**

A MESSAGE TO D.C. GOVERNMENT AGENCIES AND D.C. COUNCIL MEMBERS ABOUT COVID19

FROM THE D.C. DEVELOPMENTAL DISABILITIES COUNCIL

The Developmental Disabilities Council (<https://ddc.dc.gov/page/about-ddc>) is a federally-mandated body responsible for strengthening the voice of District residents with developmental disabilities and their families, in support of greater independence, inclusion, empowerment and the pursuit of life as they choose.  Never has the challenge of our mandate been greater than it is now, when our community and country are mounting a response to COVID-19. We have participated in community calls with the executive office of the mayor over the past week, and would like to make the following essential points:

* These times define us all and we must do everything we can to support each other, our neighbors, our families, and ourselves. A successful response to this public health crisis requires us all to contribute – government and community alike – and to act with love, understanding, and genuine care. While the government has a strong role to play, we support the informal networks of volunteers that have already formed throughout DC to help those who cannot leave their homes – including people with developmental and other disabilities.
* Within this context, it is essential for DC government agencies to conduct intentional outreach to people with disabilities and their families, many of whom are reliant on now-closed public libraries for access to community information. Virtual outreach alone is not going to be fully responsive in this regard. There is a need for targeted mailings, phone calls, and other forms of engagement with people who have disabilities as well as their households and caregivers - all of whom have a critical need for information and services.
* This should be a government-wide effort, in which people with disabilities are explicitly recognized and taken into consideration as a part of the entire population the administration is trying to reach in this time of crisis. People with disabilities are at great risk of social isolation, and each agency of the D.C. government needs to consider what it can do to reach them.
* The DD Council is engaged, along with other groups, in identifying specific measures the community can undertake, and will be brainstorming about actions we believe DC agencies should take into consideration. We will be developing further ideas which we will share with individual agencies, as well as the mayor’s coronavirus task force. At this time, we have two urgent points to flag:
  + We request issuance of guidance to health care providers to ensure non-discriminatory approaches concerning the provision of health care services to people with disabilities, whether they have contracted COVID-19 or need services related to their individual health care needs during this national emergency. Federal disability laws exist to ensure that the rights of people with disabilities are protected, that they are not subject to discriminatory practices, and and that they are not denied health care services which may or may not relate to COVID-19. Underlying medical conditions among many people with disabilities could heighten the effect of the virus and put them at particular risk.
  + In full consideration of the latest guidance from U.S. Department of Education (<https://www2.ed.gov/about/offices/list/ocr/frontpage/faq/rr/policyguidance/Supple%20Fact%20Sheet%203.21.20%20FINAL.pdf>), we have concerns regarding DCPS plans to start distance learning on Monday, April 27th, and what specific plans exist to address the needs of DC students with developmental disabilities in this regard.
* Staffing shortages among direct support professionals, personal care attendants, medical staff and others will affect this vulnerable population’s day-to-day supports in significant ways. Backup plans and flexible arrangements must be in place to ensure community supports are available and can be used when traditional supports are not available.
* A moment of crisis such as this one points up the unacceptably fragile and limited safety net available for people with disabilities in the District of Columbia – especially those who do not currently qualify for Medicaid waiver supports. The DD Council urgently reasserts that DDS must expand eligibility to people with developmental disabilities, including autism, who may not fall within the arbitrary IQ cutoff that now determines who receives services. We call on the Bowser administration and the DC council to take all necessary steps to expand eligibility without further delay.