

The Impacts of COVID-19 on People who are Visually Impaired: Interview with Dr. L. Penny Rosenblum Director of Research at The American Foundation for the Blind

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Divija and Hari Bhimaraju are from the leadership team of Donum Visi, a 501c(3) nonprofit that aims to educate communities about the causes and cures of blindness as well as improve the lives of those who are visually impaired through building accessible resources and technologies. From the organization's website, The American Foundation of the Blind is a non-profit that aims to create a world of no limits for people who are blind or visually impaired. They mobilize leaders, advance understanding, and champion impactful policies and practices using research and data (<https://www.afb.org/>). Recently, they partnered with 19 different companies and organizations to create and conduct the Access and Engagement Survey. Below is a paraphrased interview between the Donum Visi team and Dr. L. Penny Rosenblum Director of Research at the American Foundation for the Blind.

What are some of the biggest challenges visually impaired students face during COVID-19?

Many visually impaired students have been negatively affected by the pandemic and the lack of adequate accessibility resources, including instructional resources and materials (inaccessible scientific lab setups, images of documents, etc.). Inequities in learning during non-pandemic times have been exacerbated by increased obstacles to accessing learning tools such as braille textbooks and 3D-printed models. In addition, visually impaired students rely on hands-on learning which is greatly limited in online learning such as when classes meet on Zoom. Especially for young visually impaired students and students who also have other special needs, adapting to an environment that is less hands-on and more reliant on visual access impacts their ability to make educational progress.

Do you have any tools and technologies that can help bridge these inequalities?

To create effective accessible technologies, you have to approach the design process with accessibility in mind. Accessibility cannot be an afterthought. For example, visually impaired students often struggle with navigating and understanding information on the internet. Even with tools such as text to speech software such as JAWS or NVDA, or VoiceOver, which is built into every Apple product, sites can still be difficult to navigate. This is because websites, apps, and learning tools have to be designed to work effectively with screen reader technology.

Dr. Rosenblum explains, **“Developers should have lots of people with different abilities and backgrounds try out their product, and get input on the first level, because it is much easier to build a universal design from the beginning rather than the middle or the end.”**

What has the American Foundation for the Blind done for those who are visually impaired during these difficult times?

The American Foundation for the Blind is working hard to help those who are visually impaired continue their normal day to day lives despite the changes and challenges of the pandemic. AFB continues our focus to empower individuals with the tools and resources they need to help themselves. In response to COVID-19 AFB took a lead role in two research studies. The first, Flatten Inaccessibility ([afb.org/flatteninaccessibility](https://www.afb.org/flatteninaccessibility)) examined the impact of COVID-19 on 1,921 adults with vision loss. The second Access and Engagement (<https://www.afb.org/AccessEngagement>) examined the impact of COVID-19 on children with visual impairments, their families, teachers of students with visual impairments, and O&M specialists.

What message do you want to share with visually impaired individuals and the people who work with them?

Visually impaired individuals should learn to be advocates for themselves. Advocating for things that are important to them will help them tremendously in their day-to-day lives as well as during the pandemic. For people who work with those who are visually impaired, be good allies by supporting your visually impaired peers in acquiring resources and tools. Dr. Rosenblum encourages, **“Reach out to help! Don’t let differences scare you away!”** The best thing a sighted individual can do is reach out to a visually impaired person and listen to what they need. Don’t make assumptions that they need something, they very well may not. For teachers who teach children who are visually impaired, be patient, persistent and figure out the best way to help your individual student learn. In order to help the visually impaired community at large, Dr. Rosenblum offers practical advice to sighted individuals that they should inform the people in charge if they see any online resource, educational tool or other information for common use, that is not adequately accessible.

The need for self-advocacy, proactive design thinking, and combined community effort is more necessary than ever to bridge the gap create a more inclusive world for all of us.