

LETTER TO FAMILIES

Letter to Families



January 31, 2022

Dear DDDS Families and Service Recipients,

Well, 2022 has started off rougher than I was hoping, with unprecedented numbers of Delawareans testing positive for COVID-19. In my letter from December 20th, I was looking forward to families enjoying time together at the holidays and making up for lost time from the 2020 winter holidays. I certainly didn't anticipate that in just one week Omicron would have a profound impact around the state.

COVID-19 Cases

Like the rest of the State, our DDDS network started experiencing a surge in positive cases among direct support professionals (DSPs) and service recipients around December 27th. Since my letter on December 20th, there have been 180 new positives among service recipients who receive residential habilitation, bringing the total to 514 cases throughout the pandemic. Among DSPs, there have been 484 new cases, bringing the total to 1,083 during the pandemic. I know how staggering that data is; it has been a difficult month for our network.

While new cases continue to remain higher than they were in early December, they are beginning to trend down, so that is hopeful. In the past month, DDDS has temporarily suspended in-person visits by DDDS employees and providers of consultative services to provider-managed sites. These visits are still occurring but are being done virtually instead of in-person. Providers have increased testing, sometimes to daily, in an effort to detect COVID before it spreads throughout a site.

Testing and Vaccination Opportunities

As the Omicron surge hit, testing availability in the community became strained. However, within our provider network, those providers who were approved to use Rapid Antigen Tests (RATs) experienced no supply challenges, which allowed for the use of RATs for prophylactic testing. Today, access to testing has stabilized in the community.

I want to draw your attention to a few testing resources for your own use. The federal government has offered to mail four at-home tests to each household in the US. There is no out-of-pocket cost to you, and you can request your four at-home tests at www.covidtests.gov. The Curative sites continue to add additional testing locations, too. You can visit www.curative.com to find a site and schedule an

appointment. And the state provides a listing of additional testing options, including free at-home test kits, at de.gov/gettested.

Hospitalizations also surged during the last several weeks. Luckily, among our service recipients who receive residential habilitation, we have seen a need for very few hospitalizations. This is in stark contrast to January 2021 data, where we had 40 or more service recipients hospitalized at any given time. The difference this year is most service recipients in residential habilitation have been fully vaccinated and/or boosted. Please get vaccinated and your booster dose if you have not already. You can find vaccine information and locations at www.coronavirus.delaware.gov/vaccine.

At home vaccinations are being delivered again throughout Delaware. DHSS has partnered with independent pharmacies in each county to deliver the vaccinations to eligible Delawareans 5 and older and their caregivers. All requests for a homebound vaccination or booster will be filtered through a toll-free number (1-888-491-4988) to be assessed and scheduled. Live operators will staff the toll-free line from 8 a.m. to 8 p.m. Monday through Friday, and 8:30 a.m. to 6 p.m. Saturdays. To learn more, visit DHSS' website at VaccineAccessDE.com.

The Division has also partnered with our colleagues at the Developmental Disabilities Council to provide an opportunity to learn more about vaccinations and boosters. You can participate right from your phone. Just text the word VACCINE to 8337009009. Try it out and let us know what you think.

Operational Challenges

As you are aware, prior to the spike in new cases, staffing challenges were ever present for our providers. The surge in new cases has continued to wreak havoc on our provider agencies from a staffing perspective. I want to acknowledge the incredible dedication shown during this time. From DSPs willing to work non-stop overtime, to executive leaders working as direct support professionals, our DDDS providers have demonstrated they will stop at nothing to ensure the health, safety and integrity of operations to support service recipients. As we are not out of the woods yet with high case rates, I expect delays and limitations in operations to continue for the time being and appreciate your flexibility as we get through this together.

As I mentioned in last month's letter, DDDS asked our provider community to participate in a staffing survey to gain a more data-informed perspective on the workforce challenges facing our service system. We had an excellent response rate of 86%. The survey closed at the end of November 2021, so the results do not reflect any of the additional difficulties experienced during December 2021 and January 2022. Providers were asked questions in three categories: overall change in staffing/staff vacancies compared to pre-pandemic totals; impact on operations; and efforts taken to address shortages. Takeaways from this survey include:

- Scale of provider staffing shortages by total numbers:
 - 63% have staffing shortages of between 0-20
 - 23% have staffing shortages between 21-50
 - 14% have staffing greater than 50 staff vacancies

- Scale of provider staffing shortages by percent of workforce:
 - 28% are missing between 20-30% of their workforce

- 30% are missing between a third and a half of their total workforce
- Impacts on provider operations:
 - 66% indicated that senior leadership are providing direct services
 - 61% have postponed program expansion
 - 50% have not been able to accept new referrals
 - 25% have been unable to welcome back all *existing* service recipients
 - 11% *permanently* closed a program site decreasing overall capacity
 - 42% indicated that they have lowered expectations in their efforts to recruit staff
- Efforts taken by providers:
 - 78% have increased communications and outreach to potential applicants
 - 42% increased interactions between leadership and staff, e.g., hosting town halls
 - 56% offered recruitment and retention bonuses from their own general budget
 - 39% have used CARES Act, Health Care Relief, or other COVID-related funding to support recruitment and retention efforts
 - 42% have offered more flexible work schedules and provided financial incentives to employees to work longer shifts

As you can see, DDDS providers are facing substantial staffing challenges. Services will continue to be stymied until providers can hire additional staff. DDDS and Delaware’s Division of Medicaid and Medical Assistance (DMMA) are committed to efforts to increase this critical workforce. Recruitment bonuses are available to new DSPs who work at least 25 hours a week and are paid out once they reach certain employment milestones. Retention bonuses, for DSPs who have worked throughout the pandemic, are being finalized now. DDDS is using the results of the staffing survey to guide additional workforce initiatives, including surveying DSPs directly to identify what keeps them interested in this field and areas that need improvement. If you know anyone interested and qualified to be a DSP, I encourage you to connect them to a DDDS provider agency.

In conclusion, while this letter has not been filled with the most uplifting news, I remain encouraged by the slowly declining cases of COVID around the state. Please continue to reach out to your Support Coordinator, Employment Navigator, Family Resource Coordinator or Columbus Community Navigator to discuss services and supports available currently.

Be well,



Cory Ellen Nourie, MSS, MLSP

Director of Community Services