



June 17, 2020

Joe Nahra  
Disability and Rehabilitation Research  
Coalition  
1501 M Street, NW, Suite 700  
Washington, DC 20005

Dear Mr. Nahra:

Thank you for your email and letter to Secretary of Health and Human Services (HHS) Alex Azar regarding the Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic and reporting data on disability status, and for sharing Senator Cassidy's letter. I am responding on behalf of the Secretary.

With more than 5,000 personnel supporting the pandemic response, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) is at the forefront of the federal government's efforts to control the spread of COVID-19. Our decades fighting pandemics gives us the experience needed to mitigate the impact of this virus to the American public.

For surveillance of COVID-19, and the virus that causes it, SARS-COV-2, CDC is using multiple surveillance systems in collaboration with state, local, territorial, and academic partners to monitor COVID-19 disease in the United States. COVID-19 surveillance draws from a combination of data sources from existing influenza and viral respiratory disease surveillance, syndromic surveillance, case reporting, commercial lab reporting, the healthcare safety system, ongoing research platforms, and other new systems designed to answer specific questions. These systems combined, create an updated, accurate picture of SARS-COV-2 spread and its effects in the United States and provide data used to inform the U.S. national public health response to COVID-19.

Data collection is an important part of making sure that people with disabilities and other health conditions are supported during this pandemic. CDC's COVID-19 public health surveillance and data collection strategy adapts and optimizes CDC's existing disease surveillance infrastructure to respond to this new threat. New investments in Public Health Data Modernization and CDC's efforts to strengthen state and local surveillance capability are critical components of CDC's strategy. Disability is now included in the updated Human Infection with 2019 Novel Coronavirus Case Report Form ([www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/downloads/pui-form.pdf](http://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/downloads/pui-form.pdf)), and efforts are currently underway to begin analyzing these data.

Through an active IT and Data Governance structure, CDC implemented a new approach for data surveillance last year that guides our strategy and includes leaders and technical experts from across the agency. Our goal is to enhance strategic and efficient IT and data investments. With the investment in public health data modernization provided through the Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security Act, signed by President Trump on March 27, 2020, CDC is better positioned to modernize public health surveillance and data collection through accelerated integration of multiple

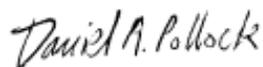
health systems by taking advantage of common platforms and real-time analytic capabilities. The additional funds are helping us respond to the pandemic and inform our work in meaningful ways.

CDC is modifying existing surveillance systems to track COVID-19. The weekly surveillance report on CDC's website, COVIDView ([www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/covid-data/covidview/index.html](http://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/covid-data/covidview/index.html)), summarizes and interprets key indicators, including information related to COVID-19 outpatient visits, emergency department visits, hospitalizations, and deaths, as well as laboratory data. Reported data on hospitalization rates and demographics (race, ethnicity, age, sex), part of the COVID-NET surveillance system, also includes information on selected underlying chronic medical conditions. People seem to be at higher risk of severe illness from COVID-19 if they have serious underlying chronic medical conditions like chronic lung disease, a serious heart condition, or a weakened immune system. Most people with disabilities are not inherently at higher risk for becoming infected with or having severe illness from COVID-19. However, some people with disabilities might be at a higher risk of infection or severe illness because of their underlying medical conditions. Adults with disabilities are three times more likely than adults without disabilities to have heart disease, stroke, diabetes, or cancer than adults without disabilities. Disability alone may not be related to higher risk for getting COVID-19 or having severe illness.

As you noted, people with disabilities who live in group homes or long-term care facilities are at increased risk for infection. CDC is working with the Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services (CMS) to leverage existing data systems and reporting requirements to improve COVID-19 surveillance and response across the healthcare spectrum. As announced on April 19, 2020, with CMS' release of new regulatory requirements for nursing homes ([www.cms.gov/files/document/qso-20-26-nh.pdf](http://www.cms.gov/files/document/qso-20-26-nh.pdf)), CDC released a new reporting tool that allows nursing homes to provide data to CDC's National Healthcare Safety Network ([www.cdc.gov/nhsn/acute-carehospital/covid19/index.html](http://www.cdc.gov/nhsn/acute-carehospital/covid19/index.html)) assist in COVID-19 surveillance and response. This coordinated effort with CMS will allow CDC to provide even more detailed information to health departments about the burden of COVID-19 in long term care facilities in order to develop additional recommendations to keep residents safe. People with disabilities, particularly those who live in group homes or long-term care facilities, are at an increased risk for infection and these types of living conditions have shown to lead to rapid spread of the virus. CDC has also issued, *Considerations When Preparing for COVID-19 in Assisted Living Facilities* ([www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/hcp/assisted-living.html](http://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/hcp/assisted-living.html)) and *Key Strategies to Prepare for COVID-19 in Long-Term Care Facilities* ([www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/hcp/long-term-care-strategies.html](http://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/hcp/long-term-care-strategies.html)).

Thank you, again, for the work you do to protect Americans with disabilities and for your interest in this ongoing response. We appreciate your support as we all work together to fight COVID-19. CDC remains committed to protecting the American public in the face of this pandemic. Please share a copy of this response with the co-signers of your letter.

Sincerely,



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