

LETTER TO FAMILIES

November 9, 2021

Dear DDDS Families and Service Recipients,

I hope this email finds you well as we move into the fall months. I certainly did not think I would be sending COVID-19 letters to families 20 months later, and yet here we still are. I am hopeful that the recent trending down in cases is a sign of things to come for our network and community.

New COVID-19 Cases

Since my last letter on September 29th, we have seen an increase of 40 new positive cases among Direct Support Professionals (DSPs) who work for our authorized providers. This brings the total impact to 549 DSPs infected with COVID since the start of the pandemic. Of those 40 new cases, 30 were unvaccinated. Twenty-three were identified because of the weekly testing mandate for all unvaccinated employees working in home and community-based services. The remaining seven were symptomatic or exposed and sought testing for confirmation. Ten of the 40 were fully vaccinated and had a breakthrough case.

Among service recipients who live in provider-managed settings, there were three new cases in the past month, bringing the total to 322 service recipients infected with COVID since the start of the pandemic. There continues to be spread of the virus in the community, but it seems to be slowing down, which I hope is a sign of things to come. Two weeks after Halloween last year is when we started to see cases surge and that lasted through mid-January. With the administration of the vaccine and an ongoing commitment to the strategies to reduce the spread of COVID-19, I am cautiously optimistic the remainder of 2021 will be better than the later part of 2020 as we all work together to keep service recipients, family members and staff healthy safe.

Testing

Our provider network continues to have access to Rapid Antigen Tests (RATs), which provide results in 15 minutes. We are fortunate that the Division of Public Health has supported our providers in accessing these tests at no cost to them. Delaware is unique in this regard. Our state has invested heavily in making testing widely available to our residents. This is not the case in many other states and it's a fact that we should be proud to recognize. Early identification of asymptomatic cases has been a game-changer for our network and supporting service recipients to return to in-person programming.

Testing continues to be available around the state through rotating and permanent Curative locations, DPH clinics, pharmacies and through DHSS' at-home testing services. To find a testing location, visit <https://coronavirus.delaware.gov/testing-events>.

Vaccine

All three brands of COVID-19 vaccines continue to be readily available around the state. Pfizer is currently available for anyone aged 5 or older. Moderna and Johnson & Johnson are available for anyone 18 or older. To find a vaccine location, visit <https://coronavirus.delaware.gov/vaccine/where-do-i-get-my-vaccine>.

If you've misplaced your vaccine card, the Division of Public Health has created a portal where people can log into DelVAX to obtain their immunization history. It will not give someone a new CDC COVID-19 vaccine card, but it will instead show when they received their vaccine and which brand. Directions on how to access the portal and request immunization history are available at https://www.dhss.delaware.gov/dhss/dph/ipp/portalflyer.pdf?fbclid=IwAR0_QfxT49Z1alJ2f3IxX1jtyJjDisn4BhIq-GU-6bN41vwH7K94HioQTpA.

The CDC has approved booster doses of all three brands of COVID-19 vaccine for certain people. **All employees of congregate settings and people who live in or attend congregate settings are encouraged to get a booster dose.** Booster doses are available through one's primary care provider, local pharmacies, or vaccine sites through the Division of Public Health.

For those who were vaccinated with Pfizer or Moderna, the booster should be administered six months after the second dose. For those who received the Johnson & Johnson vaccine, the booster should be administered two months after the single dose. If you have any questions about the vaccine or booster, please reach out to your primary care provider.

DDDS Service System

As I reported last month, the workforce shortage that is impacting most industries is definitely felt amongst our providers and within the state workforce. Providers remain committed to actively recruit more DSPs to join their teams, but continue to struggle to find willing and eligible applicants. The State recognizes this workforce shortage and has announced recruitment and retention bonuses for our providers to incentivize and show appreciation for DSPs. We hope these bonuses will make an impact on our applicant pool. Additionally, the Division received an additional \$17.2 million in this year's budget to implement rate increases for service providers retroactive to July 1, 2021. We expect that our service providers will use these additional funds to increase DSP wages, which should also help with recruitment and retention of essential direct support staff.

DSPs are the backbone of all our services. Without more DSPs, our providers remain stymied by how many service recipients they can support safely. The Division also continues to review and approve new service providers who are interested in offering services in Delaware.

DDDS continues to closely monitor the spread of COVID-19 in Delaware, and we will keep you updated on COVID-related issues and progress in our provider network. Thank you for your continued patience

and understanding as we navigate through this period, while keeping everyone as healthy and safe as possible.

Be well,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Cory Ellen Nourie, MSS, MLSP". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Cory Ellen Nourie, MSS, MLSP

Director of Community Services