

New Horizons

Housing That Supports Independence

Ed Department Says Transition Services Must Continue During Pandemic

Reprinted from Disability Scoop September 1, 2020 by Shaun Heasley

Federal officials are reminding schools and vocational rehabilitation agencies of their responsibility to work together to help students with disabilities transition to adulthood, even amid the pandemic.

In a letter this week to special education and vocational rehabilitation administrators across the nation, officials from the U.S. Department of Education said that while the coronavirus might alter how things are done, the expectations for transition remain.

"Recognizing that COVID-19 has resulted in students accessing educational services differently than in the past, whether it be virtually, in-person or a hybrid approach, the importance of the provision of transition and pre-employment transition services has not changed," wrote Mark Schultz, commissioner of the Rehabilitative Service Administration, and Laurie VanderPloeg, director of the Office of Special Education Programs.

During the pandemic, states, school districts, schools and vocational rehabilitation agencies are encouraged to "use the flexibility afforded under the (Individuals with Disabilities Education Act) and the Rehabilitation Act to engage in innovative strategies, involving students and youth with disabilities and their families in the transition and pre-employment transition processes as early as possible," Schultz and VanderPloeg indicated.

Under IDEA and the Rehabilitation Act, the transition process should be outcome-oriented with students and their families working in collaboration with officials from their state education department, school district, school and vocational rehabilitation agency, according to the correspondence. State vocational rehabilitation agencies and school districts also have a responsibility to provide pre-employment transition services to students with disabilities. Central to this process is coordination between state education officials, vocational rehabilitation and school districts, Schultz and VanderPloeg said.

In addition to the letter, the Education Department also recently released an updated 60 page transition guide that's meant to help students with disabilities and their families understand the years-long process and the options available to them as they prepare to leave public education.



The U.S. Department of Education is reaching out to stakeholders across the country to emphasize the importance of collaboration in providing transition services to students with disabilities. (Anne Meadows/Flickr)



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"My Two Cents"

By Tim Doherty, Executive Director



As fall approaches, we all enjoy the vibrant colors of the surrounding landscape, and Project Freedom is usually busy planning its annual Angel Award Dinner, a tradition that spans more than 20 years. This year, due to Covid protocols, we will not be able to host a celebration with 250 guests in attendance. Instead, we will celebrate the resiliency of our staff and tenants in navigating today's new and challenging world.

Quietly and faithfully, five organizations have been providing food for our Project Freedom neighborhoods. **Arm in Arm**, and the **Jewish Family & Children Services of Greater Mercer County** organizations have been delivering grocery bags on a monthly basis to tenants experiencing food insecurities. **The Hopewell Valley Regional School District** and **Hopewell Valley Mobile Food Pantry** have been bringing food and meals to some of our Hopewell families. **The National Equity Fund Inc.** generously donated \$ 10,000 to Project Freedom to provide food for 137 tenants in three of our communities. These five organizations have been the Angels of 2020 for many of our tenants who benefited from the gift of food. We would like to recognize each of these outstanding organizations for the food relief that they provided to many during the past seven months.

So, this fall, instead of attending our annual Angel Gala, we instead invite you to tune in to a Live Stream event, which will honor and recognize our heroes of Project Freedom as well as entertain you. Please mark your calendar now for this exciting, new event. Project Freedom will Live Stream a program on Saturday, November 7, 2020 from 7:00- 8:00 PM from our Hopewell Location on Denow Road in Pennington, New Jersey. This Live Stream program will include music by the wonderful local band, Kindred Spirit, information on the newest Project Freedom communities, and a presentation of awards to our 2020 honorees. The funds from our Angel Award Dinner have supported programs and services for our tenants each year. In the past, our attendees and sponsors have given generously to this annual event, and we are grateful, and we hope that you will continue to do so this year as well.

Donations can always be made by mailing your check or by credit card to Project Freedom Inc. Or by going to our website at www.projectfreedom.org. All donations are tax deductible.

Help us continue the work of building housing communities that promote Independence for everyone. So, in order to attend our Live Stream Fundraiser, just log onto our website at www.projectfreedom.org and tap on the link, Live Stream Event.

See you then.



STREAMING LIVE EVENT

JOIN
US

Saturday November 7, 2020

7pm—8pm

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go to our website: www.projectfreedom.org



From Norman's Desk

Readers of my monthly column should know by now that I'm also interested in politics, and especially the intersection of politics, disability, and the resulting public policies that impact on people with disabilities.

The interest stems from being trained as a journalist during the Carter-Ford presidential campaign while living on a college campus with many activists with disabilities. I caught the "inside politics" fever.

And, by happenstance, I became involved with two political campaigns upon returning to New Jersey. One for a Republican and one for a Democrat, and I quickly learned that disability-related policies are not partisan issues at the local level.

I also learned that participating in campaigns is a great way to educate people in politics about "our issues," and it is very helpful in building up credibility if you decide to do something unusual like start building housing to support people with disabilities. I cannot tell you how helpful it is to advocate for something with politicians who know you personally.

This is why I encourage anybody with a disability to get involved with politics. First and foremost as voters. Then, if you like a candidate, become involved by volunteering with the campaign. Become engaged, ask questions, and don't just focus on disability issues.

We live in the Community. We need to ask about issues beyond our own because our needs for safe neighborhoods, effective and efficient local governments, well maintained infrastructure, and well-run services are just as great as our able-bodied neighbors.

I'm a great believer in democracy even as messy and raucous as ours is right now. What is happening now, however, is not that unusual if you delve into early U.S. history. If it existed, Thomas Jefferson and Alexander Hamilton might have used Twitter to insult and degrade each other in their campaigns.

Our democracy is cheapened by the ugly discourse, but it is endangered much more by people opting not to participate in the process. Sure, there are winners and losers with participatory politics and elections, and, sure, democracies sometime make huge mistakes with major consequences. The key to democracy is to stay engaged no matter who wins or loses.

A year ago I predicted we may be in the most contentious presidential campaign in my experience. Little did I know that we would be smack in the middle of a deadly pandemic, a racial reckoning, seemingly endless natural disasters, and wacko fringe elements stoking civil strife for the sake of causing chaos. It is enough to make someone disengage.

But we can't!
So, let's get engaged!

Norman A. Smith, Associate Executive Director -
Follow me on Twitter @normansmith02
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Freedom Village at Gibbsboro Grand Opening on September 2



Project Freedom's 8th campus in Gibbsboro, NJ, was officially opened last month. Here are some photos of the event which was also broadcast LIVE courtesy of Norman Smith.



Donations for Robbinsville Tenants

Freedom 1 Robbinsville tenants received another delivery of food staples from Jewish Family and Children's Services of Greater Mercer County. Shown in the photo is Beth Englezos handing packages to Jackie Elsowiny and Johnny Anaya loading the push carts.



How To Adapt Special Education To The Remote Learning Reality

by Faith E. Pinho, Reprinted from the Los Angeles Times/TNS | September 8, 2020

LOS ANGELES — When the pandemic forced schools to transition to remote learning in the spring, some families struggled more than others. Families of students in special education programs were suddenly expected to adapt to an online learning environment that was often inaccessible to children with a variety of physical, emotional or developmental needs. As another period of distance learning dawns, parents, educators and service providers are offering recommendations and advice about special education.

Know your rights Although it may seem obvious, parents should know that schools must still provide their students with special education. Denise Stile Marshall, chief executive of the national Council of Parent Attorneys and Advocates, which protects the civil rights of students with disabilities, said she received an outpouring of calls in March from parents — especially from California — struggling to get their school districts to accommodate every student's needs.

Some school districts, Marshall said, completely suspended special education courses until the closures ended. Marshall said that is illegal under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, the law that makes about 7 million students in the United States eligible for special education. Every child, regardless of need, is entitled to a "free, appropriate public education." "The pandemic and the closures that resulted from it have not waived any requirements or obligations under the law," Marshall said. "The districts are still supposed to be providing what the student needs." If a school district is not meeting its requirements, Marshall said, caregivers should write their concerns down to create a record. Any data that families can collect on any student — including video of the child, school work or other documentation — can be helpful for tracking the student's progress or regression. Then, she said, get into contact with the school district and the student's individualized education program coordinator.

Adjust expectations Don't be afraid to change your child's learning goals for the year. "When we talk about expectations for the coming year, we need to listen to students and families about what works," said Beth Lasky, who just completed her 40th year as a special education professor at Cal State Northridge and previously taught in the Los Angeles Unified School District for 13 years. That may mean reevaluating a student's individualized education program, or IEP. Set up a meeting with the child's IEP team to assess the goals for the year. They might not be the same as last year — and that's OK, said Erica Howell, co-director of the Center for Autism at Cal State Fullerton. "We might say, 'This goal was great, and it was really meeting an important skill, but we're not going to be able to target this in the home environment as we could in the school environment,'" Howell said. "But instead, 'Hey, here's another skill and goal that we can really develop while we have this opportunity now with this child at home.'" The IEP may require more intense services to counter an achievement gap caused by last year's sudden shift to virtual learning. If some in-person services such as physical or occupational therapy are not available now, COPAA's Marshall recommends setting an agreement for when the service can resume. "I just want to caution parents: Everybody's tempted to think ... that something must be different because of COVID," she said. "Perhaps, if the team decides that. But ... it really is team dependent." The goals may remain the same, but the way each student achieves them looks different. For example, perhaps one student answers a

question with a written response while another creates a video, draws a picture or responds verbally. "They can still be expected to demonstrate a common core standard, but we give them options or choices of how they're going to demonstrate that understanding or ability," Lasky said. Lasky also recommended setting up an informal meet-and-greet with teachers to familiarize them with the student's family, home life and learning environment. Opening that relationship early on will reap returns later, she said. "We know from research that when teachers connect with students and their experiences and their family life, that kids tend to remember and they learn more," Lasky said. However the child performs, Howell recommends responding to any positive behavior with praise. "We get a salary for our jobs; that reinforces us," Howell said. "We want to keep our kiddos in mind that it's not easy, and we want to give that reinforcement to keep them engaged."

Your kid needs friends Whether during school time or after the virtual bell rings, kids will need time with friends. Parents and teachers recommend intentionally setting aside some social time. Children may especially enjoy connecting with others similar to them. For the last six years, Tustin parent of four Marsha Hansen has sent her 16-year-old son, who lives with a congenital heart disease, to Camp del Corazon on Catalina Island. Every year, Hansen said, she noticed her son returning with renewed confidence and a stronger sense of self after spending a week with nearly 500 other children "with a scar running down their



chest.” This year, the camp went virtual. Campgoers interacted with one another using video chats and Padlet, a child-friendly social media wall where people can post pictures and sticky notes. The virtual experience may be different, but don’t underestimate your children’s ability to have fun, Hansen said. “I heard laughter ... and screams and shouts and joy coming from his bedroom,” she said. “He was having a great time as a 16-year-old boy on a Zoom call with a bunch of other 16-year-old boys at a virtual camp. I would have never guessed that.” Mother Gretchen Miner said her 10-year-old loved making friends at Camp del Corazon so much that Miner and a few parents formed a Facebook group so the children can stay connected through the school year with Friday night virtual dance parties, online bingo games and even Zoom hide-and-seek.

More parental involvement might be needed For a child struggling with a speech issue, for example, speech-language pathologist Jimmy Nguyen is frank: Therapy from home is going to be hard and require more parental involvement. Adults at home may need to monitor the student to make sure they are logged on and paying attention. “In the beginning, it can be very difficult, because parents don’t have that knowledge or that education that we work on. We’re able to dissect and evaluate these little pathways on how to facilitate it,” Nguyen said.

Still, he said, there’s hope: “For parents, it’s just tweaking their routine a little to (achieve) those goals and making them a part of their skill set.” For example, he often advises families that a simple trip to the grocery store can turn into a lesson. Analyzing a box of cereal can help with language skills, while adding up calories on a candy bar can teach simple math. Playing board games as a family is another way to engage a child and improve a host of skills — social, analytical, critical thinking and sometimes even math. Interactive lessons — which he recommended finding on websites Nearpod and N2Y — can also facilitate learning.

Keep a schedule — as best you can Everyone interviewed for this story emphasized the importance of making and maintaining a schedule. “Kids, especially with special needs, need that consistency,” El Segundo High School science teacher Tiffany Maisonet said. “They know that every day, no matter what, 10:30 is when they should log in.”

Keeping a schedule doesn’t necessarily mean following a typical six- or eight-hour school day. “Expecting kids to sit from 8 to 3 online all day is not realistic,” said Lasky, the special education professor. “It’s not realistic for people that don’t have disabilities, and it’s not realistic for kids with disabilities.” Mix up the traditional schedule by adding in plenty of breaks for small rewards, like a snack, a few minutes of TV time or a romp outside. Some educators suggested creating an incentive chart of different rewards, so the child gets to choose how to spend the break. But, they acknowledged, some children won’t be motivated by charts. Listen to your child to know how best to incentivize them. “What we don’t want is students sitting down all day at the computer and making parents check off every task until it’s done,” Howell said. “We want there to be a balance so we keep children in the framework for learning.”

Theresa Quarry, a coordinator at CSUN’s Family Focus Resource Center and the founder of a support group for Black and African American families of children with special needs, suggested taking notes on which rewards and schedules seem to work for your child. She also suggested setting a timer — when it goes off, reading time is over and playtime can begin. As anyone with children knows, the schedule will change. Don’t beat yourself up, and do your best to get back on schedule tomorrow.

You and your kids can do it Families are not the only ones struggling. Teachers and educators are navigating the virtual environment too, and everyone is learning alongside the students. Here are some of their words of advice. Hansen, mother of four: “Give the kids credit because they’re smart. This is a super, super smart generation. They have the whole world at their fingertips. They’re not going to get behind.” Nguyen, speech-language pathologist: “It’s good also to remember (that children) ... don’t have those social skills. They don’t have the patience that we do. They don’t have the critical thinking skills that we have. ... There is going to be that learning curve.” Quarry, coordinator at CSUN’s Family Focus Resource Center: “We have to come at it with a different approach and just say, ‘Families, do what you can do. It’s not going to be the same. We know that. But do what you can do.’” Miner, mother of five: “We’re all being asked to do something that we’re not equipped for, and nobody’s equipped for. We’re all going to have to figure out as we go and give each other the grace and the space to meet everybody’s needs the way they are.”

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Watch our Live Event to Honor Our 4 Angels of 2020 -

- **Arm In Arm**
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- **Hopewell Valley Regional School District**

***Learn about the newest Project Freedom communities,
enjoy the music of Kindred Spirit and see the
Presentation of Awards to our 2020 Angels.***