



# Pennsylvania Advocates and Resources for Autism and Intellectual Disabilities

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Testimony  
of  
Mark Davis, President & CEO of PAR  
to the  
Senate Health & Human Services and Aging & Youth Committees  
Joint Hearing on Vaccine Distribution in the Commonwealth  
February 4, 2021

Thank you Chairwomen Brooks, Ward, and Collett and Chairman Haywood, members of the Health & Human Services Committee, members of the Aging & Youth Committee and guests. Thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony on the distribution of the COVID-19 vaccine.

Good morning, my name is Mark Davis. I am President and CEO of Pennsylvania Advocates and Resources for Autism and Intellectual Disabilities. PAR is the statewide provider association dedicated to Intellectual Disability/Autism (ID/A) services. Our members provide \$2 Billion of the \$3 Billion ID/A industry, supporting tens of thousands of Pennsylvanians with ID/A and employing thousands more.

On behalf of our over 120 member providers, I would like to call to your attention to challenges and opportunity faced within the ID/A community from the pandemic and they and their caretakers in receiving the COVID-19 vaccination.

## **Individuals with Intellectual Disability or Autism (ID/A)**

The 2020 COVID-19 pandemic has disproportionately affected people with ID/A. A recent multi-state study including Pennsylvania found that people with ID/A have been infected by the virus at roughly the same rate as the general population, demonstrating the successful work done by ID/A providers and Direct Support Professionals (DSPs) to keep people safe. The most alarming finding was that individuals with ID/A diagnosed with COVID-19 are almost twice as likely to die from the disease than are members of the general public. The impact of the high rate of comorbidities among people with ID/A and the presumed older average age of the people with ID/A have been suggested as a possible contributory factors to the high mortality rate. The people we support depend on their Direct Support Professionals (DSPs) and their providers to keep them safe.

## **Direct Support Professionals**

We must recognize the invaluable contributions direct support professionals provide to individuals with ID/A and our society. DSPs wear many hats in the lives of those they care for: they not only provide hygiene and personal care but they also take individuals to medical appointments, provide grocery shopping services and support their participation in the community, which exposes them to risk of infection more than they would find acceptable if it were not part of their job. The coronavirus is rocking the already unstable workforce of DSPs assisting people with ID/A. Our obligation is to protect them so they can protect others. Due to low wages, the DSP profession has had a high turnover rate and open position rate for years. A study found that during the pandemic, turnover skyrocketed from 31% to over 55%. When we surveyed DSPs, they cited low

wages, staff shortages, lack of access to PPE, lack of child-care options and fear of COVID-19 infection as reasons for leaving.

### **Communities of Color**

A recent study found that 56% of PAR member DSPs are people of color. DSPs come from diverse racial and cultural backgrounds. There is a sense of mistrust that stems from these communities' negative experience with the medical field in our country, and this mistrust is passed down through generations. In addition, the COVID vaccine could be at the bottom of the priority list for people who are battling food insecurity and stable housing.

### **Strategy to Increase Vaccination Rates**

Our objective is to maximize vaccine coverage for people with ID/A and those who having direct contact with them (DSPs, nurses, other staff and families). We know that any vaccine hesitancy strategy needs to specifically address the concerns of people of color, as well as the general public. So, here are the highlights of our thoughts on this strategy. We're happy to work with the legislature, the Departments of Human Services and Health and the CDC to finalize and implement such a strategy.

We suggest leveraging the relationships that ID/A providers have and partner with community influencers, who are people of color and from prominent sectors such as medical professionals (doctors, nurses, mental health clinicians, for example); professional athletes; television personalities; musicians/artists; church and religious leaders, and union officials. People of color should design and deliver the message that vaccines are safe, necessary and for the good of the community. The messaging should be science-based and should be include information on the availability of vaccines in community locations. These locations include community centers, food banks, neighborhood pharmacies, and grocery stores.

Distribution of the message can be delivered broadly through "Vaccine Ambassadors" including community influencers, frontline workers who have received the vaccine and medical experts in town-hall type formats where concerns can be directly addressed and attendees can freely ask questions of medical professionals and learn why and how to get the vaccine, its safety and long-term benefits to themselves and their families and most importantly, how to get the vaccine.

PAR and our members are committed to working in partnership with you, the legislature, the Governor, the Department of Health, the Department of Human Services, the federal CDC and stakeholders across the commonwealth to facilitate vaccine distribution, mitigate vaccine hesitancy and support efforts to end the pandemic. We welcome any questions or feedback and thank you for your consideration.

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