



For disabled, protective steps present challenges

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By Dawn Megli
dawn@theacorn.com



A WINDOW TO COMMUNICATION—Isabella Appell of Thousand Oaks has created a face mask with a clear vinyl panel that allows lip readers to see what the wearer is saying. Masks can be ordered from talking-masks.com. Courtesy photo

As the use of masks has become more widespread, members of the deaf and hard-of-hearing community have watched their ability to communicate via lip reading disappear.

To help with the issue, 17-year-old Isabella Appell, an 11th grader at Viewpoint School in Calabasas, created Talking Masks, which feature a clear vinyl panel that allows lip readers to see what the wearer is saying while still helping to prevent the spread of COVID-19.

“They rely on lip reading to communicate, and I believe that they deserve the opportunity to communicate like everyone else,” said Isabella, who has a family friend who is deaf. “This led me to look for a way to accommodate these masks for everybody.”

Isabella, a Newbury Park resident, has sewn around 200 masks to date. Each takes

about an hour to make.

She offers the face coverings online, and only charges shipping costs. She also accepts donations and sends the proceeds to the Hearing Aid Project, a nonprofit that helps provide hearing aids to those who can't afford them.

So far, her site has raised over \$4,300.

Especially challenging

Disability advocate Dani Anderson said measures intended to slow the spread of COVID-19 have affected the disabled community in more ways than one.

Anderson, 33, is the executive director of the Independent Living Resource Center, a disability advocacy organization based in Santa Barbara that serves clients in Ventura, Santa Barbara and San Luis Obispo counties.

She said the disability community encompasses a diverse array of individuals ranging from medically fragile seniors to young adults with healthy immune systems who have intellectual disabilities or mobility issues.

The Camarillo resident, who uses a motorized wheelchair, said discussions surrounding COVID-19 have amplified the rate at which disabled individuals are referred to as "vulnerable" or "at-risk."

She said some measures intended to help the disabled community, while well-intentioned, create additional hurdles. Shopping hours set aside for seniors and medically fragile individuals, for example, are in the early morning before stores have received shipments of staple items.

Food delivery services that leave groceries on the porch aren't any help to people who can't lift a heavy box. Social distancing guidelines mean that people with physical disabilities may feel disinclined to ask for help reaching items on top grocery store shelves.

"People assume if you have a disability you're immunocompromised. I don't have a respiratory issue. I just use a chair. People like me shouldn't be getting judging looks for being in the store in the middle of the day," she said. "The assumptions that all people with disabilities should be home all the time are just not true."

Since the pandemic triggered the closure of businesses and services across California, Anderson said, the resource center has received calls from clients regarding food insecurity, the inability to access food distribution services that are drive-thru only and difficulty getting in-home care services, as personal assistants and other workers try to protect their families and the people they serve from possible infection.

“People are not always getting the help they need,” she said.

Alexa Martin, a community living advocate based out of the resource center’s Ventura office, specializes in working with youths and young adults from 12 to 24 years old. She said school closures have meant that students with disabilities are no longer receiving certain therapies and other accommodations.

“Students with disabilities are really being affected by distance learning,” she said. “A lot of people rely on routine and structure, and when structure is thrown out the window that can really throw people off balance. Even people without disabilities are struggling with this.”

Martin said the requirement to wear masks in stores can present an additional barrier for those who may be unable to put on a mask by themselves.

“There’s no one-size-fits-all solution,” she said.

A new mandatory mask requirement in Los Angeles County specifically mentions that anyone unable to put on a mask by themselves is not required to wear one.

Martin said she has also seen silver linings as the center connects individuals with resources. The organization has been getting in touch with anyone they’ve worked with over the past two years to make sure they have the help they need.

The resource center recently worked with a 96-year-old blind woman who lives alone. Her daughter was bringing her groceries, but when her daughter lost her job she couldn’t afford the financial burden. The center was able to connect the older woman with a permanent program through the Ventura County Area Agency on Aging that delivers meals to disabled seniors at no charge.

“It’s filling a gap in this scary time, but it’s also improving her quality of life long-term,” Martin said. “That’s been great. People are learning about services and supports that

are available to them, not just because of COVID, things they didn't know about.”

Like the rest of the population, many individuals with disabilities have recently lost their jobs, Anderson said. Unlike the rest of the population, workers with disabilities will face the additional hurdle of social stigma while competing for a new job against non-disabled peers.

Anderson said the resource center has launched a weekly video-chat support group so its consumers can process the stress and challenges of their new normal during the pandemic.

“Even if it's just for an hour a week, we're all experiencing this together,” she said.

Talking Masks is looking for people to help sew masks. To volunteer, email Isabella@talking-masks.com. To donate, visit talking-masks.com.