

LETTER TO FAMILIES

December 20, 2021

Dear DDDS Families and Service Recipients,

As the holiday season is upon us and family and friends are re-connecting after a long time apart, I hope this letter finds you well. I am happy to see people venturing out to honor traditions and celebrate the holiday season. Many of these activities can resume, provided we all remain cautious, and we use the tools available to us; those that have helped keep us safe during the pandemic. COVID-19 remains active in our state, and in fact there has been an increase in positive cases and hospitalizations statewide since last month's letter. We have learned a tremendous amount about COVID-19 these past 21 months and understand that our best defense against the virus is getting vaccinated, wearing a face mask, getting tested if symptomatic or around others not wearing masks, practicing social distancing, and washing our hands often. These strategies, collectively, are the recipe to keeping services open and service recipients engaged and safe.

New COVID-19 Cases

Since my last letter on November 9th, we have seen an increase of 50 new positive cases among Direct Support Professionals (DSPs) who work for our provider network. This brings the total number of DSPs who have been infected with COVID-19 to 599 since the start of the pandemic. Of those 50 new cases, 38 were unvaccinated. Seventeen were identified because of the weekly testing mandate for all unvaccinated employees working in home and community-based services. The remaining 21 were symptomatic and sought testing for confirmation. Twelve of the 50 were fully vaccinated and had a breakthrough case.

Among service recipients who live in provider-managed settings, there were twelve new cases in the past month, bringing the total to 334 service recipients infected with COVID-19 since the start of the pandemic. Of those twelve, seven were fully vaccinated.

We expected to see an increase in positive cases as the holidays arrived. While these new cases are concerning, we are in a much different place this year than last, thanks to access to testing and vaccine availability.

Testing

Our provider network continues to utilize Rapid Antigen Tests (RATs), which provide results in 15 minutes. Providers are using the tests to meet the Governor's regulation requiring unvaccinated staff to be tested weekly. They are also using RATs on visitors to program sites and if there has been an

exposure. On-site, on-demand testing with results in 15 minutes reduces the spread of the virus amongst asymptomatic people and helps keep our service system open and operational.

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 provide 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_QfxT49Z1aj2f3lxX1jtyJjDisn4Bhlq-GU-6bN41vwH7K94HioQTpA.

The CDC now recommends booster doses of all three brands of COVID-19 vaccine for anyone age 18 and older. Pfizer booster doses are now recommended for 16 and 17-year-olds as well.

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.

If you would like to be vaccinated or need a booster and have difficulty getting to a site, in-home vaccines and boosters are now available for older adults and those with disabilities. Pharmacists will make home visits to administer the doses. Visit [VaccineAccessDE.com](https://vaccineaccessde.com) or call the toll-free number 1-888-491-4988 from 8 a.m. to 8 p.m. Monday through Friday, or 8:30 a.m. to 6 p.m. Saturday, to schedule an appointment.

DDDS Service System

Anyone can look around these days and see "help wanted" and "now hiring" signs in just about every business. The staffing shortage continues to deeply impact the DDDS provider network's ability to operate at full-scale. As I indicated in previous letters, DSPs are the backbone of our service delivery system. Without them, providers cannot safely support service recipients and offer quality programming.

To fully understand the impact of the staffing crisis in our network, DDDS conducted a brief survey with our provider community earlier this month. As the data is being analyzed, the initial results demonstrate the staffing crisis is impacting every provider in significant ways. I will share the official results with you in next month's letter.

We continue to work with our provider network to support them through this difficult situation. The State has committed American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) funding to offer recruitment and retention bonuses to DSPs who meet eligibility criteria. At this point, without qualified and interested job applicants, providers cannot expand beyond what they're offering right now. The Division also continues to review and approve new service providers who are interested in offering services in Delaware, but who also face the staffing shortages.

I want to reinforce that we are in a much better place this year heading into the new year than last. Because of this, service recipients are more broadly able to celebrate winter holidays with their family and friends compared to last year. To keep everyone safe and visits happening, I urge you to please keep wearing a face mask when around others not from your household. Get the vaccine and booster dose. Consider asking guests to get tested before visiting. If you have any symptoms, especially cold-like symptoms, please get a COVID test to rule it out. Practice hand hygiene anytime you touch shared surfaces.

As we are closing out the second year of this pandemic, thank you for your continued patience. The Division and our staff continue to be here to support you and your loved one. Please do not hesitate to reach out to your Support Coordinator, Employment Navigator, Family Resource Coordinator or Columbus Community Navigator with any concerns or needs. They are here for you and are committed to supporting you any way they can.

Wishing you a safe, healthy and peaceful end of 2021.

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