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COVID-19: DISABILITY-INCLUSIVE RESPONSE AT THE WORKPLACE

These are unprecedented times. The world has not dealt with a crisis of this magnitude and scale in living memory. As countries across the globe take strict containment measures to stop the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic, companies too are developing policies and taking steps for the safety and wellbeing of their employees, besides ensuring business continuity. These policies and initiatives must be inclusive.

For persons with disabilities, these are even more challenging times. They may face barriers in terms of access to information being circulated within the company. Some people with disabilities may need additional reasonable accommodation in order to work from home or office (if their work requires them to be present in office), while some others may have difficulty accessing essential/health/support services. Some people with disabilities may have certain underlying health conditions which make them more vulnerable during these times. Some managers may assume that persons with disabilities may not be as effective working from home and therefore may ignore their rights. The Rights of Persons with Disabilities (RPWD) Act, 2016 mandates non-discrimination and equal protection during an emergency. Hence, it is important to take proactive measures to protect employees (including contract workers) with disabilities during this period.

Here are some broad recommendations for organizations to ensure inclusion and support to employees/partners with disabilities during the COVID-19 pandemic:

1. Ensure that employees with disabilities receive accurate information about the disease, prevention methods and the services offered by the company, government and civil society organizations (including disability-specific information) regularly, in easy-to-read and accessible formats. If sign language videos can be made, it would greatly help deaf people.
2. Proactively reach out to all employees who have self-identified themselves as persons with disabilities and medical conditions, employees who are caregivers and pregnant women regarding their health and check if they need

any support/additional accommodation (such as assistive technology, furniture or any other support) to ensure that they continue to remain productive.

3. Some people with disabilities may need assistance in accessing essential health services (for example, blood transfusion, dialysis etc.) and in buying groceries, medicines, food and so on. Connect them with organizations/shops that are providing these services. Refer below to some contact numbers of government officials and NGOs. If some people with disabilities have been asked to vacate their places of stay, help them find an alternate place to stay or provide accommodation at a company guest house during the lockdown period.
4. Send out a communication to all managers/supervisors to ensure non-discrimination of employees with disabilities while allocating work, organizing meetings, among others. Companies must follow the government's directive against laying off people or cutting salaries of employees during the pandemic.
5. Managers should interact frequently with the entire team including team members with disabilities, to help boost their morale during this time. Some of the measures that managers can take are: have regular team meetings (ensure these meetings are accessible to people with visual, hearing and communication disabilities by using platforms which also have a transcript facility or have an online sign language interpreter); have informal conversation at the beginning of the meetings to know how each one is doing; give time for employees to adjust to the altered work routine/remote working; seek feedback, among others.
6. An employee assistance program/counsellor on call can be introduced to provide counselling for personal and work-related issues. If the company already has such a program, send out a mail to all employees informing them about the availability of such a program. In Bangalore, NIMHANS is offering free counselling over phone. Please refer to the contact details at the end of this document.
7. People with disabilities may need gloves and sanitizers in addition to masks as they may need to hold railings to walk or climb stairs. Ensure the disinfection of entrance doors reserved for persons with disabilities, handrails of ramps or staircases, wheelchair rims, etc.

8. All preparedness initiatives and plans should be made inclusive. For example, if there is a phone-based support system available, ensure that the support system is accessible through SMS and email as well.
9. Hold an awareness session for the emergency response team members and HR managers regarding disability-inclusive responses and educate them regarding disability-inclusive practices.
10. In case an employee with disability requires access to health services/hospitalization /requires to be quarantined, ensure the availability of a sign language interpreter, personal assistant, transport, counselling and/or any other reasonable accommodation that may be required.
11. If an employee who is a caregiver of persons with disability needs to be quarantined or hospitalized, help find a person to support the person with disability at home and/or provide caregiving allowance.
12. Ensure that persons with disabilities in need of health services due to the COVID-19 pandemic are not deprioritized on grounds of their disability.

Pan India Resources for any support

- Common Helpline Number: 1075, 9013151515, 011- 23978046
- Delhi Government Online Support Link: <https://epass.jantasamvad.org/epass/init/>
- Karnataka State Commissioner for Persons with Disabilities: +919449869430
- Bangalore Curfew Pass: "Clear Pass" can be downloaded in Android phones (for getting online pass to access services)
- Caremongers India: www.caremongers.com, 9591168886 (WhatsApp and SMS only)
- NIMHANS - for counselling/ mental health concerns: 080 46110007
- Kickstart Cabs for delivering groceries from Big Bazaar with a fee: 8105600445
- Vishnu Soman (Voluntary group for delivering food, grocery or medicine): +917975616937
- National Thalassemia Welfare Society Federation of Indian Thalassemics; Tel (off) +91-11-25511795, 796 Mob (off) 9312273959 and Thalassemia and Sickle Cell Society of Bangalore: 9880188874 (for blood requirement)

- Snehi (counselling services): 9582208181
- Samarthanam (for groceries and mask kit): Naveen: 9449864786; Sunil: 9449864691; Raghavendra: 9483237158
- Project Delhi /NCR (for groceries and medicines): Mobile: 7411167030
- Project Mumbai: For groceries and packed food call 9879508404; whatsapp: 9653330712; for medicines call: 999299929 (via PharmEasy)
- Government of Punjab Helpline (whatsapp video call with sign language support): 9888176357
- NCPEDP (for any queries, concerns and complaints), Arman Ali: 9864102555; Rati Misra: 9811938889; NCPEDP office (whatsapp only): 7303944839. Email:secretariat.ncpedp@gmail.com
- For online sign language interpretation, please contact chanokhs@gmail.com or 9686409251

For any further information/ query / support for people with disabilities, please feel free to contact any of the numbers below:

Rama Krishnamachari, Director DEOC: 91 9880583277

Vidya Rao, Global Lead -- Persons with Disabilities, Wipro: 91 9901288500