



## Highlights

- Longstanding policy challenges of the disability community have been exacerbated by the global pandemic. The pandemic has unmasked the most deadly and extreme forms of state-sanctioned ableism.
- The predicate to live, to learn and to earn, is to attain and maintain good health.
- Therefore, during Gallegos's tenure as Chairman, as a Council, the agency's primary focus will be on healthcare and associated issues, while continuing to advance work in other areas, as well.
- NCD's moments of greatest impact have been when it has worked most closely and authentically with the community. We value your input and welcome it.

## Vision and Priority Statement of New NCD Chairman Andrés Gallegos

**February 16, 2021** – It is a privilege to serve as Chairman of the National Council on Disability, an independent federal agency that for the past 42 years has been at the forefront of the fight for civil rights for persons with disabilities in this country and advising the President, the Vice President, and federal policymakers on ways to improve their lives on a daily basis. An agency that serves as the national voice of the disability community within the Federal Government. A large part of what makes it a privilege is the ability to work closely with an immensely talented and dedicated staff, now led by Anne Sommers McIntosh, our new Executive Director, and impassioned and equally talented Council Members.

Today, the challenges before us are enormous. We are in the midst of an economic catastrophe. The labor participation rate for people with disabilities is less than half that of nondisabled counterparts. In addition, the unemployment rate for persons with disabilities is nearly double that of persons without disabilities. Those disparities contribute to a poverty rate among persons with disabilities that is nearly three times as high as people without disabilities. Throughout the country, persons with disabilities continue to face a profound and long-standing housing crisis given the dearth of affordable and accessible housing.

Transportation barriers continue to exist as the disability community continues to suffer from a lack of reliable affordable transportation options, and in far too many communities, persons with mobility disabilities who utilize mobility devices are forced to compete with vehicular traffic on the streets because of the absence, or the disrepair, of municipal sidewalks and curb cuts. Increasingly, students with disabilities are being subjected to harsh disciplinary practices and, given a school nursing shortage, are not provided with consistent nursing services at school that would allow them to focus more on their academics than on their well-being. Many public schools still lack the required physical accessibility requiring many students with mobility disabilities who utilize mobility devices to attend classes in schools outside of their neighborhoods, and lack programmatic accessibility ensuring full inclusion for all students with disabilities.

Persons with disabilities are also negatively impacted by federal fiscal policy that always looks to reduce funding for Medicaid, Medicare, Social Security, and other federal programs that persons with disabilities and those who love them desperately depend upon to sustain them.

Many of those issues have been exacerbated by the global pandemic. A pandemic that has disproportionately affected the health and well-being of

persons with disabilities, who not because of disability per se, but due to underlying health conditions are at a greater risk for contracting the virus, a higher risk of hospitalization once the virus is contracted, and a greater risk of dying from the virus. Persons with disabilities are vulnerable to the extreme effects of the virus given the decades of neglect in meaningfully addressing the chronic and profound health disparities between persons with disabilities and those without, and decades of neglect in addressing systemic and pervasive barriers to accessible healthcare. A pandemic that has unmasked the most extreme and deadly form of state-sanctioned ableism manifested in discriminatory crisis standards of care and rationing policies that in many instances categorically defined persons with disabilities as persons whose lives are not worth treating, and whose lives are not worth vaccinating or vaccinating with any urgency. A pandemic that has given license to many healthcare professionals to publicly express their explicit bias against persons with disabilities.

In 2009, the National Council on Disability published *The Current State of Health Care for People Disabilities*. In that report and others subsequent reports, I noted the Council was fond of the overarching theme – Living, Learning and Earning – to describe the fundamental needs of persons disabilities. In 2010, I served as a delegate to NCD’s historic two-day Policy Summit for People with Disabilities designed to translate current knowledge about the problems people with disabilities were experiencing in all areas of life, including health, healthcare and health outcomes into a plan for action. Throughout the Summit, *Living, Learning and Earning* was a recurring theme. Since the Summit, that theme has stuck with me and has helped crystallize my focus as a disability rights attorney and advocate. It is without exaggeration that the predicate to our ability, as persons with disabilities, to live, to learn and to earn, is to attain and maintain good health, and that has never been truer than now because of the pandemic.

It’s for those reasons that during my tenure as Chairman, as a Council, our abiding focus will be on healthcare and the breadth of issues associated therewith. Foremost, all things COVID and addressing the harsh lessons learned and that we’re still learning from the pandemic; accessibility to accessible healthcare, dental care, behavioral health, etc.; addressing the social determinants of health contributing to the disparities in health and health outcomes; addressing implicit and explicit bias against persons with disabilities in healthcare; advocating for dedicated funding for home and community-based services; adoption of the Access Board’s voluntary standards for accessible medical and diagnostic equipment; not just preserving, but strengthening our federal nondiscrimination rights to accessible healthcare (and beyond); recognizing the importance, and advocating for the protection, of direct service providers and family caregivers; looking for solutions to address the dire communication needs of persons who are Deaf, hearing-impaired, blind, visually-impaired and persons with cognitive disabilities in healthcare settings, among many other important related issues to address.

While that will be our primary focus, it will not be our sole focus. We will work closely with federal partners and legislators to work on commitments expressed in

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NCD welcomes letters and statements outlining your organizational policy priorities.

To share your organization's or coalition's policy priorities with NCD or to request a meeting with NCD, please email Nicholas Sabula, Public Affairs Specialist, at [nsabula@ncd.gov](mailto:nsabula@ncd.gov).

the President's disability plan, even as we advise for greater efforts. We will continue to educate policymakers on the incompatibility of arcane disability programs and laws, like subminimum wages paid to people with disabilities, to modern national disability goals and policies. And in the months ahead, we will highlight the disparities in eligibility for, and benefits under, certain federal programs that exist between U.S. citizens with disabilities residing in U.S. territories as compared to their disabled counterparts residing in the mainland and in Hawaii. As I mentioned, the Council's staff and Council Members' are exceptionally talented and can nimbly address other issues that immediately require our attention.

As one of the smallest independent federal agencies, by design the Council does not conduct its work alone. The positions we adopt and the advice we formulate is directly influenced and shaped by the input we receive from the diverse disability community directly, from a myriad of national disability advocacy and disability rights organizations, and through inter-agency collaboration. We are stronger together when we work together. The moments when NCD has had its greatest impact and its proud history has shined brightest have been when it has had its work most closely and authentically tied to the community we represent. We value your input. We welcome your input. We need your input. And we look forward to the progress that we can achieve together.



Andrés J. Gallegos, Chairman