**A. Williams OpEd re: ES Study on COVID Impact – May 3, 2021**

No one would argue this last year has been terrible for virtually everyone. But, for children and adults with disabilities who represent some 61 million Americans, there is no doubt they have been disproportionately impacted by this crisis. Further, these hardships are only compounded for people with disabilities of color, across all aspects of their lives, but particularly around healthcare equity, education, employment, and financial stability.

If we are really being honest, even before COVID-19, people with disabilities were already at a societal disadvantage. Historically under-reported and discounted, the disability community has long faced discrimination in:

* Employment, with many employers not understanding people with disabilities’ talent, skills and potential;
* Healthcare, with limited access to quality healthcare and a lack of general understanding or training by the medical community to adequately support their unique needs; and,
* Society, with outdated and hurtful stigmas still rooted in the culture of our neighborhoods, schools and workplaces.

If we are to truly build back and move forward, we must ensure the people most affected by this tragic year receive the most support, with innovative, responsive and quality services and resources. Simply put, now is the time to urgently address these systemic barriers, once and for all.

Our communities are beginning to reopen, with many people generally starting to recover. For people with disabilities, the barriers to mend are much more complex and more urgent. To get to the core of these challenges, Easterseals commissioned Accenture to conduct a comprehensive [national study](https://www.easterseals.com/shared-components/document-library/media-room/easterseals-study-on-the-impact-of-covid-full.pdf) to better understand COVID-19’s impact on the disability community. The [findings](http://www.easterseals.com/covidstudy) are undeniable.

Take education for example. Almost all children with significant disabilities (93%) have missed milestones due to the pandemic, compared to around half (54%) of their non-disabled peers. The first five years of a child’s life are the most critical time in their development with these crucial years setting the trajectory of their entire lives.

People with disabilities are three times less likely to be employed, with this gap growing ever wide during COVID. And, the digital divide is acutely impacting people with disabilities. They are much less likely to use the Internet, have home access to broadband, or own a computer – the lifeline for all of us through this time.

Bottom line, if our communities do not properly address the inequities people with disabilities face during this emerging post-pandemic, it will have devastating short- and long-term consequences on their quality of life and wellbeing. Not to mention the negative and financial impact on society at large. We can no longer afford to look the other way and not recognize this important demographic of our society. We can, should and must do better.

As a leading nonprofit provider of outcomes-based services, we are launching a comprehensive, nationwide strategic effort to modify, expand, and amplify our services to meet the very pressing and evolving needs of people with disabilities.

We cannot do this alone. We need employers, educators, government officials, community leaders, and local organizations to step up, drive solutions and do more to advance equity for all in our communities. Only when we do this together, will we ensure every single American is valued equally.

Angela F. Williams, President & CEO, Easterseals