

LETTER TO FAMILIES

JANUARY 11, 2021



Dear Families,

With the new year upon us, full of hope for health and a return to normalcy, we are still deep in the thick of the COVID-19 pandemic. As the calendar changed from 2020 to 2021, I know that I, like many, wished it would have meant a fresh start. Unfortunately, it does not. As you are aware, the rate of COVID-19 continues to break records - Thursday reported the most positive cases for Delaware in one day since the pandemic started and yesterday, we broke the record for the most hospitalizations in one day. Since I last wrote to you in mid-December, 94 new service recipients who live in provider-managed settings have tested positive along with 99 new DSPs. We have sadly had our thirteenth service recipient who lived in a provider-managed setting and another service recipient who lived at home with their family die from COVID-19.

We are not out of the woods yet, but I am excited to share the progress DDDS and our partners are making in some important areas.

### Vaccine

DDDS has been working with all of our sister Divisions in the Department of Health and Social Services (DHSS) to plan for administration of the COVID-19 vaccine to DDDS service recipients and the direct support professionals who work with them. The State has a plan for vaccine allocation which started with long-term care facilities (where the biggest outbreaks and number of deaths have occurred) and health care professionals, moving to Emergency Medical Service providers and then direct support professionals (Review the plan: [DPH Finalizes Recommendations For Next Groups Eligible For COVID-19 Vaccine - State of Delaware News](#)). The vaccine itself is being delivered to Delaware in small batches, so getting Delawareans vaccinated will take several months. Timeframes for vaccine administration are estimates based on vaccine availability and are subject to change.

Both brands of vaccine available at this time require two doses to give the maximum protection. The Pfizer vaccine requires the second dose to be administered 21 days after the first dose. Moderna's requires the second dose be 28 days after the first time. Our vaccine distribution plan addresses scheduling and administering of both doses.

There is **no mandate** from the State or DDDS that direct support professionals or service recipients become vaccinated. However, we want to make sure that the vaccine is available for all who would like to receive it when it is available to them. Lots of people have questions. You can find more information at [COVID-19 Vaccine Information for the General Public - Delaware's Coronavirus Official Website](#).

**Direct support professionals** within the DDDS system, who are recognized as frontline health care personnel in the State's distribution plan, will begin being offered the vaccine later this month and into February.

**Service Recipients living in provider-managed settings** will have access to centralized vaccine locations and scheduled dates to receive the vaccine. Service recipients who live in a provider-managed (congregate) setting may begin to have access to the vaccine once frontline medical professionals are vaccinated. While we cannot know for sure exactly when this will happen, we anticipate vaccinations rolling out by early to mid-February.

**For service recipients living at home with family**, including those served by a Columbus Community Navigator or through LTSS, DHSS is partnering with DelDOT and Paratransit to arrange to have the vaccine delivered by Paratransit vehicle to your home for administration. It appears that this will require consent from the service recipient to share information between DDDS and Paratransit; your loved one's team will keep you posted as we finalize the details. Please be sure your contact information is up-to-date, so that the Columbus Community Navigator or Managed Care Organization's Care Coordinator can contact you to discuss details as the plans roll out. At-home administration of the vaccine will begin in February, again subject to change based on availability of the vaccine. If your loved one opts to not have the vaccine delivered at home, there will be community-based locations available in the future for them to receive the vaccine. For those who currently attend day programs in Stage One, they will be administered the vaccine at their day program if they want it. We will notify you of the dates when vaccinators will be onsite at your loved one's day program to administer the vaccine.

**For those age 65 and over**, there will be community-based vaccine distribution available in the coming weeks. Please refer to the Delaware Coronavirus vaccine website for more details, <https://coronavirus.delaware.gov/vaccine/>

It is important to note that if someone declines the vaccine at first offering that there will be ample opportunities over the coming months to receive the vaccine.

### **Testing**

Another exciting update to share is that DDDS has partnered with DPH to get our providers access to Rapid Antigen Testing, which provides results of someone's COVID-19 status in 15 minutes! The tests are to be performed on people who do not have symptoms to screen for those

40% of individuals who are COVID-19 positive but asymptomatic. Testing is available to service recipients who live in a provider-managed setting and to those who attend in-person day services if the provider is participating.

DDDS has worked with providers over the last several weeks to get their selected staff trained on how to administer the Rapid Antigen Test and to interpret the results. I'm thrilled to report our first batch of tests were delivered to one residential habilitation provider on January 4<sup>th</sup> and they have successfully tested their staff who all were negative last week!

One important note on testing: individual providers must receive a Certificate of Waiver from the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services (CMS) and the Division of Public Health to allow them to perform the tests. The waiver allows laboratory testing to be performed in non-laboratory settings. It is up to each provider if they are going to perform the Rapid Antigen Testing with their staff. You can ask your loved one's provider if they are participating. DDDS and DPH have offered this to every Day and Residential Habilitation provider in our network. We hope that having this testing available will curtail the unknown spread of the virus by identifying as early as possible and having those positive individuals isolate.

### **Return to Indoor Family Home Visitations and Stage One Day Programs**

Governor Carney issued the Stay at Home Advisory effective December 14 - January 11, which advised people to not intermingle indoors with those from other households. This prompted the temporary suspension of Phase-Two Visitor Access and a few Day Services to opt to suspend their Stage One in-person programming for those who were attending in person.

On Friday, January 8, the Governor officially extended the Stay at Home Advisory, noting "All vulnerable individuals, including those at high risk of severe illness from COVID-19, are strongly advised to stay at home, except that routine medical care should not be postponed without consulting a medical professional. Members of households with vulnerable residents should be aware that by visiting environments where distancing is not practical, they could carry COVID-19 home. Precautions should be taken to isolate oneself from vulnerable individuals in the home." (<https://governor.delaware.gov/>)

We know the stress that not having in-person visits has caused, so effective today, January 11<sup>th</sup>, in-person visits to the family home may resume if, and only if, the residential provider is in agreement that the visit can occur. Ultimately, the residential provider must weigh the status of all individuals in the home and their vulnerability in determining if home visits are safe. There are many active cases of COVID-19 currently, which may mean that your loved one needs to remain in quarantine until their home is COVID-19 free. Please work with your loved ones' provider to discuss the safety of the situation. For those who had their loved one temporarily move to the family home during the Stay at Home Advisory, please confirm with their provider what the requirements are to safely return.

It is very important to note that **the universal indoor mask mandate remains in effect** as well, so if a home visit is scheduled, **the service recipient and all family members must comply with wearing a face covering during the entire visit.** This is for everyone's safety.

For those day programs resuming in-person services after suspending activity over the last several weeks, the provider may require proof of a negative COVID test within five days before return is permitted. Testing is readily available throughout the state via the Curative sites. Test results are sent to you via email or by text within about 72 hours, typically. Please work with your loved one's day provider to discuss. If someone was COVID-19 positive, it may take 90 days for the viral load to clear their system, even though they are not contagious anymore and have fulfilled their recommended isolation period. Day programs may require proof of when the service recipient was COVID-19 positive. As long as it was over 14 days ago and the person no longer has symptoms, they should be permitted to return to day program.

While these are great advances in mitigating COVID-19 amongst our network, we all must remain vigilant with following the CDC guidelines for mask wearing, maintaining social distance, extreme hand hygiene and reducing our exposure to those who are not part of our household. Please consider getting tested at one of the Curative sites around the state. You can find the list of locations at <https://coronavirus.delaware.gov/testing/>

DDDS remains committed to continuing to provide services to service recipients through virtual and remote methods. Please do not hesitate to reach out to your loved one's Support Coordinator, Columbus Community Navigator or the Family Resource Unit with questions or concerns.

We will get through this together.

Be well,



Cory Ellen Nourie, MSS, MLSP

Director of Community Services