



April 6, 2020

Office for People With Developmental Disabilities
Attn: Roger Bearden, Acting Executive Deputy Commissioner
roger.a.bearden@opwdd.ny.gov

Re: NY START

Dear Mr. Bearden:

Due to the COVID-19 public health crisis, individuals with Intellectual and/or Development Disabilities (I/DD) are experiencing a greater need for behavioral health supports and crisis intervention services. The virus-related fear and anxiety, program/school closures, loss of daily structure and the limits placed on typical activities have created significant stressors for individuals and families. Over the past several weeks, the seven Care Coordination Organization/Health Homes (CCO/HHs) conducted numerous forums with individuals and families throughout the state to provide guidance and support during this pandemic. Concerns around access to behavioral health services, particularly those tailored to the I/DD population, is one of the more critical concerns expressed by individuals, families, and advocates.

The Office for People With Developmental Disabilities (OPWDD) has developed an infrastructure to support people with I/DD who have behavioral health challenges through the NY START service. NY START has established clinical expertise and response structures to support individuals with I/DD and their system of support during ongoing behavioral health challenges and crisis events. Additionally, NY START has experience in providing remote clinical support and consultation using technology platforms for communication. The NY START teams have had a positive impact on the system of supports and have been well received by families who struggle to support their family members. The CCO/HHs see a tremendous benefit in leveraging this existing infrastructure to develop approaches that will enhance behavioral health services during this unprecedented public health crisis.

In light of the current system challenges, the CCO/HHs propose that the Office for People With Developmental Disabilities (OPWDD) consider enhancing, adjusting and expanding the NY START program to better serve individuals with I/DD during this period of crisis. The following recommendations were identified by the CCO/HHs for immediate consideration:



- Initiate an immediate collaboration between the OPWDD, CCO/HHs, NY START teams and the University of New Hampshire (UNH) UCEDD Center for START Services (CSS) to identify and implement approaches (i.e. utilization of telehealth) to best support individuals with presenting behavioral health needs in the unique environment resulting from the pandemic;
- Establish, a Behavioral Health “Helpline” utilizing existing NY START resources and in collaboration with each OPWDD Regional Office, to facilitate connections to appropriate service options, including NY START, to ensure efficiency and timely accessibility;
- Expand NY START coverage to include Region 2, beginning with a limited consultative support system, making it an available statewide service; and
- Accelerate and streamline the eligibility and enrollment process for NY START so that individuals requiring this service can access behavioral health supports as quickly as possible.

As Governor Cuomo has recognized through his establishment of an Office of Mental Health sponsored statewide emotional support helpline, to support NYS citizens with emotional/behavioral health needs, the importance of attention to behavioral health is critical during this time. Those with I/DD have unique needs and an understanding of those needs, and how to best support the system to address those needs, is critical to provide effective supports. For many children and adults with I/DD and their families in the community, this is a health and safety need that if not effectively addressed will result in utilization of overtaxed and limited emergency resources such as EMTs, law enforcement and hospital emergency rooms for both pediatric and adult psychiatric emergencies.

Due to the time sensitive nature of this concern, we would like to engage in a more detailed discussion with OPWDD Leadership as soon as possible. The CCO/HH leadership looks forward to working collaboratively with OPWDD to ensure individuals with I/DD receive necessary behavioral health supports during this crisis period.

Sincerely,

Lewis Grossman, CEO, Advanced Care Alliance NY

Jim Moran, CEO, Care Design NY

Nick Cappoletti, CEO, LIFEPlan CCO NY

Bridget Bartolone, President & CEO, Person Centered Services

Lindsay Gozzi-Theobald, Interim CEO, Prime Care Coordination

Meghann Andrews-Whitaker, Executive Director, Southern Tier Connect

Yoel Bernath, CEO, Tri-County Care