

Pandemic augmented services long-sought by the disabled

If the pandemic has an upside, it is the expansion of services and online connectivity, from grocery delivery to closed captioning during meetings. Technology has ushered in welcome solutions to everyday challenges.

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Robin Wilson-Beattie, a disability and sexuality educator, speaker and writer, has professionally thrived throughout the pandemic. She now attends and presents at international events online, no longer having to deal with transportation and mobility issues. Here, she is at the Palace of Fine Arts in San Francisco on Jan. 29, 2021. (Photo by Katie Lauer)

[Written By Katie Lauer](#) *Featured Writer*

Did You Know?

Robin Wilson-Beattie was left to her own devices when coping with chronic pain at her employer's office a decade ago, whether that meant bringing in pillows from home, stretching out on the office floor or popping an occasional prescribed Vicodin to get through the day.

Searching for sustainable solutions, she requested a different office chair to ease her suffering caused by the C4 incomplete spinal cord injury she sustained in 2004, which paralyzed her right side. Despite being employed by a disability advocacy organization in Atlanta, Georgia, her seemingly simple request was denied, as were subsequent asks for a private office space or the option to work from home on days she wasn't in the field. "Even though you have legal protections, you have to depend on the personality of someone else who's in charge of giving you these things," Wilson-Beattie said. "I've had to navigate someone else's prejudices and feelings about me in order to be a part of what's going on and be able to do my job."

Determined to find a more accessible community, as well as a new dating pool and access to medical cannabis, the now 43-year-old left the South for the Bay Area in 2016, where she now works as a freelance disability and sexuality educator, speaker and writer. "After all that, I went freelance because nobody else was going to give me these accommodations," she said. "I had to find work that I can do and have control over. ... That lack of accommodations in the workplace forced me to go a different direction and discover where I could use my skills and gifts."

People with disabilities have requested these types of accommodations for decades, but are often left in the lurch and need to advocate for themselves. Even though [61 million adults in the United States](#) have a disability, services and resources designed to provide accessibility have historically been deemed cost prohibitive and frivolous. That equates to one in four Americans, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Once able-bodied folks feared threats of a global pandemic's disabling symptoms — lost senses, severe fatigue, lung damage, psychosis and death — public officials, academic institutions, private employers, family and friends reimaged what it means to work, learn and live in an inflexible and inaccessible society.

Grocery and meal delivery has exploded, virtual meetings and classes have incorporated closed captioning, and work-from-home schedules have come into their own since March 2020. Mailed prescriptions, face masks, ASL interpreters, mail-in and early voting, and even prepackaged meals have found widespread use while society contends with the coronavirus.

Ashley Shew, an associate professor researching representation of disabled people in technology at Virginia Tech, said the dual realities of who gets access has held the disability community back, in everything from employment to entertainment.

"I feel like there's a lot of bitterness with a lot of the accommodations we have now," Shew said. "The access disabled people have been wanting for so many years is now in place, and we were told that it was impossible and inconvenient. Now that everyone is inconvenienced by a pandemic, this becomes standard. ... It feels like a betrayal of sorts; the world had all these possibilities, and it was just ridiculous, ableist gatekeeping that kept them from becoming true."

Shew, a hard of hearing amputee, who also deals with the cognitive fog of “chemo brain” and tinnitus, hopes the pandemic leads others to listen to disabled perspectives more often, since they have historically forged new solutions for vulnerable communities that ultimately benefit larger populations.

“I think about all the ways in which the disability community is not credited,” she said, referring to the phenomenon sometimes referred to as the “[Curb Cut Effect](#)” (laws and programs designed to benefit vulnerable groups, such as the disabled or people of color, that end up benefiting all of society). “I don’t mind when people use our hacks, but it would be nice to see the community credited and being regarded as designers. Disabled people rarely are.”

Until Americans start seeing disabled people as their own independent agents, Shew said ableism will continue to frame the disability community as needy, as opposed to innovative by necessity.

“For a lot of people, the pandemic has meant greater accessibility, and the hope is that it means greater understanding at some point among non-disabled people about what disabled life is like,” Shew said. “That truly has yet to be seen.”

Wilson-Beattie has professionally thrived throughout the pandemic, especially being able to virtually attend and present at international events.



Robin Wilson-Beattie is at the Palace of Fine Arts in San Francisco on Jan. 29, 2021. (Photo by Katie Lauer)

Instead of coordinating wheelchair assistance in airports, contending with circulation issues and pressure sores on long flights and missing breakout sessions to prioritize rest, she can now attend a full conference, with the help of a mute button and captioned discussions available within the comfort of her own home, which is already tailored to her body's needs.

Wilson-Beattie said it's been great not to have to deal with the hassles of traveling when she has to deliver a speech. Reminiscing about her last keynote event in Toronto in 2019, she said, "I miss the tote bags, bad coffee, name badges and going out on a stage to talk to an audience, but at the same time, I'm much more comfortable now."

The freedoms that come along with accommodations reach beyond visible disabilities, too.

Zoom birthdays, weddings and baby showers, continuing education opportunities and telehealth doctor's appointments have opened up new possibilities for Wilson-Beattie while dealing with her invisible disabilities of attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, post-traumatic stress disorder, clinical depression and anxiety.

"In the past, especially when dealing with depression and episodes of mental illness, I couldn't move to go get dressed, get in a car and drive down through traffic in order to go sit down and see the therapist," Wilson-Beattie said. "This (telehealth) has worked out amazing. I've been able to go to group therapy online, and people from around the country were able to attend and talk to each other and the therapist. I've been to many group therapy sessions — in the old days — and I much preferred being online. Matter of fact, I felt like we were able to get a lot more out of it."

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