

**LETTER TO FAMILIES**

May 27, 2021

Dear DDDS Service Recipients and Families,

Since my last letter on May 10<sup>th</sup> a lot has changed both in the State and across the country related to our ongoing efforts to mitigate the spread of COVID-19 and bring this pandemic under better control. We are eager to take advantage of these changes to help reopen our day service programs and get more of our service recipients' access to in-person services. Reopening our day programs is a top priority for all of us, but we need to ensure that both our providers and our service recipients are ready so that we can provide a safe return for everyone.

For our service providers to reopen safely, we need to make sure they have an opportunity to rebuild their staffing, make any necessary adjustments to program protocols and practices, and continue to encourage their staff to be vaccinated. Many of our providers have been closed or running at minimal capacity for well over a year. They need time to rehire, retrain, and reorient a staff that has been hit hard by this pandemic. They also need the time to make space accommodations and program adjustments, including managing transportation needs or changes required to accommodate congestion at drop-off or pick-up. We must remember that these programs are congregate care settings; they draw together many individuals from many different homes, working in close contact, for an extended period. Reopening these service settings is not the same as opening a department store or a grocery store. The space, time, and care-type all require special consideration. Rest assured that DDDS is working with our day service provider network to help manage these needs so that they can plan for welcoming back more service recipients for in-person services as soon as possible.

Because of these current service capacity constraints, the Division is working with the provider community to roll out the next two successive stages of reopening. As you recall, in Stage One, initiated last August, service recipients capable of wearing masks with minimal supports began returning to facility-based congregate day services. For Stage Two, we are working with providers to include *fully vaccinated* individuals who struggle with mask wearing, but can be encouraged to do so or be assisted with at least limited mask wearing throughout program times. DDDS will monitor this progress closely so that we can move quickly into Stage Three, allowing all *fully vaccinated* individuals, regardless of their ability to wear masks consistently, back into day programs. By creating two separate stages, the Division is working with the provider community to ensure adequate time to rebuild staff and to ensure safety protocols are working. The direct personal care provided to many of our service recipients requires that we take every possible precaution to maintain a safe environment for all. Direct support professionals continue to be required to wear a face mask during their entire shift, in all settings.

Our provider network is diverse, and each of them will need to restaff and retool in ways that are suitable for them. This means that not all programs may open simultaneously or transition between stages at the same time. We encourage all of our families to remain in communication with their individual providers to stay informed of progress and to help establish expectations.

It is important to note that only fully vaccinated service recipients will be a part of Stages Two and Three. The Division is working with the Columbus Organization to ensure Community Navigators upload an individual's CDC vaccine card into the electronic case record, which will allow providers to see who among the population they serve is eligible for return at this time. For those service recipients who are enrolled in the Diamond State Health Plan Plus, also known as the LTSS program, your day provider will upload your vaccine card for you. Residential Habilitation providers have already loaded vaccine cards for those who live in a provider-managed residential setting. If a service recipient or guardian chooses not to share the service recipient's vaccine card, the day service providers will err on the side of caution and presume that the service recipient is not eligible to return to in-person services at this time.

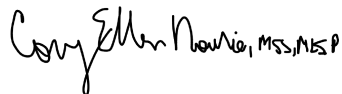
Virtual day programming will continue to be an option for all service recipients including those who cannot or do not want to return to in-person facility-based programs. If you have questions about the availability of virtual programming, please speak with your loved one's Support Coordinator, Columbus Community Navigator or the Family Resource Unit for additional details.

I know it has been a long road to get to this point. All of us – both within our Division and across our provider community – are anxious to be reunited with our communities of friends and supports. We're confident that we will see rapid progress in the coming weeks with an increase in direct support professionals hired and trained, and therefore an increase in service recipients returning to day services and other community-based activities. This will be an exciting, but also potentially stressful time, as routines will be disrupted and new ways of doing things will be required. Be assured the provider network is taking this seriously and working to minimize any undue stress along the way.

I'd be remiss if I didn't take this opportunity to remind you that vaccinations are available for everyone 12 and over. Delaware is now sponsoring a vaccination promotion program, [DEWins!](#), to help get as many people vaccinated as soon as possible. I hope you'll share this with family and friends. The more people across this state that we can get vaccinated the sooner we can get this virus under control and get back to our lives, our loved ones, and our communities.

On behalf of the Division, thank you for your understanding and patience as we move into a brand-new stage for us all, in a deliberately controlled manner. We really are all in this together.

Be well,



Cory Ellen Nourie, MSS, MLSP  
Director of Community Services