

Date: March 19, 2020
To: Texas Public Health Officials and Leaders
FROM: Beth Stalvey, MPH, PhD, Executive Director
RE: COVID-19 Response for Individuals with Developmental Disabilities

The Texas Council for Developmental Disabilities (TCDD) thanks you for your efforts to protect all Texans during this worldwide pandemic. TCDD would like to offer the following resources and considerations for individuals with developmental disabilities (DD).

TCDD is established by state and federal law and is governed by 27 Governor-appointed board members, 60% of whom are individuals with DD or family members of individuals with disabilities. The primary role of TCDD is to advocate for responsive policies and programs that ensure Texans with DD have the opportunity to live, work, and contribute to the community of their choice.

Our Council members have expressed the following concerns and hope to partner with you as you continue to educate, prevent, and respond to COVID-19 in Texas.

System Planning and Response

- In past emergencies, individuals with DD were forgotten or neglected. We offer our assistance and that of our many statewide partners to ensure that individuals with DD are adequately included in your community response plans.
- We realize that having a DD alone is not identified as a high-risk category; however, many individuals with DD have other chronic health conditions that make the illness more dangerous for them and may elevate their risk to the negative effects of COVID-19.

Community Education

- Like all Texans, individuals with DD and their families are instructed to prepare and protect themselves. This requires receiving and understanding the instructions given by leaders and health officials.
- We offer some educational resources specifically developed for those with intellectual and other DD and we hope you include these in the list of resources you already provide. These resources are also provided in Spanish.

Individual Protection and Prevention

- Individuals with DD may find it more difficult to execute social distancing and isolation because they need regular and hands-on help from others for everyday tasks. Many individuals receive this help from family members and/or direct support professionals who come into the home to provide needed support.

- What happens when family caregivers and providers become ill and cannot provide care to the individual?
- How can the individual and family protect themselves when a paid provider is coming into their home?
- How will paid staff and providers know the signs and symptoms of COVID-19 and when they should seek medical care – especially when the individual is non-verbal or has limited communication?
- Obtaining needed supplies such as medication refills and groceries may also be difficult without needed assistance. This includes transportation services as well as hands-on assistance with shopping.

Congregate and Residential Settings

- Facilities such as group homes, state supported living centers, and nursing homes are not necessarily safer for individuals with DD or older adults due to the inability to engage in social distancing or isolation from others.
- What plans do these facilities have in place to ensure continuity of care in the event that staff at these facilities become ill or need to isolate themselves at home for a long period of time? Without proper plans and actions in place, other residents are at increased risk.

Work and School

- As many Texans shift quickly to teleworking from home, many employees with DD may not have the needed accommodations to be successful in a home-based work environment. Additional information should be provided to both employers and employees to make these adjustments so work may continue.
- Similarly, students receiving special education services may not have the supports or resources necessary to receive instruction from online sources. Additional strategies are needed to ensure students with DD are able to continue their coursework during school closures.

We know that COVID-19 is testing our support systems in new ways for all Americans. For Texans with DD who regularly rely on our system for their daily needs, the greater risk may not be from the actual disease, but from how the disease could disrupt critical services and supports.

TCDD is here to assist in these efforts by providing educational resources; identifying system support needs for individuals with DD; and connecting with a diverse network of organizations and disability experts at the national, state, and local level.

We have begun compiling specific resources on our website at www.tcdd.texas.gov. You can also contact me directly at Beth.Stalvey@tcdd.texas.gov or 512-437-5440.

Sincerely,

Beth Stalvey

Beth Stalvey, MPH, PhD
Executive Director