

LETTER TO FAMILIES

November 6, 2020



Dear DDDS Families,

Thank you for your patience as the nation struggles to contain the spread of the coronavirus (COVID-19). We know the disruption to daily life in multiple domains has a significant impact on all Delawareans. The pandemic has forced the Division and providers to get creative in meeting service recipients' needs, while also working to ensure the health and safety of service recipients and the incredible direct support professionals who care for them. In this letter, you'll find updates on the state of COVID-19 in Delaware, information about what that means for access to programs and visits, and advice on how to begin planning now for the holidays. As always, we encourage you to reach out to us at DDDS with questions and concerns.

COVID-19 Update

The country as a whole is experiencing widespread outbreaks of COVID-19, and the number of positive cases in Delaware has risen to alarming levels. As of yesterday, our percent positive rate was 9.8%. This trend is very concerning. The number of cases continues to grow within our service population as well. Thus far, DDDS has had 72 service recipients who live in provider-managed settings test positive for COVID-19. Amongst them, 11 have died from COVID-19. The mortality rate is 15.3% for DDDS service recipients who test positive. For the general population of Delaware, the mortality rate is less than 3%. This staggering difference vividly demonstrates the vulnerability of our service recipients. The *Annals of Internal Medicine* just published a study demonstrating that individuals with Down Syndrome have 10 times the risk of dying from COVID-19 compared to those without the disability.¹ While this study focuses on one specific condition, we know that it is an indication of how lethal this disease can be for many of our DDDS service recipients. While cases of COVID-19 continue to rise, now is the time to recommit to the everyday practices that can keep you and your loved ones safe and healthy.

Visits and Program Access

For now, the state of Delaware continues in Phase 2 of its Re-Opening Plan, which dictates that vulnerable populations continue to shelter in place. What does this mean for you? Day services remain in Stage One, where only those service recipients who can wear a facemask, maintain social distance and practice hand hygiene attend in-person. It is important to note that not all day providers have re-opened for Stage One. As a reminder: if **anyone** in your household is being tested for COVID-19, your DDDS service recipient should remain at home until the result has come back negative.

Many day providers have made the move to offering virtual day services for the time being. If your loved one is interested in participating in virtual online day services, please contact their day provider for more information.

For those who live in provider-managed settings, we continue with Phase Two of visitor access, which permits and encourages outside, open air visits for family and friends, as well as visits back to the family home. Home visits are **only** allowed if no one in your household is symptomatic or currently being tested for COVID-19 due to exposure and no one is positive for the virus.

Our providers have full discretion to restrict visits based on the current health and wellness circumstances of the individuals in the home. While this may be frustrating, we all need this to be a fluid process since the environment of the home can change daily.

No one is permitted inside the provider-managed setting, unless they live or work there. In the homes, all direct support professionals are required to wear facemasks during their entire shift. We are encouraging service recipients to wear a facemask if they are able to as well. We are aware that there are some service recipients who cannot safely wear a facemask. Wearing a mask in public is not going to go away anytime soon, so this is both a way for service recipients to protect themselves and to practice getting used to wearing facemasks where possible.

Preparing for the Holidays

The holiday season is going to be moving into high gear this month. DDDS will continue to follow the recommendations put forth by the Center for Disease Control and the Division of Public Health. At this point, it is recommended to not plan for cross-household holiday celebrations. While this news may be disappointing, I want to reiterate how COVID-19 disproportionately impacts DDDS service recipients. Our experience of these last eight months has shown us that when a DDDS service recipient gets COVID-19, they have a much greater likelihood of a bad clinical outcome. Aside from the risk of death, we know that DDDS service recipients have lingering side effects from COVID-19, even after their bodies have cleared the virus.

For those reasons, we are asking that you strongly consider not having family outside of your household together for holiday celebrations when your DDDS service recipient participates. As of right now, we are not restricting the ability of service recipients to attend holiday events with family, as long as they are in the family home and all of the rules are being adhered to from Phase Two of visitor access. This remains subject to change based on the number of cases in Delaware. If anything does change, you will be notified immediately.

We are not out of the woods by any stretch, but you are most certainly not alone in this. I have to acknowledge the hard work of DDDS employees, our incredible provider network and the Columbus Organization's Delaware team. They continue to work together with creative problem solving and modifications during this pandemic to meet the needs of our service recipients. If your loved one needs anything, please do not hesitate to reach out to their Support Coordinator, Employment Navigator, Community Navigator or the DDDS Family Resource unit. We continue to authorize exceptions to respite services and reassess service delivery options. Together with you, we will get through this.

Please be safe. Continue to wear facemasks, maintain six feet of distance between you and people who don't live in your household and wash your hands routinely.

Be well,



Cory Ellen Nourie, MSS, MLSP

Director of Community Services

¹ <https://www.cnn.com/2020/10/23/health/down-syndrome-covid-19-death-risk-wellness/index.html>