

New Horizons

Housing That Supports Independence



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Justice Department Settlement Forces Amtrak To Fix ADA Violations

Reprinted from Disability Scoop / by Shaun Heasley | December 10, 2020

Amtrak will make big changes at over 100 train stations across the country to ensure that 30 years after the passage of the Americans with Disabilities Act, people with disabilities can finally access its rail network.



Amtrak has reached a settlement with the U.S. Department of Justice to resolve violations of the Americans with Disabilities Act. (Michael Hibblen/ Miami Herald/TNS)

Under a settlement this month with the U.S. Department of Justice, Amtrak will fix inaccessible stations and pay \$2.25 million to people with disabilities who sought to travel at 78 stations with significant issues.

When the ADA was passed in 1990, lawmakers gave Amtrak 20 years to come into compliance. But the Justice Department found that the rail system did not follow through and continues to discriminate against those with disabilities.

"Amtrak failed or refused to comply with the congressionally-mandated 2010 deadline, and Amtrak's noncompliance with the Americans with Disabilities Act injured individuals with disabilities. Passengers with disabilities have waited long enough," said Eric Dreiband, assistant attorney general at the Justice Department's Civil Rights Division.

The agreement stipulates that Amtrak will design at least 135 accessible stations over the next 10 years. Construction of 90 of the stations should be completed within that time frame and changes should be underway at a minimum of 45 more. In addition, the rail system created an Office of the Vice President of Stations, Properties & Accessibility to handle ADA compliance and a settlement fund is being set up to compensate affected travelers. Amtrak has also agreed to train its staff on ADA requirements and implement a process for ADA complaints.

Kimberly Woods, a spokeswoman for Amtrak, said that information about eligibility for compensation through the settlement fund will be posted on Amtrak's website by the end of the month. Additionally, Woods noted that the rail system invested \$109 million toward accessibility improvements in its last fiscal year.

"The settlement reached by DOJ and Amtrak not only resolves the lawsuit, but more importantly it builds upon and protects important aspects of Amtrak's longstanding ADA compliance efforts," Woods said.

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“My Two Cents”

By Tim Doherty, Executive Director



Well what a year 2020 has been! What started out as a normal year, became topsy turvy with the emergence of the Covid-19 virus, and how our lives did change. No longer could we go out to dinner, assemble in church, or visit our grandparents in nursing homes. Many companies were forced to have employees work from home, but many people also got laid off. Our own work schedules have been altered so that our offices had to close, our recreation programs put on hold, and Board and staff meetings became “Zoom” meetings. Schools closed, and then opened and closed again, while offering virtual learning became the order of the day for schools and colleges.

For Project Freedom though, it was a productive year. We finished construction on two large housing communities, one in West Windsor and one in Gibbsboro, leased them up and continued construction on a third in Robbinsville. At the same time, we laid plans for a second community in Hamilton having won the funding and Tax Credits in 2019. We hope to break ground for “Hamilton Woods” in the Spring of 2021.

The year started out in sadness in losing our long time Lawrence receptionist, Nate Smith, who was our good friend. However as PFI continued to grow we added construction manager, Bob Fasulo and Human Resource Manager, Marilou Chinchilla, as well as adding Gibbsboro Manager Wendy Pritsky. Joanne Sherry, took over the new West Windsor Community while Brianne Devlin stepped up to become our Lawrence Manager. We restructured our management team, appointed Jackie Elsowiny Frank Sciarrotta and Dara Johnson as Regional Managers. These changes were necessary to manage the growth we had just experienced, and have made our organization stronger, as we look forward to 2021.

As we enter 2021, there is great anticipation that the new vaccines, which have been developed at Warp Speed, will provide the protection we all need from this pandemic, and that very soon we will be able to return to a more normal lifestyle. For me personally, it will be my last year as Executive Director, as I hope to retire on July 1, marking my 24th year of service. What started out as a visit with Norman to sell my handicapped van, became my life’s work. It has been a wonderful and exciting journey, seeing a small non-profit housing company, grow to over eleven housing communities of over 500 units. I am grateful to all whom I have worked with, from our Board of Trustees, our dedicated staff and our wonderful tenants. You have made that journey special.

Finally I want to thank my son Tim and daughter Jen for always supporting my efforts, but most of all, my wife Marion, for being my sounding board and providing her wisdom and guidance. Working with her every day has been special. So the reigns are past to another special lady--Tracee Battis, who will become the new Executive Director. Tracee not only has the talent, experience and knowledge to handle the job, she also has the heart. Our Mission is safe in her hands. Project Freedom continues the journey. Happy New Year!

Timothy J. Doherty



From Norman's Desk

The New Year brings hope of going back to the way life as it was before the pandemic. To a maskless way of life where getting together or meeting someone new happened without fear and doubts. To a life that seemed unfettered compared to being shut in at home or shut out of your favorite place to eat, drink, or see a movie.

Yes, we all yearn for what used to be normal. A smile on a stranger's face. Going to a ballgame with hundreds of your fellow fans. Browsing in a bookstore or a library for relaxation. Taking a trip with a group to see a movie and eating afterward. Following one's faith with friends gathered together in holy places.

Those days are coming, but they are still months away. The virus is still raging, and we must do our part in to fight this virus in order to reach those better days faster. We are all soldiers in this fight, and we cannot leave anyone behind through our own inaction.

This next month will be critical. The vaccines are here, and overall immunity will be increasing as healthcare workers are immunized. That is a scientific fact as certain as the Sun will come up tomorrow.

Yes, there are valid concerns about these vaccines because of their rapid development and the shortened testing period. Yes, there are side effects or allergic reactions from the vaccines. And, yes, there are also wild conspiracy theories out there generated by kooks and people who want to do harm or create chaos.

Choosing to be vaccinated is a personal choice in this fight to return to normal. The choice should be based on facts and not fiction. People should use common sense and not political ideology in weighing the facts, and they should always weigh the consequences of their choice for the people around them.

Lastly but most importantly, always ask two questions: "Why?" and "Does this makes sense in my life?"

"Why?" is probably the most powerful question that journalists and scientists can ask. For scientists, the question lead to accepted scientific facts such as the Earth rotates around the Sun. For journalists, the question often, but not always, reveals the motives behind events or actions. The question "Why?" combined with common sense should bring critical thought to tales that don't sound quite right.

"Does this makes sense in my life?" is probably the best question to ask yourself when evaluating the positives and negatives of a life-changing choice. Based on what your life experiences have taught you, the societal values that your life is anchored upon, and the common sense that has brought you to this point, does taking or not taking this vaccine make sense in your life?

And don't fool yourself. Either way, this decision will be life changing for you and your family and friends.

Perhaps that is why we yearn to go back to pre-pandemic life when decisions—especially routine decisions like going out to eat—were not so consequential. We want to go back to easier decisions, but to get there we need to go forward to face a hard choice.

Be safe. Be aware. Be mindful that we fight this virus together!

Please join us in congratulating John McCormack on his retirement!

John worked for Project Freedom for fifteen years after retiring from a 30-year career at General Motors.

John is someone that we could ALWAYS count on, no matter what. If we were right about something, John was in our corner. If we were wrong, John would make no bones about letting us know, and somehow, we were OK with that!



He always played the role of Santa Claus every Christmas and our tenants at Hamilton truly enjoyed his HO-HO-HO singing and dancing. John had everyone laughing, singing and most of all, SMILING!!

John was our chef de cuisine, cooking all of our holiday meals for our tenants. John and his wife, Susan, prepare a delicious Christmas breakfast every year for the Hamilton staff. John was also instrumental in coordinating and distributing food donations in an efficient manner to all of the Hamilton tenants.



Lastly, we remember John doing his White Elephant gift drawing at our Staff Holiday Party every year. It was always fun watching John interact with each of us! It was a long and drawn out process in order to get the final gift, but we sure did have a great time!

John will truly be missed. Hopefully, he will be able to come back and visit us from time to time! We wish him a retirement of good health and happiness always!



Disability Advocates Urge People To Get Vaccinated Against COVID-19

by Michelle Diamant |

Reprinted from December 17, 2020 Disability Scoop

As the first COVID-19 vaccines become available, advocates say that people with developmental disabilities should get vaccinated and they are pushing for this population to be eligible as soon as possible.

In a statement, 20 advocacy groups are calling on people in the disability community to be immunized.

“We encourage our stakeholders to receive the COVID-19 vaccine,” reads the statement spearheaded by the Autism Society of America and signed by Autism Speaks, Easter Seals, the National Association of Councils on Developmental Disabilities, the National Association of State Directors of Developmental Disabilities Services and the National Down Syndrome Society, among others.

The groups said that getting vaccinated will “make it significantly less likely you’ll get COVID-19” and it “may keep you from getting severely ill if you were to contract COVID-19.” In addition, doing so “will help protect vulnerable people around you.”

For those with disabilities, the advocates said that widespread vaccination could lead to an end to remote learning, resumption of regular therapy, support and respite care services, improved employment opportunities and it may allow individuals living in group homes and other congregate settings to see their families and friends again.

“Mass COVID-19 vaccination would allow our global community to recover and help stop the pandemic,” the statement says, while noting that like other medical decisions, people should discuss the COVID-19 vaccine with their physicians.

The benefits of vaccination could be greatest for those with more significant challenges, said Angela Geiger, president and CEO of Autism Speaks.

“For someone with autism and limited communication skills or behavior challenges common in autism, protection afforded by the vaccine can have an immeasurable impact. It can enable renewed participation in community life, access to vital services and supports and an opportunity to begin the recovery from the disruptions in care that have taken place this year,” she said. “This can also be a crucial step for family members and caregivers of people with autism who have more significant needs.”

The push from disability advocacy groups comes as the first COVID-19 vaccine from Pfizer-BioNTech started to be administered in the U.S. this week. With limited supply, the initial shots are going to health care workers and residents of long-term care facilities.

Advocates have been speaking out for months about the need for people with developmental disabilities to be prioritized in the distribution of any COVID-19 vaccines given the high risks they face. Research shows that people within this population who contract the virus face a two to 10 times greater risk of dying as compared to others.

Nonetheless, only 10 states have specifically addressed people with developmental disabilities in their plans to allocate coronavirus vaccines, according to a new report from the American Network of Community Options and Resources, or ANCOR, which represents disability service providers across the nation. A poll out this week from the Kaiser Family Foundation indicates that 71% of Americans say they would “definitely or probably” get a COVID-19 vaccine, up from 63% in September.



Sandra Lindsay, left, a nurse at Long Island Jewish Medical Center in Queens, N.Y., is inoculated with the Covid-19 vaccine. (Mark Lennihan/Pool/AFP via Getty Images/TNS)

State May Require Cameras In Group Homes

Reprinted from Disability Scoop by Susan K. Livio, NJ.com/TNS | December 15, 2020

EDISON, N.J. — William Cray was found dead on the floor of his bedroom closet in a group home in Somers Point three years ago. His mother said she'll never know what happened to her son, a 33-year-old man with developmental disabilities. The autopsy said he died of natural causes. The operators of the state-licensed group home, Devereux Advanced Behavioral Health, didn't say much, although she had been at odds with them in recent months over Billy's unexplained bruises and other injuries.

Martha Cray asked a New Jersey Assembly panel last week to spare other families this fear and uncertainty by supporting legislation that would require the installation of security cameras if residents or their guardians give consent. She noted her son had suffered abuse in other licensed facilities, and when she complained and demanded an investigation, the claims were always "unsubstantiated." "What exactly is the purpose of having a Department of Health and (a Department of) Human Services if they don't oversee these facilities and hold them accountable?" she said.

Following an emotional three-hour hearing, the Assembly Human Services Committee agreed and voted 6-0 to pass the bill (A4013). The bill requires the group home to retain the video recordings for 90 days, and the state Department of Human Services to list the names of group homes that have cameras on the state website. The bill, which was amended before the vote, makes clear the cameras would be installed in common areas — including backyards and doorways — and only if all of the residents agree they want them. "The loss of a child, is best described as a state of purgatory and hell wrapped up in one," Cray said as she wept. "The families who are testifying before this committee today that are feeling the stress of sleepless nights, is a fraction of the pain and stress they will have, should they lose their loved."

Priscilla Quesada of East Windsor, the mother of a 21-year-old nonverbal son with autism who lives in a group home, said she believes cameras would help keep her son safe. She showed photographs of bruises around her son's neck and rug burn on his face, among other injuries. "No one knew or could give me an explanation on how these incidents occurred," said Quesada, who described the guilt she feels as a "bad mother" for leaving her son in group care.

Representatives from the group home industry asked the committee to vote no and consider how cameras in common areas like living rooms would violate the residents' privacy.

Cathy Chin, executive director for the Alliance for the Betterment of Citizens with Disabilities, shared with the committee a research paper that found cameras in homes of people with intellectual disabilities raises the level of distrust from employees and give families a false sense of security.

Brent A. Hayward from the Office of Health and Human Services of Victoria, Australia, after reviewing 43 research papers on the subject, concluded: "it was disliked by people with disabilities and was regarded with suspicion by staff. Functionality was limited and the ethical challenges associated with its deployment are considerable." At a time when budgets are stretched to acquire personal protective equipment to prevent the spread of the coronavirus, "cameras are a waste of resources," Chin said.

Evelyn Ramundo, president of the Statewide Self-Advocacy Network, an organization comprised of people with disabilities, said she surveyed her members and the "vast majority" opposed the idea of living under surveillance. The bill "does not say who will be able to review the recordings," Ramundo said. "Can you imagine being watched in your own bedroom or living room? The thought frightened me." "Cameras do not stop abuse or neglect," she added. "Cameras cannot stop it when someone is choking."

Assembly Human Services Chairwoman Joann Downey, D-Monmouth, who is also the prime sponsor of the bill, stressed that everyone living in the group home must consent to the use of cameras in the common areas. If anyone says no, they would not be installed. Residents could request them for their bedroom — paid for by the resident's family — but if it is a shared space, there needs to be consent by everyone sharing the room.

Downey said she was "really kind of upset" because it appeared the self-advocates "were fed information" that wasn't true. "We've gone through every particular thing to make sure this balances privacy and protecting people," Downey said. "If they don't want it, they don't have to have it." Downey added that some group homes use cameras with great success because they protect both residents and staff, who otherwise may be falsely accused of wrongdoing.

Jessica Gustafson, a former Devereux employee who said she was warned by management that Billy Cray had a habit of falsely accusing staff of abuse, said she came to know him well and witnessed his mistreatment.

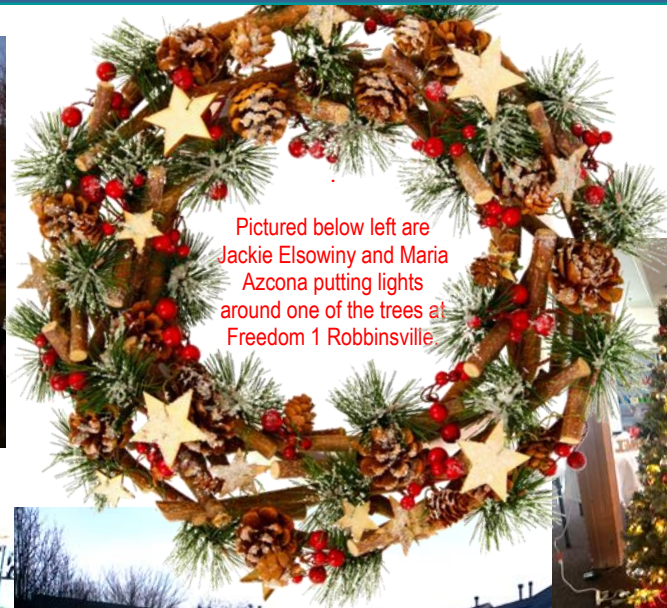
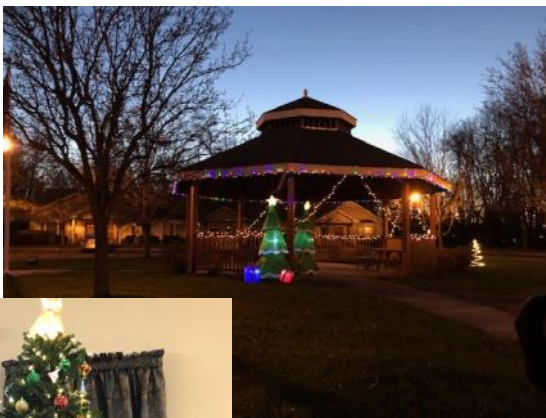
There is no reason employees should object to cameras unless they have something to hide, Gustafson told the committee. "Cameras should be installed in every hospital, nursing and group home in America," Gustafson said. "While abuse may never go away completely, cameras would definitely decrease the amount of abuse. The men and women that have to live in a group home have the right to feel safe."

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Pictured below left are
Jackie Elsowiny and Maria
Azcona putting lights
around one of the trees at
Freedom 1 Robbinsville

