



Edward J. Kaul, ARCA President and CEO

September 17, 2020

Address to the Disability Concerns Subcommittee: Challenges in Providing Services for People with Disabilities during the COVID-19 Pandemic

People receiving ARCA services have lived lives of maximum independence in our community for decades. They have successful careers, meaningful relationships and causative lives. Since March 11, COVID-19 has changed how we provide services. In the midst of an international pandemic, providers like ARCA have been extremely successful in safeguarding the health, safety and happiness of children and adults with IDD, families, staff and our community at large

- Rita used to work in the food court at the mall bringing meals to customers. She missed the social and professional aspects of her job when COVID kept her home. Staff helped her become a successful gardener and she's proud of her produce.
- Bob and Phil are good friends and not seeing one another because of stay at home orders was hard. Staff implemented ZOOM and now they enjoy starting their day together over morning coffee and the newspaper.
- Cynthia had a very successful interview – over the phone – and will soon begin a new job at Albertson's. Staff have worked closely with her to ensure she is fully prepared in mask wearing, hand sanitizing and social distancing guidelines.

These are a few examples of the successes people with IDD have realized during the pandemic because of the hard work of providers in New Mexico. There have been MANY challenges, but we NEVER QUIT. We HAD to be physically present every minute of every day – AND WE WERE - with very positive outcomes.

- As essential employees, we were one of the few businesses open early in the pandemic. Staff had to continue working every day, while most of New Mexico sheltered in place.
- Within hours, we implemented the Governor's Directives and public health orders. We adjusted to ongoing changes in directives such as
  - Stay at home orders including no visitation
  - Closing community based day activities and comforting individuals adjusting to significant time at home
- Grocery shelves were picked clean. We worked with the community to ensure individuals had adequate food and paper goods.
- We supported individuals who chose to continue working and those who felt work was too risky.
- We addressed staff's personal challenges including school and childcare closures, preexisting conditions, self-quarantine, elderly family members – and fear.

- Once testing was available, positive results were reported. We knew very little about this disease or effective treatment. We immediately developed and implemented protocols for facility access questionnaires, sanitizing common areas, quarantine mandates, temperature checks, testing, contact tracing, isolation, medical care, PPE, counselling and support, state reporting, outside sanitation contracts and other State directives as ordered.
- We implemented technologies and worked with individuals to provide access to and comfort with telemedicine
- We created outdoor spaces for safe visits
- We worked with people served to understand and make choices about social distancing, not to hug or shake hands and wearing masks by using storyboards, encouragement and repetition. We did all this, with the unwavering focus of creating meaningful opportunities for people we serve without endangering their health and safety. There were and continue to be enormous challenges, including:
  - Keeping people healthy who are often medically more vulnerable to COVID-19 because of multiple comorbidities as evidenced by high mortality rates nationally
  - Historic staff shortages.
    - As long as school and childcare closures remain in place, staff will need to prioritize family responsibilities and further shortages will result.
    - People are afraid to work in a residential setting for their own and their family's health and wellness
    - The health status of every employee must be evaluated daily
- ARCA, DDS and the State of New Mexico must reward people who do the work, accepting greater challenges and potential risk for themselves and their family
- DDS's 2019 Rate Study, conducted by Professional Consulting Group, showed a 19% overall deficit in reimbursement rates or \$15.2 million in State General Funds
- We thank the legislature for appropriating \$5.9 million in State General Funds during the 2020 general session which DDS allocated toward residential Waiver services with the highest need.
  - Highest need **DIRECTLY EQUATES TO DIRECT SUPPORT PROFESSIONAL SALARIES**

In summary, the COVID-19 pandemic has significantly impacted how New Mexico providers deliver lifelong supports for infants through seniors with IDD. We have benefited from the strong leadership of the governor and DDS. Because we quickly adapted and strictly comply with health directives, many lives have been saved. It will take decades for researchers to quantify the impact of this pandemic on people we serve. It is our job to assess, reimagine and, where possible, repair the impact of the loss of lives, health, jobs, relationships, learning, skills development and routines. Compassionate, well-trained staff is crucial to current and future success. I thank you for your continued support and ask you to ensure sustainable funding for these essential services. Together, we will find the solutions to these challenges.