

COVID-19 Health Care Barriers among People with Disabilities

A Report of the COVID-19 Health Disparities Statewide Leadership Task Force

August 2022

PROJECT BACKGROUND:

The COVID-19 pandemic has been difficult on everyone, but for some groups, including and especially the disability community, its impact has been staggering. This is even more the case for those in the disability community who live in rural areas and those belonging to racial and ethnic minorities.

The Arc of Pennsylvania received funding through the Pennsylvania Department of Health through the CDC's National Initiative to Address COVID-19 Health Disparities Among Populations at High-Risk and Underserved to investigate, educate, and report on problems that people with disabilities in Pennsylvania have accessing appropriate information and help during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The Arc's research focused on asking participants two questions:

- *To what extent have we used a disability-inclusive approach to combat COVID-19?*
- *To what extent will we use a disability-inclusive approach to prepare for future emergencies?*

A disability-inclusive approach means that the interests of people with disabilities were included every step along the way.

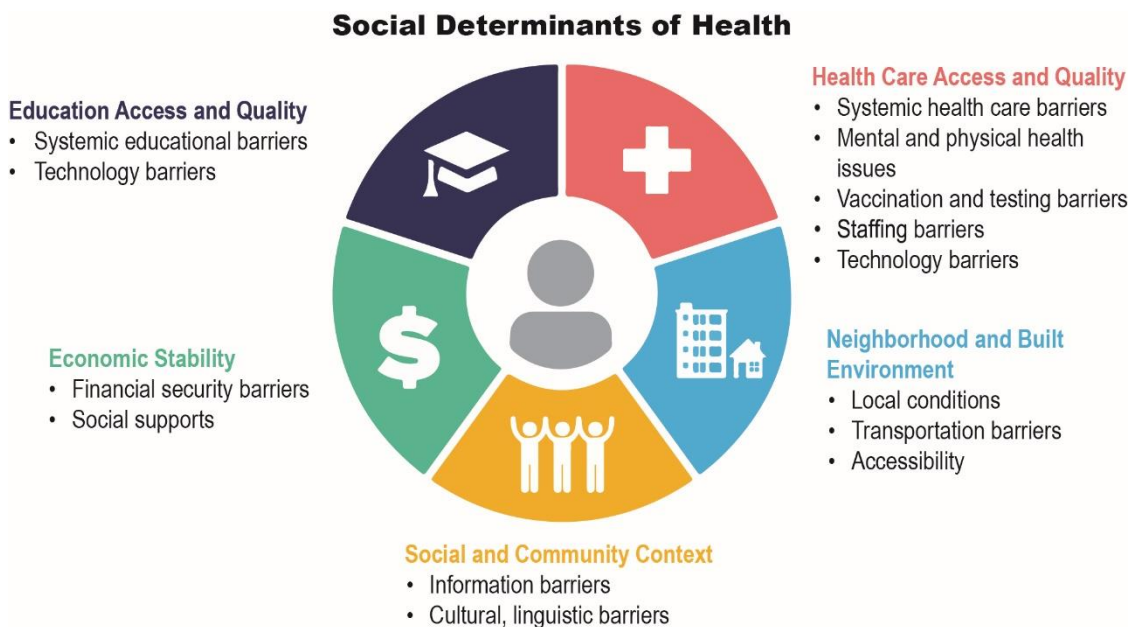
SUMMARY FINDINGS:

When COVID-19 emerged, emergency response planning did not consider the unique needs of the disability community, which tends to have worse health outcomes due to a variety of social and institutional barriers that the pandemic exacerbated, nor did it account for challenges people with disabilities face accessing information (i.e., braille, plain language, or multicultural materials).

Respondents reported that inequitable access to health care and other social system supports compounded physical and mental health issues, worsened chronic health conditions, made getting vaccinated and securing regular testing difficult, and led to a disintegration in quality of life for entire families.

More than 400 individuals from diverse racial, ethnic, and rural populations and representing people with lived experience of a disability, caretakers and family members of those with a disability, and professionals in support fields participated in the study through local and regional interviews, surveys, and meetings.

The information in the report is organized by social determinates of health, which look at how conditions like where people are born, grow, live, work, play, worship, and age affect someone’s health. These categories include health care access and quality, neighborhood and built environment, social and community context, economic stability, and education access and quality.



NEXT STEPS:

Informed by a deepened understanding of COVID-19 health-care barriers among Pennsylvanians with disabilities, the Arc’s Regional Community Work Groups and state-level COVID-19 Health Disparities Statewide Task Force will focus on recommendations for the Department of Health to address health disparities.

That report is due in mid-2023.

As part of the Pennsylvania Office of Health Equity’s 2022 focus on disability equity, this initiative is an opportunity for learning, connecting, and joint action to increase health equity for an important sector of our community.

To access a copy of the “COVID-19 Health Care Barriers among People with Disabilities” report or to learn more about the work of the COVID-19 Health Disparities Statewide Leadership Task Force, visit:

<https://thearcpa.org/healthcare-initiatives/>.

