



January 12, 2022

Dr. Rochelle Walensky

Director of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC)

1600 Clifton Road, Atlanta, GA 30329

Dear Director Dr. Walensky,

The undersigned 141 of disability organizations, individuals and supporters from across the nation address you with great concern to your statements on January 7, 2022 during an interview to Good Morning America, as the Director of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), where you stated that *“The overwhelming number of [COVID-19] deaths, over 75% occurred in people who had at least 4 comorbidities, so really these are people that were unwell to begin with. And yes, really encouraging news in the context of Omicron [to get vaccinated and boosted]. And yes we are really encouraged by these results.”*

The disability community is outraged at the CDC's utter disregard for the lives, health, and value of people with disabilities as expressed in this statement. Comorbidity is usually an alternative descriptor for disability that incorrectly conflates disability with illness. This statement communicates that this large group, including 26% of the population, according to Director Walensky's agency, is “unwell” and is acceptable collateral damage in the battle against the COVID-19 pandemic.

These comments reflect at minimum, a view of people with disability as unwell but they express a more dangerous view that is perilously close to a recommendation for denial of treatment to persons with underlying conditions and potentially a violation of protections afforded people with disabilities under the Americans with Disabilities Act and other civil rights laws.

Building trust between the CDC and people with disability requires leadership that is dedicated and trained to recognize discrimination against and to protect the rights of people with disability and older adults.

“~840,000 people have died and much of them Black, indigenous and people of color with disabilities, but [@CDCDirector](#) is “encouraged” by this fact.”

- Imani Barbarin



There is nothing “reassuring” about the news that people of all ages with four or more comorbidities are more likely to perish from Omicron. Your statement implies that people with comorbidities are of less value, and therefore our COVID-19 deaths are more acceptable and tolerable, implying that people with disabilities have little value and thus are expendable.

If the CDC had said it was “encouraging news” that Omicron fatalities were more likely to occur in children, there would be a massive outcry. As a society we devalue people with disabilities, including children and older adults with disabilities. This is particularly true for multiply-marginalized disabled people which are disproportionately impacted by COVID-19.

“Disability only becomes a tragedy for me when society fails to provide the things we need to lead our lives -- job opportunities or barrier-free buildings, for example.”

- Judy Heumann

The CDC aims to save lives, protect people from health threats and pledges to “treat all persons with dignity, honesty, and respect.” Instead, you dismissed disabled lives as collateral damage of the pandemic, and put forth an ableist and deadly message that is antithetical to the CDC’s intent to control and prevent disease.

Without clear leadership to eliminate ableism and ageism, we will continue to create exclusionary, dangerous and deadly policy, systems and environments.

We call on the CDC to mitigate further harm in their efforts to improve COVID-19 outcomes for ALL.

We request a meeting with you Dr. Walensky to begin a shared effort to replace ableist messaging with messaging that advances the CDC’s commitment and leadership on zero tolerance for ableism and ageism.



Sincerely,

American Foundation for the Blind
Atlantis Community, Inc.
Autistic People of Color Fund
Autistic Self Advocacy Network
Autistic Women & Nonbinary Network
Black and Brown United in Action
Bloom's Connect
California Foundation for Independent Living Centers
Cara Sachs Coaching
Center for Dignity in Healthcare for People with Disabilities
Colorado Cross-Disability Coal
CommunicationFIRST
Connecticut Legal Rights Project
Council for Relationships
Council For Relationships/ Thomas Jefferson Health System
Critical Design Lab
CT Cross Disability Lifespan Alliance
Disability Pride PA
disAbility Resource Center
Disability Rights Center
DMV Disability & Sr Community Group
Georgia ADAPT NATIVE 2 NATIVE
Gulf Coast ADAPT
Independence Northwest, Inc.
June Kailes, Disability Policy Consulting
MassADAPT
Minnesota Autistic Alliance
National Association for Rights Protection and Advocacy
NJ-SILC
PA ADAPT
Philly ADAPT
Progress Center for Independent Living
San Jose Peace and Justice Center
Senior and Disability Action
shasta college



Silicon Valley Independent Living Center
Together We Will - San José
Together We Will Baltimore Area
UPRISE Collective
US Society for Augmentative and Alternative Communication
World Institute on Disability
Yad HaChazakah-The Jewish Disability Empowerment Center

Individuals

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Alexander Sing (CA)
Alexander Sinnott (OR)
Anais, she/her (DMV)
Andrew Raymond (MN)
Bea Hollander-Goldfein (PA)
Blair (CA)
Caitlin Rice (PA)
Camille Edwards Bennehoff (MD)
Candie Burnham (CO)
Cara Liebowitz (NY)
Cara Sachs (VT)
Carol Tyson (DC)
Cheryl Gottlieb (MD)
CJ (CT)
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Danielle E. Augustin (OH)
David Ruttenberg (FL)
David Zuckerman (Fmr. Lt. Gov. Vermont) (VT)
Deborah Cherry (PA)
Del. Sheila Ruth (MD)
Donna Harris (OR)
Dr. Martha Rinehart (NJ)



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