

LETTER TO FAMILIES

September 29, 2021

Dear DDDS Families and Service Recipients,

I hope this email finds you well, adjusting to the many changes that are occurring around us. We continue to persevere through challenging times, while trying to look hopeful towards the future and responding to what we can do now to impact that future.

New COVID-19 Cases

As my previous letter referenced, we continue to see new COVID-19 cases increasing throughout the state, with the first leveling off of those cases just this past week. Since my last letter, our network has equally seen a dramatic increase in positive cases among direct support professionals (DSPs) and service recipients, both those who live in provider-managed settings and those who live at home and participate in day programming. In total, there have been 509 DSPs who have tested positive during the pandemic. Among those who are supported in Residential Habilitation, we have had 319 positive cases among service recipients. While positive cases have increased in the past month, we are nowhere near the surge we felt in the beginning of the year. With the advent and acceptance of the vaccine, the numbers have become more manageable, so I am happy to report that we do not anticipate having to put any additional restrictions in place at this time. We continue to support visits in residential habilitation sites according to Phase Three of visitor access processes, including visits not occurring in communal areas indoors.

When looking at the new COVID-19 positive cases, it is important to understand who is most susceptible to severe COVID-19 infection, hospitalization, and mortality. Among those three categories, the evidence is clear- people who are unvaccinated make up the majority of severe illness, hospitalizations and those who succumb to the virus. It is absolutely true that the vaccine cannot prevent COVID-19 in all cases, but even for those who are fully vaccinated and who become infected, their clinical course tends to be less severe. Scientific evidence supports the effectiveness of the vaccine.

Testing

Effective September 30th, all state employees and employees who provide Home and Community-Based Services for DDDS must either be fully vaccinated or participate in weekly COVID-19 testing. As I have shared in previous letters, our network has access to Rapid Antigen Tests (RATs), which provide results in 15 minutes. Many providers signed on in early 2021 to administer RATs and have found great success with their use and early detection of COVID-19. Now, more than 20 of our providers have been

approved and will be able to use the RATs for their staff, service recipients they support and visitors meeting in-person.

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

Vaccine

The testing requirement does not apply to fully vaccinated individuals. The United States Food and Drug Administration (FDA) has given full approval to the Pfizer vaccine for anyone age 16 or older. Emergency Use Authorizations are still in effect for the Pfizer vaccine for 12–15-year-olds, the Moderna vaccine for 18-year-olds and older and the Johnson & Johnson vaccine for 18-year-olds and older. Pfizer and Moderna both require two doses to be fully vaccinated. Johnson & Johnson is a single-dose shot. All three brands are readily available around the state. 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 will instead show when they received their vaccine and which brand. Directions of how to access the portal and request immunization history is available at https://www.dhss.delaware.gov/dhss/dph/ipp/portalflyer.pdf?fbclid=IwAR0_QfxT49Z1alJ2f3lxX1jtyJjDisn4BhIq-GU-6bN41vwH7K94HioQTpA.

The CDC has made approved a booster dose of the **Pfizer vaccine** for certain people. Booster doses are available through one's primary care provider, local pharmacies, or vaccine sites through the Division of Public Health or Curative network. Based on CDC recommendations, the following people **should** receive a booster shot of Pfizer-BioNTech's COVID-19 vaccine at least 6 months after their second dose of Pfizer-BioNTech:

- People 65 years and older and residents in long-term care settings
- People aged 50–64 years with underlying medical conditions, which include but are not limited to: *cancer, chronic heart, lung and kidney diseases, dementia, diabetes, down syndrome, HIV, overweight and obesity, pregnancy, organ transplants, and stroke.*

CDC recommends the following individuals **may** also receive a booster shot of Pfizer-BioNTech's COVID-19 vaccine at least 6 months after their second dose of Pfizer-BioNTech.

- People aged 18–49 years with underlying medical conditions (the same categories as mentioned above), based on their individual benefits and risk
- People aged 18–64 years who are at increased risk for COVID-19 exposure and transmission because of occupational or institutional setting, including *first responders (health care workers, firefighters, police, congregate care staff); education staff (teachers, support staff, daycare workers); manufacturing workers; Corrections workers; U.S. Postal Service workers; public transit workers; grocery store workers; and those who reside in correctional facilities or homeless shelters.*

It is important to note that the booster approval is only for those who were fully vaccinated with the Pfizer vaccine. The CDC and FDA are considering the need for booster doses for Moderna and Johnson & Johnson. We will share information as soon as it is available. For those DDDS service recipients and family caregivers who were vaccinated through our drive thru events in partnership with Rite Aid, you received the Moderna vaccine and therefore are not eligible for a booster dose at this point. If you have any questions about the vaccine or booster, please reach out to your medical provider.

DDDS Service System

Our provider network continues to face a significant staffing crisis, as we are seeing throughout the state. Providers are working to onboard more staff to be able to increase the number of service recipients able to be supported. I'm also excited to say that providers routinely demonstrate flexibility, adaptability and creativity in working to meet the needs of our service recipients. The pandemic has definitely caused a disruption in just about every aspect of service delivery. DDDS has been meeting with our day providers to discuss their eligibility for a second round of retention payments to help cover fixed expenses while the system operates at less than full capacity. Many providers are eligible for these payments, to retain the services so they are ready to welcome service recipients back as soon as possible. Additionally, many providers have been awarded Health Care Relief Funds, again to help them pay their bills, until they are able to have their full complement of service recipients back in person.

We continue to operate under the authorities given to us by the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services (CMS) Appendix K Emergency Preparedness and Response authority. This means DDDS Support Coordinators and Columbus Community Navigators continue to operate remotely in some capacity, including holding meetings via online platforms or telephone versus in-person. It is also true of DDDS' Family Resource Unit and Employment Navigators. I recognize not having in-person meetings is difficult for some service recipients. When possible, we suggest meeting in an outdoor open-air environment, while being fully masked and maintaining social distance. There are still many restrictions in community settings where meetings used to occur, so please reach out to your loved one's team member to discuss if an accommodation can be made.

As we move forward into the fall, we will continue to closely monitor the spread of the virus in the state and in our network. Be assured, DDDS and our provider network remain committed to minimizing the disruption to services as much as possible. At this point, the pandemic has extended longer than I ever anticipated, but we have learned to adapt and adjust based on the current situation and will continue to do so. I thank you for your patience and understanding as we get through this together.

Be well,



Cory Ellen Nourie, MSS, MLSP

Director of Community Services