to continue moving forward with our comprehensive plan to combat the housing crisis in California.”

Apple is not the only Silicon Valley company investing in housing for people with developmental disabilities. Last year, Google committed $5.3 million for an inclusive apartment complex where 25 percent of the units will be reserved for those with developmental disabilities.