



December 3, 2020

Governor Tom Wolf
Pennsylvania Office of the Governor
508 Main Capitol Building
Harrisburg, PA 17120

Re: Phase 1A COVID-19 Vaccine Distribution for Human Services Professionals and Those They Serve

Dear Governor Wolf:

Thank you for your leadership during the COVID-19 public health emergency. We write to you today in support of the Center for Disease Control and Prevention's (CDC's) Advisory Committee on Immunization Practices' (ACIP's) December 1 decision to prioritize health care workers and individuals living in long-term care (LTC) facilities for Phase 1A vaccine access. We urge you to explicitly classify those who work in facilities or other settings that directly work with individuals with disabilities, behavioral health issues, substance use disorders, and other challenges as a top priority for access to vaccination.

With well over 350 members, the majority of who serve over 1 million Pennsylvanians annually, Rehabilitation and Community Providers Association (RCPA) is among the largest and most diverse state health and human services trade associations in the nation. RCPA advocates for those in need, works to advance effective state and federal public policies, serves as a forum for the exchange of information and experience, and provides professional support to members. RCPA provider members offer mental health, drug and alcohol, intellectual and developmental disabilities, children's, brain injury, medical rehabilitation, and physical disabilities and aging services, through all settings and levels of care.

RCPA firmly believes that human services workers, who are serving as health care staff on the frontlines and keeping people with disabilities and behavioral health disorders safe during the pandemic, must be prioritized in states' vaccine distribution plans. Human services workers are critical to supporting these vulnerable individuals; they assist them in everything from activities of daily living to taking precautions to avoid exposure to the coronavirus. Because these workers often work in residential and inpatient programs, people's homes, intermediate care facilities (ICFs), group homes, and other situations where social distancing is not possible, prioritizing human services workers to receive the vaccine will be a critical step in keeping the people they support safe and healthy.

For months, RCPA has also advocated that people with disabilities and behavioral health disorders be explicitly included in the top priority tier to receive the vaccine, because mounting research shows particularly significant risks facing this group. For example, [data](#) recently collected on people with intellectual and developmental disabilities (I/DD) from eight states, in partnership with RCPA's state association members, has found that people with I/DD are twice as likely as members of the general population to die from COVID-19, despite being no likelier to contract the virus. Meanwhile, an [analysis](#) of insurance claims data conducted by Fair Health found that people with "developmental disorders" were among the likeliest to die from COVID-19, while another [study](#) in the United Kingdom found that people with Down syndrome were 10 times likelier to die from COVID-19 compared to members of the general population.

Given the expedited timeline on which forthcoming COVID-19 vaccines will be approved by the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) and allocated according to states' distribution frameworks, it is absolutely imperative for states to designate human services workers as top-tier priority to receive the vaccine. These human services workers are at an equivalent risk to older adults who live in congregate settings. Other states have taken steps to prioritize these professionals and those they serve, and Pennsylvania must do the same.

State governments should be applauded for the important work they have done in response to the record speed at which vaccine developers have created a highly effective antidote to this deadly virus. RCPA stands as a ready and eager partner to these lawmakers as we all work to ensure the fastest possible recovery from a global pandemic that has wreaked havoc on the lives of far too many Americans.

We appreciate the urgency of the task facing all governors, particularly as the number of COVID-19 cases surges across the country. We welcome the opportunity to be a resource for you and all state governments in this work as we are united by a common goal: Ensuring that the needs of people with disabilities and behavioral health disorders and those who serve them are addressed.

Please [contact me](#) with questions or to discuss this issue further.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Richard S. Edley', written in a cursive style.

Richard S. Edley, PhD
President/CEO

Cc: Mike Brunelle, Chief of Staff, Governor's Office
Teresa Miller, Secretary, Department of Human Services
Dr. Rachel Levine, Secretary, Department of Health
Jennifer Smith, Secretary, Department of Drug and Alcohol Programs