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## Pandemic creates special challenges for vulnerable population



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COVID-19 poses extreme obstacles for people who have intellectual disabilities and thrive on routine, familiar activities and people, such as family and friends. So, with everything going on, how do we support one of our most vulnerable populations through all of the sudden and dramatic changes?

People who have intellectual disabilities and their advocates have fought for generations against social marginalization, segregated education, inadequate health care and lack of access to opportunities that those of us who do not have an intellectual disability simply take for granted. The recent pandemic has added a whole new list of challenges for this vulnerable population.

A person who has an intellectual disability may not understand why they need to wear a mask in public or why they are unable to meet with and hug their friends. This epidemic is a viral threat that knows no levels and respects no social norms, yet people who have intellectual or developmental disabilities are more likely to die from COVID-19. This pandemic is a continual crisis for these individuals.

As the mother of a beautiful adult daughter who has intellectual disabilities, I have a front-row seat to her daily struggles for independence, equality and acceptance. As the founder of a nonprofit organization that provides comprehensive programs that empower adults who have intellectual disabilities, I have the privilege of connecting these special individuals to dynamic learning experiences that will help them thrive.

Our main focus is on positively changing lives for individuals who have disabilities. While the pandemic has surely changed aspects of all of our lives, vulnerable populations like those who have intellectual disabilities have been affected most by not being able to attend their regularly scheduled programs in person. These individuals largely rely on routine, so the change in delivery of programming can be immobilizing for them.

Continuing to offer programs that educate, support and break down barriers is vital to the overall health and well-being of our members, especially now as we work to mitigate the risk of the virus. While offering virtual programming has had its challenges, there have also been unexpected wins. Virtual classes have provided the opportunity for our participants to engage with friends and staff who they miss so much. Guest speakers have stepped up and volunteered their time to personally engage via video conferencing, offering a new way for our members to socialize and network with influential citizens in our community. They share their stories and offer tips and encouragement for the future.

The past few months have been daunting times for these individuals and their families. We do not know the long-term effects that quarantine poses. We are unsure of how these changes will affect the gains they have made toward personal goals. If one thing is certain, it is that people who have disabilities are at a disadvantage when it comes to COVID-19. As a community we need to continue to fight for their independence, growth, and access to community resources.

*Mimi Rogers is a resident of San Carlos and founder and CEO of One Step Beyond Inc., a private nonprofit organization that provides educational, vocational, recreation and performing arts programs for adults who have intellectual disabilities.*