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A Call for Disability Advocacy during the Coronavirus Pandemic from APA Division Of Rehabilitation Psychology (22)\*

Given the serious health threats posed by the COVID-19 (coronavirus), Division 22 (Rehabilitation Psychology) of the [American Psychological Association \(APA\)](#) is very concerned about the health, welfare, and well-being of citizens with disabilities and chronic health conditions. Some disabled individuals have conditions or impairments that place them at greater risk for infection from the novel coronavirus, while others do not. Some disabled individuals are at greater risk for secondary complications due to contracting the novel coronavirus or from prolonged hospitalization. However, their collective safety and health is at risk of compromise by ignorance and discriminatory beliefs and actions which in turn can limit health care, personal assistance, social services, and work or educational opportunities.

Division 22's members and leadership team are especially worried that any rationing of healthcare not disproportionately affect the disability population in this country or around the world. Such medical choices are patently discriminatory, aimed at a group that is routinely marginalized and stigmatized. Ableism is a form of discrimination which favors the able-bodied and characterizes the disabled as inferior to non-disabled people. Worrisome evidence is mounting: Some states have considered denying lifesaving efforts to their citizens who have [intellectual disabilities](#).

Several lawsuits have been filed on behalf of people with disabilities related to discrimination concerns during the COVID-19 pandemic. [The first of these was a disability discrimination complaint filed in the state of Washington due to a COVID-19 healthcare rationing plan outlining protocols for influencing who will or will not have access to lifesaving interventions, such as ventilators.](#) [The Office of Civil Rights in Health and Human Services \(HHS\) has spoken](#)

[out through a bulletin](#), stating that disabled people “[should not be denied medical care based on a person’s relative ‘worth’ based on the presence or absence of disabilities or age](#)”.

[Understandably, however, people with disabilities fear that their health histories, coupled with biased and outmoded beliefs, could be used to deny them critical care and services during the pandemic](#). Denial of fundamental human rights is too easily becoming part of the normalized discourse, a change which is both ableist and dangerous. Due to systemic government and public health failures over years of fiscal cost cutting, frontline health providers may make emergency decisions based ableist beliefs that could or can effect disabled individuals. The issue of rationing due to scarcity of resources presents complex ethical conundrums for healthcare providers and society at large. Guidelines based on estimates of survivability and quality of life have been shown to be flawed as they are oversimplified and cannot be separated from ableist attitudes. The common belief of “survival of the fittest”, which places different value on different lives, illuminates the complexities that go into seemingly simplistic decisions. Ultimately, policies that promote waste avoidance and emphasize disease prevention are the best ways to reduce the likelihood of insufficient resources. If emergency triage protocols or rationing policies becomes necessary, it is critical that they be formulated via explicit and transparent neutral medical criteria, such as current disease evidence and symptom severity, rather than pre-determined beliefs that pre-existing conditions determine outcomes. In instances when rationing becomes necessary, such decisions should be explicit and transparent, consistent with principles of distributive justice, with appropriate appeals processes and proper oversight.

What can you do to be ally of people with disabilities at this critical moment? Division 22 urges advocacy on behalf of the disability community. [First, educate yourself about the challenges members of this community face in the pandemic and in other emergency and disaster](#)

[situations. Realize, too, that health isn't the only concern for people with disabilities—some students and employees with disabilities may find the sudden switch to online learning to be difficult.](#) Many disabled individuals are struggling to access necessary medical supplies and/or everyday items through regular means, offer to drop items by for them. [Second, you can work to promote the disability community's civil rights and.](#) [Third, contact your elected officials and encourage them to protect the welfare and safety of people with disabilities during this international health crisis and.](#) [If you are disabled, you can engage in self-advocacy, as well.](#) We want to ensure that simply because of individuals may have a preexisting disability that they are not overlooked for lifesaving measures. We are all in this fight together but we must remember that many of our citizens are particularly vulnerable, like those who are disabled, and deserve our ongoing vigilance to policy impact and allyship.

\* [Rehabilitation psychology is the study and application of psychological knowledge and skills on behalf of disabled persons and those with chronic health conditions in order to promote their physical and psychological health, welfare, independence, and functional abilities at each stage of the lifespan.](#)