

New Horizons

Housing That Supports Independence



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Struggling To Connect Through A Screen, Special Ed Teachers Make House Calls

by David Mekeel, Reprinted from the Reading Eagle/TNS | October 30, 2020

READING, Pa. — For the first few weeks of the school year, Leslie Esterly struggled to connect with Levi Wilson. With the COVID-19 pandemic far from over, the Reading School District began classes this fall virtually. That meant Esterly, who teaches students with multiple disabilities at Lauer's Park Elementary School, was introduced to the 6-year-old kindergartner online.

That can make connecting with any student difficult. It made connecting with Levi — who is non-verbal due to Leigh Syndrome, a severe neurological disorder that leads to progressive loss of mental and movement abilities — nearly impossible. Esterly said Levi wasn't responsive to virtual lessons and wouldn't interact with the stranger talking to him through his computer. And Esterly couldn't provide the hands-on help she would normally give in the classroom. "On screen, I can't tell if he's touching the right object or looking at the right thing," she said. "Levi can't manipulate a mouse, so his mom would have to be moving it for him." The same was true with several other students in the multiple-disabilities program.

Esterly and her fellow teachers were frustrated, wondering how to give their students what they need and, quite frankly, deserve. They decided to pitch an idea to the district administration. Instead of trying to slog through the challenges of virtual instruction, they would put a plan into action that would let them teach their students face to face. And since the district's schools were shut down, that meant making house calls.

The administration agreed. So for the past month Esterly and Fisher have been on the road, meeting with students three times a week for 45 minutes a session in backyards, front porches, parks and courtyards.

What the teachers at Lauer's Park are doing for their students is impressive but not shocking, district spokeswoman Kristin Boyd Edwards said. Since the start of the pandemic, or at least when schools statewide were shuttered in mid-March, Reading teachers have been stepping up for their students. They've been delivering food to families in need, dropping off special porch prizes to award students engaged in remote learning, staying online before or after work hours to assist families with Chromebook technologies, bringing in props — from puppets to household pets to dance moves — to keep students' attention and creating funny morning announcements to make sure the day gets off to a good start, just to name a few things.

"No, it didn't surprise me at all," she said. "Every day the special education teachers in Reading go above and beyond, and it often goes unnoticed. Our teachers just have this mindset of nothing is going to stop us from educating our students."

Leavy said she was impressed by the creativity the Lauer's Park teachers showed with their plan, as well as their commitment to their students during such a challenging and worrisome time. "It's just a really beautiful thing that came out of this," she said. "This is awesome. I'm just so proud of them, in every way imaginable."

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“My Two Cents”

By Tim Doherty, Executive Director



So, this Covid-19 Virus has affected life in so many different ways. In the past, around this time, we would be preparing and then holding our Annual Gala fundraiser. This annual event would attract about 250 people all who would gather at the Stone Terrace by John Henry.

We would have a live band for dancing, have cocktails and a great dinner. During that time, we would present our Angel Award, the Wensley Award, Robin Heim award and our Freedom Bell Award. We would also select our “Employee of the Year” on that evening, recognizing one of our staff members who distinguished themselves in their performance during the year. Not this year however....the year of 2020.

Unable to have large indoor gatherings, many non-profit agencies have opted to do a “Virtual Event”. This is one that is produced either live or with taped video, and is presented over the Internet via U Tube or some other Internet based channel.

So, this is what we intend to do this year, in place of our actual Gala Dinner. On November 7 at 7 PM, a select few of Project Freedom staff members will conduct a “Live Stream” Virtual Event as our fundraiser and awards night for 2020. This event will be held at our Hopewell Community Center in Hopewell Township. The plan for the evening is to have great music from our local band, “Kindred Spirit”, who will play selected songs in between our awards presentations. These presentations have been pre-recorded so that we won’t have a crowd of people at the same time during our Live Stream event that night. Our objective is to entertain, and to inform our audience about Project Freedom and to give recognition to those we honor this year.

And so rather than honoring one “Angel” we have selected three this year, and have dubbed them our “Angels of 2020”. These include outside service agencies such as Arm in Arm, the Jewish Family and Children Services and the National Equity Fund (NEF). Getting our Freedom Bell award will be the Hopewell Valley School District and the Hopewell Valley Mobile Food Pantry. Tenant Frieda Davis will be honored with our Robin Heim Award, and tenant Abusammaa “Sam” Ramziddin will be our tenant Success Story for 2020. Rounding out our list this year as our “Employee of the Year” is Dara Johnston.

Funds raised through this event are 100% tax deductible and provide support for our tenant programs. This year, we purchased two brand new Ford 350 Transit Vans which will be used to transport our consumers and tenants to various functions and medical appointments.

So, mark your calendar for November 7 at 7 PM. To view this event, just log onto the Project Freedom website at www.Projectfreedom.org and look for the link to our “Live Stream” event.

See you then.



From Norman's Desk

Last month I wrote about people with disabilities participating in politics in a more direct manner. I found recently a study of disability prevalence among eligible voters.

Rutgers University researchers have concluded the number of eligible voters with disabilities is growing with the aging of the population and advances in medical technology. The brief report summarizes projections of how many people with disabilities were eligible to vote in the November 2020 elections, based on analysis of data from the Census Bureau's 2014-2018 American Community Survey combined with Census Bureau population projections for 2020-2021. All figures were

limited to the non--institutional population

The key findings:

- A projected 38.3 million people with disabilities will be eligible to vote in the November 2020 elections, representing close to one-sixth of the total electorate.
- The number of eligible voters with disabilities has increased 19.8% since 2008, compared to an increase of 12.0% among eligible voters without disabilities.
- There will be 67.7 million eligible voters who either have a disability or have a household member with a disability, more than one-fourth of the total electorate.

Other findings:

- Mobility impairment will be the most common disability in November 2020. A projected 21.3 million eligible voters will have mobility impairments, 13.1 million will have cognitive impairments, 11.6 million will have hearing impairments, and 7.0 million will have visual impairments. (Note that these groups overlap since a person may have more than one type of disability.)
- Despite senior citizens having a higher likelihood of disability, there will be more eligible voters with disabilities under age 65 (19.7 million) than there are age 65 or older (18.5 million).
- There will be slightly more women (20.0 million) than men (18.2 million) among eligible voters with disabilities.
- The eligible voters with disabilities will include 26.6 million non-Hispanic whites, 5.4 million Blacks, and 4.1 million Hispanics/Latinos.
- The total number of eligible voters with disabilities (38.3 million) exceeds the total number of eligible voters who are Black (29.9 million) or Hispanic/Latino (31.3 million).
- Mobility impairments are the most common type of disability in each group except for the youngest (age groups 18-34 and 35-49), among whom cognitive impairments are the most common type of disability.

Norman A. Smith,
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IRS Issues Final Rules For ABLE Accounts

By Michelle Diamant | Reprinted from Disability Scoop October 12, 2020

Federal officials are firming up rules for a relatively new type of account that allows people with disabilities to save money without jeopardizing their government benefits.

The Internal Revenue Service issued final regulations this month spelling out details about how ABLE accounts should operate.

The accounts, which were established by the 2014 ABLE Act, allow individuals with disabilities to accrue up to \$100,000 without risking eligibility for Social Security and other government benefits. Medicaid can be retained no matter how much money is saved in the accounts.

The rules released this month stem from when the accounts were originally created as well as tweaks to the law that came in 2017 tax-cut legislation. Many of the changes have already been in effect, but the IRS said the final regulations clarify specifics and address comments the agency received in response to previous proposals about how the law would be applied.

Annual deposits to ABLE accounts are capped at the value of the gift tax exclusion for any given year, currently \$15,000 annually. However, under the final rules, people with disabilities who are employed can deposit their earnings in ABLE accounts, above and beyond the existing contribution cap for the year. These individuals can save whatever money they earn in their ABLE account up to the value of the poverty line in the state where they live.

The IRS said that workers with disabilities who have ABLE accounts can also qualify for a Saver's Credit, which can reduce their federal tax bill. Separately, money saved in a traditional 529 college savings plan for an individual with a disability or a family member can be rolled over into an ABLE account up to the maximum annual contribution limit. The rules indicate that this option is available until Jan. 1, 2026.

The regulations also offer guidance on the record-keeping and reporting requirements of ABLE programs as well as other specifics about the mechanics of the accounts.

ABLE accounts are open to people with disabilities that onset prior to age 26. Money saved in the accounts can be used for education, housing, transportation, employment training and support, assistive technology, personal support services and other "qualified disability expenses." Currently, 42 states and Washington, D.C. have active ABLE programs, many of which are open to people with disabilities nationwide, according to the ABLE National Resource Center.

As of June, data from ISS Market Intelligence shows that there are nearly 71,000 ABLE accounts open nationally with \$469.4 million in assets.



The Internal Revenue Service is putting out final regulations on ABLE accounts.
(Molly Riley/McClatchyDC/TNS)

Supported Decision-Making Eyed As Alternative To Guardianship

by Carli Teproff, Miami Herald/TNS | September 1, 2020

MIAMI — At 22, Tyler Borjas had a job, a bank account and got around using Uber and Metrorail. But he couldn't legally vote, buy a house or make travel plans. That's because a Miami-Dade court deemed Borjas, who has autism, "incapacitated," and placed him under guardianship. "I want to make my own decisions," Borjas, who is now 25, said. "I want my rights back."

Guardianship essentially stripped Borjas of his rights, meaning he couldn't legally make decisions for himself, said Viviana Bonilla López, an attorney working with Disability Rights Florida, an advocacy group. Bonilla López has set out to change that for Borjas and other adults by promoting a mechanism known as supported decision-making instead of guardianship. If Borjas succeeds, it's believed he'll be only the second person in the state to reclaim his rights back in this manner.

Supported decision-making allows adults with disabilities a "less restrictive alternative" while ensuring that they have oversight and help in making important decisions. Bonilla López filed a "suggestion of capacity," (similar to a motion) in court last week asking a judge to give Borjas his rights back and name his mother, Kelly Bain-Borjas, and two sisters, Hayley and Jade, as his supporters. "Supported decision-making better enables people with disabilities to protect themselves from abuse and neglect," Bonilla López said. "Guardians and guardian advocates have sole control over the person in their care's life with little oversight." So if Borjas wants to go on a trip or buy a car he would run the idea by his supporters and together they would make a decision. Borjas would be able to play a more active role in controlling his own life.

Tyler as a child

At 16, Borjas was already learning the importance of helping others and working. His first volunteer job was at a bird sanctuary. While in high school, Borjas was placed in a job-training program at the University of Central Florida, where he got experience by working at places including Publix and an assisted living facility. "One thing about Tyler, is he is very self-motivated," she said.

A life for himself

Borjas completed an internship at Nicklaus Children's Hospital, and in 2016 he got a job at American Airlines Arena working in the Papa John's. He is currently not working because the pandemic has shut down major events. Borjas does it all. He uses the dough machine, makes the pizza and delivers throughout the arena. He was living at home, but building the life he wanted.

How they fell under guardianship

When Borjas was 22, his mother filed a personal injury lawsuit on her son's behalf. She said a lawyer told her the only option was guardianship. She had heard about guardianship while her son was in school, but never went that route because she didn't think her son needed it. She said before she knew it, the judge deemed Tyler incapacitated. "I was thrown off," she said. "I didn't want to take his rights away. I was very distraught."

On a mission

Bonilla López's main goal is to spread the word that supported decision-making should be used as an alternative to guardianship when it is appropriate. "Guardianships are overused when really the person could be making their own decision with support," she said. "A lot of times people confuse needing help with not being able to do something. But all of us need help, all of us need advice and people with disabilities are no different."

Bonilla López said they are also working on legislation that would require supported decision-making to be considered before a disability guardianship is activated.

For Tyler, getting his rights back would mean he is in control. For his mom: "I am just so happy that there is something in place that can help Tyler."

SSI, Social Security Benefits Will Increase In 2021

Reprinted from Disability Scoop by Shaun Heasley | October 14, 2020

People with disabilities receiving Supplemental Security Income and other Social Security benefits will soon see their payments rise.

The Social Security Administration said this week that benefits will increase 1.3 percent in 2021.

The change comes as a result of an annual automatic cost-of-living adjustment, known as COLA, that's tied to inflation. By law, Social Security benefits go up when there is an increase in the Consumer Price Index from the U.S. Department of Labor's Bureau of Labor Statistics.

The higher payments will begin Dec. 31, 2020 for more than 8 million SSI beneficiaries and in January 2021 for over 64 million people across the nation receiving Social Security.

For individuals receiving SSI, the maximum federal payment will grow from \$783 per month this year to \$794 per month in 2021 with the automatic adjustment. Couples will see \$1,191 per month next year, up from \$1,175. Some states kick in additional money for SSI beneficiaries, so actual payments may be higher.

Social Security officials said that beneficiaries are typically notified about their new benefit amount by mail beginning in early December, but most people can view the information in their online Social Security account. The COLA increase for 2021 is slightly less than last year's adjustment. Benefits rose 1.6 percent in 2020 compared to the previous year.



An automatic cost-of-living adjustment means that Social Security benefits will rise next year. (Disability Scoop)

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How To Survive A Heart Attack When Alone

Source unknown

Since many people are alone when they suffer a heart attack, without help, the person whose heart is beating improperly and who begins to feel faint, has only about **10 seconds left before losing consciousness**. However, these victims can help themselves by coughing repeatedly and very vigorously. A deep breath should be taken before each cough, and the cough must be deep and prolonged, as when producing sputum from deep inside the chest.



A breath and a cough must be repeated about every two seconds without let-up until help arrives, or until the heart is felt to be beating normally again. Deep breaths get oxygen into the lungs and coughing movements squeeze the heart and keep the blood circulating.

The squeezing pressure on the heart also helps it to regain normal rhythm. In this way, heart attack victims can get to a hospital.

Tell as many other people as possible about this. It could save their lives!