



STATE OF RHODE ISLAND
Governor's Commission on Disabilities

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COVID-19 Vaccine Sub-Committee
RI Department of Health
Two Capitol Hill
Providence, RI 02908

To: Members of the COVID-19 Vaccine Sub-Committee:

Please add a representative of the community of people with disabilities to the Sub-Committee to ensure vaccine policy/priorities protect workers who are essential to the health and lives of individuals with disabilities as well as individuals with disabilities, many with unique underlying health conditions. Appointing a representative of the community of people with disabilities is critical to fulfilling the Sub-Committee's charge "to advise on how to prioritize distribution of the vaccine to ensure that it is done equitably, and in a way that best protects the State as a whole."

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) recognize that some person(s) with disabilities may be at increased risk of becoming infected with COVID-19 or of having unrecognized illness. This may include, but is not limited to:

- ❖ People who have limited mobility or who cannot avoid coming into close contact with others who may be infected, such as direct support providers and family members;
- ❖ People who have trouble understanding information or practicing preventive measures, such as hand washing and social distancing; and
- ❖ People who may not be able to communicate symptoms of illness.

In addition, essential workers daily have direct physical contact with the person(s) with disabilities which are not conducive to social distancing based upon the essential duties of their jobs and type of care or support provided. Examples listed alphabetically below, include but are not limited to:

- ❖ **Direct Support Professionals (DSP)** work directly with people with physical disabilities and/or intellectual/developmental disabilities with the aim of assisting the individual to become integrated into his/her community or the least restrictive environment. Their assistance could include feeding, bathing, dressing, grooming, work, homemaking, cleaning after defecating and leisure. A DSP may work with multiple consumers daily, in individuals' homes or congregate settings.
 - In addition to Direct Support Professionals other employees including managers; coordinators; clinical staff; physical therapists; occupational therapists; speech; psychologists; psych assistants and nurses are all in houses doing hands on work as

well. They are often pressed into DSP roles. There are also a number of employment staff (job coaches, etc.) that have daily close contact and should be on the essential list and vaccinated.

- ❖ **Family or other caregivers** any relative, partner, friend, or neighbor who has a significant relationship with, and who provides a broad range of assistance for, an older adult or an adult or child with chronic or disabling conditions. They often provide most of the care in the home. They also must be able to accompany the individual with the disability into emergency departments, hospitals, and other COVID treatment, testing, and vaccination settings in order to provide accurate vital healthcare information, for individuals who are unable to communicate their condition, healthcare history, etc.
- ❖ **Home Health Aides** provide routine personal care to persons who are elderly or disabled, including assistance with personal hygiene, dressing, feeding, and household tasks essential to the patient's health. Their services are provided in a person's home and they may work daily in more than one home.
- ❖ **Homemakers** provide light work or household tasks such as cooking, cleaning, shopping, and laundry. They may work in more than one home on daily or frequent visits.
- ❖ **Interpreters for the Deaf** and hard of hearing, work with multiple consumers on a daily basis and are critical to effective communications in healthcare situations. It is even more essential for interpreters for the deaf in COVID masking environments since facial expressions are covered up. American Sign Language (ASL) has its own rules and incorporates hand movements as well as facial motions, grammar and word ordering distinct from English, from which it is completely separate. Requiring interpreters to wear cloth masks could block critical facial information.
- ❖ **Interpreters for the Deaf-Blind** provide both auditory and visual information, modifies the signing space and distance from the Deaf-Blind consumer, and may incorporate subtle grammatical markers ordinarily visible on the face into signing received tactually. Direct physical touching of hands by both the interpreter and the consumer who is deaf-blind, are essential.
- ❖ **Personal Care Assistants (PCA)** works one-on-one with people are elders or younger people with disabilities. They perform personal hygiene tasks such as bathing, brushing teeth and washing hair; assists with administering medications. Turning a person who is bedridden and lifting when needed. Dressing and undresses. Ensuring the comfort of the individual, including giving massages and applying lotion to the skin; aids with grooming tasks such as brushing hair and clipping nails. Assist feeding including cutting or mashing food as needed to allow them to swallow. Performing household cleaning chores such as washing dishes, doing laundry and vacuuming. Helping the person walk, sit, stand, or lie down; and transports individuals to and from work, shopping, medical appointments, and socializing.

Respectfully submitted by:

Bob Cooper

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Executive Secretary