

THE INDEPENDENCE TIMES

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CEO CORNER

Patricia Yeager, Ph.D., CEO

VIRTUAL COMMUNICATION PLATFORMS AND THE FIGHT FOR EQUAL ACCESS

The pandemic has caused a seismic shift in how we work, learn, obtain services, and interact with each other. Before social distancing, meeting/communication platforms like Zoom, Go-To Meeting, Microsoft Teams, and Google Hangouts were used for a few very specific purposes. Now they are almost a daily part of our lives. They allow many (though not all) of us to work from home. Kids are attending virtual classrooms. Mental and physical health care providers use “telehealth” to deliver services. On an individual level, many of us use video chat to connect with loved ones. There’s no question these platforms have been a lifesaver, right?

Well, that may be true for many. But for people with disabilities, virtual platforms are just another barrier to work through. Those who are d/Deaf or hard of hearing often rely on captioning or American Sign Language (ASL) interpretation to be able to fully participate. People with low vision and hearing loss may need StreamText, a service that allows the user to change the size and color of the captioning. Even just getting connected to the platform may be difficult or impossible for people who cannot see or have fine motor dexterity issues.

The problem is that gaining equal access is not as easy as flipping a switch. Accessibility capabilities and quality vary widely from platform to platform. In addition, some organizations that provide public online meetings, trainings, and services are not thinking about their audience in terms of accessibility. Nor do they seem to understand that “reasonable accommodations” and “effective communication” also apply to online platforms and are required under Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act for those who

receive federal funding and the Americans with Disabilities Act for everyone else.

Unfortunately, while the technology may be relatively new, this type of barrier is all too familiar to the disability community. From bathrooms to curb cuts to buses to cell phones to the Internet and now to virtual platforms – the story remains the same. Over and over, it falls on people with disabilities to educate public entities about the need, encourage them to find and spend the necessary funds, and make sure they notify people that access is available and how to request it.

The bad news is that we once again find ourselves in this position. The good news is that we have the skills, knowledge, and determination to change things as we have so many times in the past.

To begin, check out our Issue Brief on this subject at bit.ly/ic-videoconf. It explains the differences between captioning services and platforms. Then, those who need accommodations to connect to the platforms must ask for and, if necessary, demand those services from whomever is offering a virtual experience. People without disabilities can also step up to the plate and question their organization’s capabilities in this area.

Asking for and about accommodations is our right! We have a right to participate fully in workplace meetings, telehealth services, classrooms, religious services, training programs, schools, and more. It is up to us to arm ourselves with information and start agitating for equal access.



In the Stitch of Time:

Area Girl Scouts Make It Sew Easy To Reopen

During Colorado’s stay-at-home order, issued to combat the pandemic, The Independence Center’s halls were empty for almost three months. So when restrictions were finally eased, the staff was eager to welcome people back into the building. To prepare, a re-opening committee was formed to discuss the precautions necessary to keep visitors and staff safe.

At the top of the list was procuring masks for people who were unable to supply their own. At the time, finding any type of personal protection equipment was still challenging. But Suzi Arnold, The IC’s acting Independent Living Program Manager, had an idea. Why not reach out to the Girl Scouts?

Since 1942, the Girl Scouts slogan has been “Do a good turn daily.” According to the organization’s website, it is a “reminder of the many ways girls can contribute positively to the lives of others.” As a lifetime Girl Scout herself who was also employed with them for over 20 years, Suzi knew that a partnership between local troops and The IC could be beneficial for both.

Suzi reached out to a local Girl Scout volunteer Facebook group to explain the need, and soon several troops were onboard. It also quickly became a family affair when Suzi’s sister, Traci Morgan, volunteered to record video tutorials on sewing masks without elastic, which was in short supply. One of Suzi’s daughters, Andrina McClelland, helped coordinate efforts by tracking donations, arranging to pick up finished masks, and delivering them to The IC. In the end, girls from five troops - #40409, #43893, #41660, #40960, and #43530 - donated almost 400 handmade or pre-purchased masks.

“The Girl Scouts are great,” says Suzi. “For them, it’s all about service to the community, just like it is with The IC. So it was a perfect partnership!”



Mobile Food Pantry: Supporting Our Community

COVID-19 has not just had an impact on the physical health of those in our community. Job and income losses due to the pandemic have increased economic hardships such as difficulty paying bills, putting off filling prescriptions, and greater food insecurity.

As part of its mission to help people with disabilities live more independently, The IC partnered with Care & Share Food Bank last summer to address food insecurity amongst our consumers and in the community. Eighty-five volunteers, including many of The IC’s staff members, manned a mobile food pantry in the parking lot of our main building on the fourth Thursday of June, July, and August. During these months, almost 1,000 adults and children received 28,469 pounds of food, including fresh produce, dairy, meats, and canned and dry goods.

If you or someone you know is struggling with food insecurity, call The IC at 719-425-5205 for available resources in your area. For those without transportation, you can also visit bit.ly/food-med-access to download our guide: “Food and Prescription Access for Individuals Without Transportation During COVID-19.”



Michele Chamberlain

OUTREACH

Living in a rural community has many benefits, including a lower cost of living, a feeling of safety, and a sense of belonging. But for people with disabilities, residing outside a city can make it more challenging to access the supports and services they need to live independently.

That's where The Independence Center's Outreach program comes in. Serving six counties in Southern Colorado, the program brings The IC's resources and connections to those outside of Colorado Springs. Keep reading to learn more about the program from Michele Chamberlain, Independent Living Program Manager, and Fran Dorrance, Independent Living Specialist.

Tell us a little bit about yourselves and what you do.

Michele Chamberlain (MC): I was hired as an Independent Living Specialist for The IC's Outreach program in 2017, and I covered Teller and Park Counties. I became the manager of the program in 2017.

Fran Dorrance (FD): In my position, I cover the Eastern counties including El Paso, Lincoln, Kit Carson, and Cheyenne Counties. I've been doing this about six years.

What is Outreach, in a nutshell?

MC: Outreach takes all the services we offer at The IC into rural communities in Park, Teller, Lincoln, El Paso, Kit Carson, and Cheyenne counties. We have five staff members who act as a bridge between our consumers and the resources they need. We can either connect them to resources at The IC or within their own community, depending on what's available. So, for example, if they want to apply for disability benefits, we can get them started with our Benefits department. And since our staff members actually live in the communities they serve, they can help with things like getting documents signed or helping the individual understand the process.

FD: The specialists also directly provide services like peer support and other programming. We work to make sure we're giving people in the community what they need. When I first started, I reached out to all the communities I work with. One of the big things they wanted was an exercise group so I figured out a way to do that.

Q&A

What sets The IC apart from other groups that might be in the area?

MC: When I started, one of the things I heard over and over again in Park County was that The IC was one of the groups they could count on. There have been groups that have come in, stayed a few months, and then left because they couldn't continue to provide resources. But The IC has stayed and has been responsive to the needs of individuals in the community. Something else that sets us apart is that our specialists live within the communities they serve. Because they're part of that community, residents really do reach out when they need the services we offer.

FD: Being part of the community also creates trust with the other people who live there. I live in Calhan, and if someone needs something in this town, they call me because they know I get things done.

How has the pandemic changed the way Outreach provides services?

MC: Before COVID, we would often meet people either in their homes or at the offices we had in the communities. As of right now, we are not able to meet in any of those offices because we don't want to bring our consumers into a situation where they could

be exposed. But we're still available to help. We can meet with someone in person on a case-by-case basis, depending on what's needed, although we're trying to do as much as possible virtually.

FD: If they have health issues or transportation issues that prevent them from coming into an office, we will go to them. However, if they have the ability to come to us, we encourage them to make an appointment.

What do you like most about your job?

MC: I'm just in awe of all the different communities and people we serve. I love that we're able to give individual attention in these small towns. And I get to watch my staff grow and flourish. They have so much compassion and they don't give up on trying to help our consumers.

FD: I enjoy being able to help people. And I get excited about finding resources for our consumers and seeing the really awesome outcome of it all.

For more information about The IC's Outreach program, visit <http://bit.ly/IC-outreach> or call 719-471-8181.



Fran Dorrance

Creating Connection with Online Classes and Groups

When Colorado’s Governor Jared Polis issued a statewide stay-at-home order in March due to the coronavirus, most of The IC’s staff had to figure out new ways of serving our consumers and clients. As the organization’s IL Skills Specialist, Edgar Morales was used to working in-person with consumers to help them develop the skills necessary to live more independently. Suddenly, he had to find ways of connecting through a virtual platform.

“With COVID, I said to myself, how can I be creative with my classes,” Edgar recalls. He decided if he was going to be teaching from his home, he would put it to work for his students. “I decided to make one-on-one workshops. So if, for example, someone wants to learn how to cook, I will go into my kitchen and I will go step-by-step teaching them how to cook virtually.” Edgar now offers one-hour, personalized workshops on everything from basic cleaning to simple budgeting. He also facilitates a youth support group and teaches a Daily Living Skills Workshop for Youth with The IC’s Youth Advocate, Nina Kamekona.

Edgar isn’t the only staff member who has adapted to a new socially-distanced reality. Lisa Gavel, Peer Support Coordinator, took her support groups online, allowing people with disabilities to continue to connect at a crucial time. She also facilitates a Healthy Living and Gardening Group and co-facilitates a Mindfulness Learning Group with Carrie Baatz, Community Training Coordinator.

See below for the complete list of online workshops, classes, and support groups currently offered. Call The Independence Center at 719-471-8181 to sign up and to request accommodations.

Independent Living Skills Training Workshops

For: All consumers of The IC
When: Call to schedule

Each one-hour, virtual workshop focuses on a single life skill that will help the consumer live independently. These are designed to be interactive with time to ask questions. Can be taught individually or to a group.

- Topics (special requests welcome):
- Getting to Know Your Way Around the Kitchen
 - How to Operate Kitchen Appliances
 - How to Prepare a Simple Meal
 - Basic House Cleaning/Tips to Keep Your House Clean
 - How to Use a Vacuum Cleaner
 - How to Clean Floors Using a Mop/Broom
 - How to Do Laundry
 - How to Clean a Bathroom
 - Critical/Creative Thinking: How to Solve Problems Creatively
 - Planning a Simple Budget



Healthy Community Living Class

For: Any consumer of The IC
When: Every Monday
Length of each class: 1.5 hours

This 10-week class will cover the following topics:

- Goal Setting
- Building Support
- Healthy Reactions
- Staying on Course
- Healthy Communication
- Seeking Information
- Eating Well
- Physical Activity
- Advocacy
- Maintenance

Daily Living Skills Workshops for Youth

For: Youth ages 14-24
When: Every Tuesday from 1pm – 2:30 pm
Length of Workshops: 1 – 2 hours depending on the topic

These highly interactive workshops are geared toward participants who are willing to participate, try new things, and have fun!

- Topics:
- Disability Etiquette/Culture/History
 - Knowing Your Disability
 - Virtual Scavenger Hunt
 - Art and Music
 - Self-Care and Creating a Support Network
 - And much more!

Support Groups*

Youth Support Group
Tuesdays, 11:00 am - 12:30 pm

Cross Disability Group
Fridays, 10:00 am - 11:00 am

Mental Wellness Group
3rd Tuesday of the month,
11:00 am - 12:00 pm

Women’s Support Group
1st and 3rd Tuesdays of the month,
1:00 pm - 2:30 pm

Traumatic Brain Injury Group
2nd Wednesday of the month,
1:30-2:30 pm

Community Groups*

Healthy Food & Gardening Learning Group
4th Monday of the month,
1:00 pm - 2:00 pm

Mindfulness Learning Group
1st Tuesday of the month,
11:00 am - 12:00 pm

*Dates and times subject to change.



CELEBRATING 30 YEARS OF THE AMERICANS WITH DISABILITIES ACT



Heather Skold
Anchor, KRDO

Serina Gilbert

Each July, The IC celebrates the signing of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) with an in-person event. Hundreds of people attend the free luncheon to network and learn more about the issues facing people with disabilities. This year, however, COVID-19 left the organization with two choices: cancel or get creative. With 2020 marking the ADA's 30th anniversary, canceling wasn't an option. So we got creative and hosted it online!

"We knew that gathering together this year wouldn't be possible," said Patricia Yeager, CEO of The IC. "So we did what people with disabilities have always done. We adapted!"

The theme for 2020 was "ADA: Celebrating 30 Years." The landmark legislation was signed into law by President George H.W. Bush on July 26, 1990. It prohibits discrimination against people with disabilities and guarantees that they have equal opportunity to participate in American life, including employment, access to goods and services, and the ability to take part in state and local government programs and services.

A powerhouse line-up of speakers reflected on life before and after the ADA and spoke about the challenges that remain. To maintain social distancing guidelines, each speaker was recorded separately and edited into an hour-long video that streamed on Youtube on Tuesday, July 21, 2020. The video was captioned and an American Sign Language interpreter translated the event for the d/Deaf community.

KRDO anchor Heather Skold emceed the event. She was joined by Judy Heumann,

internationally renowned disability advocate, who spoke on Accessibility; Tony Gannet, Draper Commons, who spoke on Housing; Andrew Winders and Serina Gilbert, Department of Vocational Rehab, who spoke on Employment; Julie Reiskin, Colorado Cross-Disability Coalition, who spoke on Disability Awareness; and Paul O'Brien, Canine Companions for Independence, who spoke on Service Animals. Mayor John Suthers also made a special appearance to give an update on accessibility progress in Colorado Springs.

While the in-person connections were missed, streaming the event allowed The IC to spread its message of equal rights for people with disabilities to an even wider audience. Over 4,000 viewers tuned in for at least some portion of the event, and at one point, 375 were viewing at the same time. Watch a replay at bit.ly/2020-ada-video.

A post-event survey found that participants enjoyed being able to watch and learn remotely in an accessible format. One respondent said, "It was super easy to access and the technology was perfect." Another noted that "The content is always perfect every year. It was so seamless. Everyone who put this together did a superb job!" Yet another raved, "Captioning (was) right on; speakers easy to hear; nice, tight agenda and pace. Quite impressive!"

Thank you to everyone who joined us and helped make this unconventional event a success. We look forward to seeing you – whether in person or virtually – at next year's ADA Celebration Event!

Grants Help The IC Continue Its Mission of Service



As a nonprofit, The Independence Center couldn't do what we do without the generous support of individuals, foundations, and community partners. Recently, two Foundations recognized The IC's work by awarding grants to further our mission of helping people with disabilities live fuller, more independent lives. We sincerely appreciate their support!

Colorado Springs Health Foundation Tech Grant

Many people found themselves working from home for the first time during COVID-19, and staff at The IC were no exception. Today, more than 50% of The IC's staff continue to work remotely as a safety precaution and to adhere to the State's safer-at-home phase. Thanks to a \$4,872 grant from the Colorado Springs Health Foundation (CSHF), The IC was able to purchase four laptops and five docking stations to support more secure communications with consumers and to ensure remote staff have the same computer functions commonly used at The IC.

CSHF has awarded more than 25 mini-grants to help organizations address their COVID-19-related technology needs and adapt to a new virtual reality. Cari Davis, Executive Director of CSHF, says, "We are delighted that these grants are allowing The Independence Center and other local nonprofits to continue their important work."



Comcast NBCUniversal Foundation



An \$8,000 grant from Comcast NBCUniversal Foundation will support The IC's Deaf, Hard of Hearing, Low Vision, Blind, and Assistive Technology programs. These departments and programs are intertwined, and staff work together to provide supports and services. This includes providing assistive technology resources, visiting with consumers at their homes to explore home modifications and assistive technology or tools, offering interactive transportation training, providing advocacy services and mentoring, educating the community about disability etiquette, and collaborating with other agencies to identify and develop supports within the community.

This grant from the Comcast NBCUniversal Foundation is in recognition of Comcast's commitment to the communities where its customers and employees live and work.



COVID-19: What the Deaf Community Wants Everyone to Know

The following is adapted from an op-ed originally published in The Gazette and written by Kelsey Sandella, The IC’s former Community Organizing Assistant.

When this year started, no one expected a global pandemic that would change the way of the world. Wearing masks, gloves, and handwashing to a personal theme song is now the new norm. Adjusting has been a challenge for everyone, but it has been especially difficult for d/Deaf or hard of hearing individuals.

Many individuals, like myself, who are d/Deaf and hard of hearing need to be able to read lips to communicate. Now that everyone’s lips are covered, access to communication has come to a screeching halt. This can be stressful, tiring, and sometimes downright scary. The simplest of task (going through a drive-thru, buying groceries, getting an oil change) has become a struggle of, “What did they say? Are they talking to me?”

My story is not unique. According to the 2012 Colorado census, there are 5,187,582 people living in Colorado and of those people, 446,132 are d/Deaf or hard of hearing. It is safe to assume those numbers have gone up as the

population has increased. In my role at The IC, I heard numerous negative communication experiences from d/Deaf and hard of hearing consumers and coworkers. Their experiences share a common theme: a lack of awareness around their needs. Education is the first step to making lasting changes.

So how can we support our d/Deaf and hard of hearing community members?

- Read “Simple Solutions: Communicating During COVID-19” on the next page.
- Buy disposable face masks with clear windows online from companies such as Safe ‘N’ Clear (safenclear.com) and ClearMask (theclearmask.com).
- Reusable clear window masks can be found on Etsy, with prices from \$8-\$12.
- Make your own clear window mask from patterns online. You can also donate masks through Colorado Mask Project (coloradomaskproject.com).
- Learn basic conversational American Sign Language (ASL) skills. Gallaudet University has free online ASL lessons.
- Be aware, be kind, be patient. A little empathy and support go a long way.

SIMPLE SOLUTIONS: Communicating During Covid-19

When communicating with d/Deaf or hard of hearing individuals during this unprecedented time, keep these five simple solutions in mind.

- Be patient and understand that masks cause increased stress and anxiety for those who are d/Deaf and hard of hearing.
- Ask about communication preferences (i.e., lip reading, sign language, written text). Speech-to-text apps and/or pen and paper are good options for those who prefer written text. Avoid physical contact when choosing this communication method.
- To aid those who rely on lip reading, wear clear or transparent masks that show the mouth.
- Choose to wear a face shield in combination with social distancing. Remove non-transparent masks to aid those who rely on lip reading; replace when finished.
- Face the individual while speaking and speak clearly. (Do not shout. This only distorts sound.)

A Tool for Better Communication

Using a communication placard such as the one below may make it easier for d/Deaf or hard of hearing individuals to communicate with hearing individuals. Create one of your own or cut out the one below and carry it in your wallet. You can also download one at bit.ly/comm-placard.

DEAF/HARD OF HEARING/DEAFBLIND COMMUNICATION PLACARD

I am Deaf/Hard of Hearing/DeafBlind.

My name is _____.

I do not understand you with your mask on.

Please respect my legal right to understand you by allowing me to use the smartphone.

Speak into my smartphone. I am using it to understand you.

If my smartphone is not working well or at all, please write down what you are telling me.



Caring for Yourself with Caregiver Connection

Whether helping a loved one or a client, caregiving is one of the most rewarding things anyone can do. It can also be one of the most challenging. Those who devote their lives to helping others can find themselves suffering from burnout or, in more extreme cases, compassion fatigue. Signs can include anxiety, depression, exhaustion, irritability, avoidance, physical pain, and neglecting one's own needs.

If you're a caregiver who's feeling burned out, you're not alone. In a National Alliance for Caregiving and AARP Public Policy Institute survey of nearly 48 million caregivers, 20 percent say they have experienced high financial strain, nearly 40 percent are emotionally stressed, about 20 percent are physically strained, and 20 percent feel alone.

One way to combat burnout and compassion fatigue is to join a support group like The IC's new Caregiver Connection. All caregivers in the community are welcome, whether or not they are employed by The IC. By connecting with others who understand, participants can find ways to reduce stress or anxiety, alleviate feelings of isolation, gain a sense of control and wellbeing, and cultivate healthy coping skills.

Because most caregivers find it easier to attend meetings virtually rather than in person, Caregiver Connection is held online. The group meets via Zoom from 2 – 3 p.m. on the first Friday and third Thursday of each month. (Just remember FF/TT!)

If you're a caregiver who's looking for support, get the Zoom link by sending an email to community@the-ic.org. Then grab a beverage, put your feet up (for a change), and join us for conversations that will support and inspire you.



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