

LETTER TO FAMILIES



July 29, 2022

Dear DDDS Families and Service Recipients,

I hope you've had a chance to take a little break, reconnect with family and friends and enjoy some downtime this summer. Below is my update on COVID-19 and its impact on the DDDS network.

COVID-19 Cases

As you're aware, I was hopeful that July would continue to show a downtrend in new cases, but the virus and its subvariants had a different plan. This last month the state of Delaware has seen an increase in cases, and the same is true for DDDS and our providers. Among service recipients who receive residential habilitation services, we've had 44 new cases, bringing the total to 647 throughout the pandemic. There have been dozens of service recipients who live with their families who have tested positive, too. Among Direct Support Professionals (DSPs), there have been 55 new positives bringing the total to 1291 during the pandemic.

While these numbers are higher than anyone would like, I believe it is a sign of the times and the reality that there will be surges and periods of decline as the virus continues to be part of our everyday lives.

Operational Updates

We have learned a tremendous amount about COVID-19 over the past 30 months and the excellent news is that we have found ways to get services back open with no restrictions in place. Social distancing requirements were lifted effective July 1st and at this time there are no COVID-related service limitations in our network.

Face masks continue to be required for all in-person interactions with service recipients. Masking will continue to be required for DSPs until the state of Delaware falls into the low transmission rate category according to the CDC. As of yesterday, the entire state is in the high (red) zone. The CDC recommends wearing a mask indoors in public for areas in the high (red) zone.

We continue to have access to and use Rapid Antigen Tests within our network to detect COVID-19 among those who are asymptomatic or have had an exposure.

Provider Network Capacity

The DDDS provider network continues to navigate the ongoing DSP workforce challenge. Providers are working to recruit and retain DSPs, but many report that they are not at pre-COVID staffing levels. This limits their ability to welcome service recipients back to their pre-COVID frequency and/or welcome new service recipients to their programs. Please continue to work with your/your loved one's Columbus Community Navigator, Support Coordinator or Family Resource Coordinator for the latest updates and service availability.

Testing and Vaccination Updates

The best way to reduce severity of illness and death is by being fully vaccinated, which includes getting all recommended booster doses. Everyone age 50 and over is recommended to have at least two booster doses now. Pharmacies and public health clinics continue to offer vaccinations and boosters as well. To find a location, visit <https://coronavirus.delaware.gov/vaccine/where-can-i-get-my-vaccine/>

Vaccine manufacturers are working right now to develop the next round of vaccines targeting the Omicron variants. These vaccines are expected to be available in the fall. Federal health officials have said getting boosted now will not preclude someone from getting the Omicron-targeted dose this fall.

Testing continues to be one of the best strategies to reduce the spread of the virus. Free at-home test kits are available through the federal government. The expiration dates on the tests mailed from the federal government were conservative and have been reassessed. To find the extended expiration date, go to www.fda.gov/medical-devices/coronavirus-covid-19-and-medical-devices/home-otc-covid-19-diagnostic-tests#list You can search by brand and lot number to find the extended expiration date for your tests.

Additionally, Curative and pharmacies continue to offer testing. To find a test site, visit <https://coronavirus.delaware.gov/testing/>

Moving Forward

I want to share an opportunity with you, in case you're not aware. The federal government has created an Affordable Connectivity Program (ACP) to make accessing high-speed internet accessible and affordable to all. By having a household member who receives Medicaid, you are automatically eligible for high-speed internet for \$30 or less per month. Local providers, Comcast and Verizon Fios both are participants in the program and by applying your ACP benefit, *you can access high-speed internet for free!* To claim your ACP benefit, visit www.getinternet.gov As we've learned from COVID-19, the internet is an essential component of keeping each other connected and active. Between Zoom meetings, remote school and social activities, having high-speed internet is a game changer for our communities.

As noted last month, we continue to plan for the day when the public health emergency is officially behind us. As a reminder, the Division of Medicaid and Medical Assistance (DMMA) will restart eligibility reviews also known as redeterminations. In order to avoid any disruption in services, DMMA is asking all beneficiaries to update their contact information if it has changed. You can do this by calling DHSS' Change Report Center at 302-571-4900 option 2 or via Delaware ASSIST at <https://assist.dhss.delaware.gov> By ensuring your contact information is accurate, you will be notified of any eligibility documentation that may be necessary to keep your benefits active.

While we continue to experience ups-and-downs of new cases and subvariants, it's important to recognize just how far we have come. Thirty months ago, the network was stunted; programs were closed and isolation was very real. Today, programs are open. People are getting jobs and starting new relationships. Service recipients are living their good lives, with family and friends at their sides. We've certainly come a long way. I thank you for your flexibility and patience as we continue to persevere through the pandemic together.

Be well,



Cory Ellen Nourie, MSS, MLSP
Director of Community Services