COVID 19 Impact on Individuals Served by ABCD Agencies

Good day, Chairperson Mosquera and members of the Assembly Women and Children Committee. My name is Cathy Chin and I am here on behalf of the Alliance for the Betterment of Citizens with Disabilities which represents providers of community services for individuals with complex developmental disabilities at every stage of life and every level of independence. Thank you for affording me this opportunity to apprise you of the impact COVID 19 has had on individuals served by ABCD member agencies

Residential

Day programs and services are closed. The enhanced rate for residential services pays for the additional staff needed to be in-home 24/7 with 8,000 individuals sheltering in place. As you know, individuals with complex developmental disabilities are particularly vulnerable to outbreaks of disease. According to NJ Department of Human Services COVID 19 Dashboard as of August 16, 2020, mortality rate due to COVID 19 in NJ Division of Developmental Disabilities licensed community residential settings (group homes, supervised apartments and community care residences) is .7%, compared to 2.8% in the developmental centers and 6.1% for individuals with developmental disabilities in locations such as nursing homes and specialized hospitals. According to DHS/DDD, reported incidences of abuse and neglect have decreased by 50%.

Family visitation became a very serious issue over the last number of weeks. We are grateful for the efforts of the Commissioners of Human Services and Health, DDD, advocates and legislators who worked to remove this painful barrier to people who love and care about each other. While we must remain ever vigilant regarding the health and safety of those living in group homes, we must also consider their well-being.

Between 30-57% of people with developmental disabilities are estimated to experience concurrent mental health challenges.\(^1\) In addition many of the individuals we serve have been exposed to trauma. Their mental health needs go unrecognized mainly because the disability overshadows the mental health issues which often lead to misdiagnosis and incorrect treatment. Many of our providers have staff trained in the use of Trauma-Informed Care (TIC) and employ mental health professionals.

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Recently, Support Coordinators have made me aware that in family homes they are seeing an increase in behavioral issues. We should anticipate that the mass trauma that is COVID 19 has and will lead to increased mental health/PTSD and behavioral issues for individuals with developmental disabilities.

And while we are on this topic; we need to improve our system of care for individuals with dual diagnosis so that professional services are sufficient and coordinated and include accurate diagnosis, prevention, community care, emergency care, acute care, post-acute stabilization/transition, and step down supports in the home.

With the continued support of DDD residential providers will remain vigilant in their efforts to maintain the health, safety and well-being of the people they serve.

Day Program

On July 20, 2020, day programs and services reopened to provide virtual services with a guaranteed payment of the State Medicaid Share - 50% of claims they would normally bill. Excluding for individuals who receive residential and day services from the same provider, on average, we are seeing about 14% of individuals participating in some amount of virtual programming.

Some individuals who would like virtual day services do not have access because they lack an available computer with broadband. Either it is not approved for in the individuals budget; the individual/family cannot afford this out of pocket expense (including for some, the paper and ink needed to print accompanying documents); parents are unable to work the technology; in group homes where residents attend different day programs, there may not enough shared technology and staff; and even if the family home has a digital device, it may be shared by parents working remotely.

Early Intervention

EI providers serve children ages 0-3 with a disability or developmental delay. Although the State-wide shutdown forced providers to transition from in-home to telehealth, the process included 2-weeks where no services were allowed to be provided, and another 2-weeks when families were given flexibility to consider their service options. Because pediatrician offices, clinics and many day cares were closed, referrals for newly eligible children were slowed to a halt. To date, the system is currently at 50% utilization. As a result, many children have lost access to in-home speech, behavior, occupational and physical therapies. For some children, services have either ended, diminished, or not commenced, cutting them off during one of the most critical periods in their development. We have met with the new Deputy Commissioner Adinaro who has expressed great concern about these children – we can’t just get these infants and toddlers services later. Kids development doesn’t stop because there is a pandemic.