



Co-Chair Sen. Arnie Roblan  
Co-Chair Rep. Paul Holvey  
Members of the Joint Special Committee on Coronavirus Response Committee

March 18, 2020

On behalf of our provider partners and the individuals with developmental disabilities we serve and represent we write to ask you to **include Direct Support Professional's in your emergency definition of "health care worker" as you prepare the State response plan to COVID-19.**

We are all better off when we are all healthy – especially the most vulnerable among us. People experiencing intellectual or developmental disabilities (IDD) are “vulnerable” as they often require support to access medical care, may need help maintaining independence, may require constant supervision or may need help accessing transportation.<sup>1,2</sup> Current CDC guidelines indicate that people with underlying conditions such as heart or lung conditions or diabetes are at particular risk for COVID-19 complications. People with IDD experience these conditions at a higher rate than the greater population and are therefore at greater risk for COVID-19 complications.

Luckily, over 30,000 Oregonians experiencing IDD have access to direct support professionals. These professionals support people experiencing IDD with medical needs, behavior support, personal hygiene, support to maintain employment and make real connections in the community. This is hands-on work that cannot be done from a social distance. People with IDD need support people present to provide care. Having multiple people through their home to provide these critical supports puts people with IDD at increased risk for contracting COVID-19.

Today, the DD community comes together and asks you to **include Direct Support Professionals in your emergency definition of "health care worker" as you prepare the State response plan to COVID-19.** We believe by including this workforce in your emergency definition of “health care worker” our state-partner providers will have access to basic Personal Protective Equipment as available, specifically gloves, masks, hand sanitizer, and disinfectant wipes. Access to these supplies will reduce the risk to people with IDD who are vulnerable and at increased risk of complications from COVID-19.

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<sup>1</sup> CDC Center for Preparedness and Response Emergency Preparedness and Vulnerable populations: Vulnerable populations may include anyone who has difficulty communicating, has difficulty accessing medical care, may need help maintaining independence, requires constant supervision, or may need help accessing transportation. <https://www.cdc.gov/cpr/whatwedo/vulnerable.htm>.

<sup>2</sup> Past epidemics show that people experiencing intellectual or developmental disabilities (IDD) are particularly at risk of severe complications from illness.

This workforce includes incredibly dedicated and extensively trained individuals who work for people experiencing IDD. Prior to this health crisis we have been living with workforce crisis for the past five years (or more). Our system is fragile, this workforce is fragile, yet the DD system mission and values will lead us all to rise to the occasion. Most DD providers already had many open positions that had to be filled with overtime by the existing workforce. Now with a large number of team members needing to be out for their own illness, sick children and closed schools the shortage of staff will only grow, causing more destabilization.

This is a workforce that "can't work from home." DSPs will be caring for those who may become ill and may even be quarantined with the person experiencing IDD to provide support. Our industry doesn't typically have access to temporary workers, in fact we have extensive rules regarding background clearance and training, ensuring the safety of the individuals we serve is at the forefront of all we do.

Examples of the urgent need:

- One provider had three Executive team members spend the entire day on Thursday looking for supplies across the State. They sent a team of 15 staff to small stores across three counties to find cleaning supplies. They had each buy a reasonably small amount in several locations so not to contribute the hoarding mentality. This means they stood in long lines, not 6 feet apart with people they did not know. But the provider had no choice, they had to have these supplies. Recent DHS direction requires providers to have supplies that simply are not available.
- Wages for these positions do not allow for most workers to have large savings. A day without pay from being sick, added daycare cost from school closures etc. will be huge financial burdens for this workforce. DD providers also don't have the resources to offer "unlimited" paid time off, and we need workers to stay at home if they are ill.
- One provider shared she had recently received an email from a woman they support who in the last few years finally got her own apartment with 24 hour supports. She is a person who will be classified as "high risk." She is terrified there will not be enough staff to support her and if she gets sick, she will have to move.
- Another provider shared their rough weekend in which they had three core, longtime staff out with symptoms of flu, one client in the hospital with symptoms the ER said warranted a Coronavirus test, and were desperately trying to figure out how to keep those sick staff away from the individuals they serve, while ensuring there were at least two of the three staff on shift trained/certified to provide critical behavioral supports, and meet the health, safety and compliance needs of the other residents. This week they continue to feel and see the crunch of staff needing to stay home with their own kids who are home from school.

Many people experiencing IDD require DSP support to be physically present in order to survive. They have critical health and safety support needs. Like transferring to and from wheelchairs, showering/bathing, being supported in hygiene and in use of the restroom, being fed through a G or J tube, support with physical act of eating, or support in prepping the food to meet medical and aspiration protocol guidelines, getting medications, crossing the street safely, support in communication. We are providing critical health care services and our workforce should be considered "health care workers."

We also believe the inclusion of our workforce in your emergency definition of “health care worker” will allow our workforce to receive the additional supports planned by the Governor and your Committee. For example, the child care provisions announced by Governor Brown Thursday for “health care workers” and first responders, allowing these critical workers to continue to provide the supports to the people they serve.

Thank you for your consideration.

Respectfully,

- Lois Gibson, Oregon Resource Association (ORA, DD Provider Association)
- Lorelei LaVoie, Community Providers Association of Oregon (CPAO, DD Provider Association)
- Gabrielle Guedon, Oregon Self Advocacy Coalition (OSAC, Coalition of local self-advocacy groups supporting adults with IDD to advocate across Oregon)
- Katie Rose, Oregon Developmental Disabilities Coalition (DD Coalition, Coalition with members from the self-advocate, family, provider, advocate and case management entity communities)
- Jennifer Santiago, Oregon Support Services Association (OSSA, Support Services Brokerage Association providing case management services to adults with IDD)
- Dianna Hansen, Central Oregon Disability Support Network (CODSN, peer-based support for families experiencing disability, supporting families and family networks in Deschutes, Crook and Jefferson Counties and also supports Eastern Oregon networks (Kinsugi Disability Support Network, Harney County; Family Advocacy & Support Network, Klamath County; Community FORCE, Baker County)
- Roberta Dunn, FACT Oregon (Supporting Families experiencing Disability in Portland Tri-County, Columbia, Clatsop, Tillamook & Lincoln Counties)
- Jill Fummerton, Families Engaging and Thriving Together (FEATT, peer-based support for families experiencing disability, supporting families in Douglas County)
- Cheryl Cisneros, Creating Opportunities (peer-based support for families experiencing disability, supporting families in Yamhill, Polk and Marion Counties)
- Pam Ring, Families Connected (peer-based support for families experiencing disability in Lane County)
- Emily Wylde Turner, Bridging Communities (peer-based support for families experiencing disability in Jackson and Josephine Counties)

Cc: Lilia Teninty, ODDS  
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