



AbilityFirst Announces New CEO Sergio Rizzo-Fontanesi

(PASADENA, CALIF.) June 3, 2024—AbilityFirst™ announces Dr. Sergio Rizzo-Fontanesi as its next president and chief executive officer, effective June 3. Rizzo-Fontanesi will build on his predecessor’s enduring impact, advancing the organization’s vision, mission, and legacy of fostering an inclusive community that focuses on a person-centered approach, ensuring that all participants reach their full potential.

“From our first conversation with Sergio, the board was impressed by his profound empathy, strategic thinking, and deep understanding of our values. I knew immediately that he was the person we should hire as CEO,” said Kathryn Sanders Platnick, board chair of AbilityFirst. “As a 98-year-old organization, it’s important that we bring on someone to lead who can honor our legacy while also continuing to innovate and elevate AbilityFirst to the next level, so we can make an even greater impact on the population we serve. I have no doubt that Sergio is the right person for this task.”

Following a national search led by Envision Consulting, which attracted more than 300 highly qualified applicants, Rizzo-Fontanesi emerged as the ideal candidate. Having worked as a licensed clinical social worker, a researcher and executive in the nonprofit sector, Rizzo-Fontanesi comes with innovative perspectives, a breadth of knowledge, and robust management experience. He has expertise in program design, planning, and evaluation, having analyzed the program effectiveness of numerous community-based organizations. Formerly the executive director and CEO of Beit T’Shuvah in Los Angeles, Rizzo-Fontanesi has worked at the intersections of substance use and mental health treatment, reentry and supportive housing services, and education and workforce development.

“As a person-centered organization, AbilityFirst places the needs of its constituency first and foremost. It is this guiding philosophy that connects everyone in the organization,” said Rizzo-Fontanesi, explaining why the mission resonates with him.

While Rizzo-Fontanesi does not have someone in his immediate family who has a developmental disability, he shared that when his sister was 13 years old, she sustained an incomplete spinal cord injury and corresponding paralysis. “While she ultimately regained considerable mobility, as a result of this experience, I witnessed firsthand how having a disability affects not only the individual but the family unit as well. Individuals who have disabilities are often seen for their disability and unseen for their gifts and potential,” he continued. “I am excited to lead and be part of an organization whose focus is on capabilities and possibilities, and I am committed to challenging the stigma and barriers that impede individuals with disabilities from achieving their full potential.”

Founded in 1926 as a response to children with polio, AbilityFirst continues to evolve to meet the need of people with developmental disabilities. “AbilityFirst was built on the



ethos of possibility and that resonates with all of us,” said Rizzo-Fontanesi. “We all want to achieve what’s possible and reach our full potential. This is what we aspire for ourselves, our children, and the future of the world. This is the fundamental core of AbilityFirst’s programs and services.”

Having earned a bachelor’s degree in psychology from San Francisco State University, Rizzo-Fontanesi also has a doctorate and a master in social welfare from the Luskin School of Public Affairs at the University of California, Los Angeles.

In collaboration with key stakeholders, Rizzo-Fontanesi has his sights on developing a strategic plan for the organization dedicated to empowering individuals with disabilities. Guiding its next five to 10 years, the strategic plan will define what success looks like, measure program effectiveness, enhance program adaptability to meet the current needs of its diverse participants, and secure additional funding streams while strengthening brand reputation.

Ensuring a stable and seamless transition, Rizzo-Fontanesi is committed to honoring AbilityFirst’s legacy while steering the organization toward a future with fresh insights, new opportunities, and measured growth. There will be a leadership overlap with interim CEO Julie Tugend to guarantee the successful transition.

To learn more about AbilityFirst, visit abilityfirst.org.

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About AbilityFirst

AbilityFirst provides a variety of programs designed to help people with disabilities achieve their personal best throughout their lives. Our person-centered programs are grounded in individual choice, autonomy, and community participation. Our programs empower individuals to discover what is important to them in their lives and to develop the skills that are important for them to achieve their goals. As we celebrate 98 years of service, we are focusing our efforts on programs that are proven to have the greatest impact on a person’s success: life skills enhancement through our children and adult programs; higher education and employment readiness; and social and recreational programming.

AbilityFirst looks beyond disabilities and focuses on the capabilities of each individual, opening up a world of possibilities. Our compassionate team members support people in building meaningful relationships, contributing to their communities, and creating a true sense of belonging. To learn more, visit abilityfirst.org.

Media Contact

Marisol Barrios Perez, APR, Mission Driven PR
marisol@missiondrivenpr.com | 310-713-8567