

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE
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Department of Human Services Emphasizes Importance of Support for People with Disabilities During COVID-19 Emergency

Harrisburg, PA – The Department of Human Services (DHS) today hosted a virtual press briefing to raise awareness of the challenges faced by people with disabilities during the public-health emergency and share information about the department’s efforts to support this vulnerable population throughout the COVID-19 crisis.

“The Wolf Administration and the Department of Human Services are working proactively on behalf of people with intellectual, developmental and physical disabilities to ensure that their rights to life, health and safety are protected as fiercely as everyone else’s,” said DHS Secretary Teresa Miller. “We will not tolerate discrimination in allocation of lifesaving resources based on any factor including, but not limited to age, disability and socioeconomic status to Pennsylvanians seeking medical care in our commonwealth.”

On March 30, Governor Wolf [released a statement](#) asserting the administration’s commitment to ensuring that all Pennsylvanians receive fair and equitable access to lifesaving health care during the COVID-19 pandemic.

“The department’s offices of Developmental Programs (ODP) and Long-Term Living (OLTL) are wholly focused on supporting people with intellectual, developmental and physical disabilities through this crisis,” Secretary Miller said. “We’re working closely with our partners in the managed-care and direct-care fields, and we are committed to maintaining robust service networks for individuals with disabilities throughout this crisis and beyond.”

Within days of COVID’s initial detection in Pennsylvania, the department issued operational recommendations for providers of [intellectual disability and autism services](#) and for [long-term service and support](#) (LTSS) providers in Pennsylvania in response to the emergency. DHS also implemented [proactive strategies](#) at Pennsylvania’s four state centers for individuals with intellectual disabilities to protect residents and staff.

OLTL supports individuals with physical disabilities and older adults who are dual-eligible for Medicare and Medicaid with their long-term care needs. This includes more than 450,000 Pennsylvanians who receive long-term services and supports through the Community HealthChoices program and more than 65,000 Pennsylvanians who live in more than 1,200 personal care homes and assisted living residences regulated and licensed by OLTL.

ODP supports more than 56,000 individuals with an intellectual disability, developmental disability, or autism through home- and community-based services and the state-center system. ODP is responsible for regulating more than 7,500 licensed settings across the commonwealth.

OLTL and ODP submitted applications for emergency modifications to their respective home and community based waiver programs to the federal Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services (CMS). The emergency amendments, which were approved March 18, provide the following for older adults and individuals with disabilities who receive services through ODP and OLTL:

- Expanded use of remote and telephone support so people receive needed support during periods of social-distancing measures and quarantine;
- Services provided in alternative settings, such as hotels, for quarantine or isolation when needed;
- Payment for direct-support providers to assist people in hospital settings where they may need support beyond that provided by hospital staff;
- Changes in provider qualifications that allow expansion for when family members may be compensated for providing services and the redeployment of direct-support professionals from day services to essential areas like residential and in-home supports.

Additionally, to address concerns about the financial stability of community providers through the COVID-19 response, DHS will have the ability to provide both retainer payments for day-program providers and enhanced rates for other services where needed. Further operational adjustments and guidance will be issued as needed throughout the public-health crisis.

DHS has also partnered with the Center for Community Resources (CCR) to launch a statewide Support & Referral Helpline staffed by skilled and compassionate caseworkers who will be available 24/7 to counsel Pennsylvanians struggling with anxiety and other challenging emotions due to the COVID-19 emergency and refer them to community-based resources that can further help to meet individual needs. CCR staff are trained to be accessible, culturally competent, and skilled at assisting individuals with mental illness, intellectual disabilities, autism, co-occurring disorders and other special needs.

The toll-free, round-the-clock support line is operational and can be reached at 1-855-284-2494. For TTY, dial 724-631-5600.

Another department resource available throughout the crisis is Adult Protective Services, which protects adults who are 18 to 59 and have a disability. Reports can be made 24/7 to 1-800-490-8505, and these calls are continuing to be answered and investigated.

ChildLine is available 24/7 to anyone wishing to report child abuse and general child well-being concerns at 1-800-932-0313 and at www.KeepKidsSafe.pa.gov.

Visit the PA Department of Health's dedicated [Coronavirus webpage](#) for the most up-to-date information regarding COVID-19.