

# Recommendations for Addressing COVID-19 Health Disparities Among the Disability Community

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

August 2023

### **PROJECT BACKGROUND:**

The COVID-19 pandemic has been difficult for everyone, but for some groups, including and especially the disability community, the 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 of PA'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.

The first report published from this project is titled, "[COVID-19 Health Care Barriers Among People with Disabilities](#)". It details the challenges that people with disabilities, their family members, and caregivers had receiving health care during the pandemic.

This report focuses on solutions and recommendations for the Pennsylvania Department of Health to address these barriers.

### **RECOMMENDATION SUMMARY FINDINGS:**

Since information was found during the barriers listening tours that showed inequitable access to health care and other social system supports, numerous questions were asked to participants about solutions that could help those health care barriers in the future. Hundreds of individuals from diverse racial, ethnic, and rural populations and representing people with lived experience of disability, caregivers, family members of those with a disability, and professionals in the support field participated in the study through local and regional interviews, surveys, and meetings.

We collected information by asking people questions online and in focus groups called listening tours. Everyone was asked the same two questions:

- *What are the most important recommendations for including people with disabilities in the fight against COVID-19 and other healthcare emergencies?*
- *What are other recommendations for including people with disabilities in the fight against COVID-19 and other healthcare emergencies?*

## Recommendations for Addressing COVID-19 Health Disparities Among the Disability Community

From these conversations, 10 Recommended Core Solutions were identified. These are solutions that are specific to the PA Department of Health.

- 1) Involve people with disabilities, their families, and caregivers in policy making and healthcare decisions.
- 2) Reactivate the Governor's Cabinet and Advisory Committee for People with Disabilities.
- 3) Keep helpful policy changes from the COVID-19 pandemic.
- 4) Expand community-based healthcare, including telehealth services and mobile clinics.
- 5) Include disability representatives in the Office of Health Equity Advisory Committee.
- 6) Provide disability-specific training for healthcare professionals.
- 7) Designate people with disabilities as a Medically Underserved Population.
- 8) Collect standardized data on the health needs of people with disabilities.
- 9) Provide information in multiple languages, easy-to-understand and easy to access formats.
- 10) Remove disability as a factor in healthcare decision making during emergencies.

There are 15 Additional Recommendations that will require action from other State Department(s) or cooperation between different departments.

- 1) Make technology more available and accessible.
- 2) Work together with different agencies to tackle health disparities.
- 3) Improve the accessibility of healthcare facilities and equipment for people with disabilities.
- 4) Expand transportation services.
- 5) Increase wages and incentives for qualified staff who provide direct support to people with disabilities.
- 6) Develop a statewide set of lessons and rules that will be used to teach about disabilities and cultural diversity.
- 7) Provide more funding for Direct Support Professionals and support staff.
- 8) Address recruitment and retention of various healthcare workers, such as nurses, social workers, and mental health workers.
- 9) Offer training on telehealth and technology for support staff, caregivers, and individuals.
- 10) Expand insurance coverage and access to healthcare.
- 11) Increase community-based resources for healthcare and wellness.
- 12) Ensure stable housing.
- 13) Ensure that staff working with people with disabilities are well trained.
- 14) Implement additional healthcare practices and policies.
- 15) Allocate more funding for emergencies and economic relief.

**To access a copy of the "Recommendations for Addressing COVID-19 Health Disparities Among the Disability Community" report or to learn more about the work of the COVID-19 Health Disparities Statewide Leadership Task Force, visit:**

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

