

# covid-19 and people with disabilities

By Denise Bienko, Senior Vice President of People Inc.

As we all struggle with lifestyle changes brought on by COVID-19, we cannot forget the unique challenge this pandemic brings to people with intellectual and developmental disabilities and those who care for them. While spending time at home, rather than in the programs to which they are accustomed, family members are being called upon to provide 24/7 care without much relief.

Agencies that provide programs and services for people with developmental disabilities have temporarily closed their day programs. As a result, the routines and access to friends that are a source of comfort and stability to people participating in these programs are replaced with confusion and uncertainty. To bridge that gap, the staff at People Inc. reach out to participants and families offering phone counseling, online training, in-home behavioral services, help with grocery shopping, and even accompanying people on outdoor walks.

People Inc. supports nearly 1,000 people living in group homes through essential Direct Support Professionals (DSPs) who go above and beyond. DSPs are the frontline staff we call heroes because of their genuine concern, dedication, flexibility, and willingness to make personal sacrifices to ensure the safety of people living in group homes.

Six years ago, People Inc. adopted an Emergency Preparedness Protocol. The system helps staff plan proactively, make assessments in real-time, and act quickly. It is because of this system the agency created PeopleCart, in which a dedicated staff team shops and safely delivers groceries to group homes, thus limiting the need for staff to be out in the community. In addition, the agency has a Telemedicine Program for group homes.

People with intellectual and developmental disabilities may find it extremely difficult to adjust to a new way of life where routines are disrupted, outings canceled, and visiting friends is out of the question. Using a trauma-informed care approach, People Inc. works with each person to offer individualized help. Frontline staff and clinicians explain what is happening in ways that are easily understood, by using teleconferencing, and by employing creative ways to reduce anxiety. Recently, OTG Management in Clarence generously donated more than 100 tablets for use in the agency's group homes. As a result, group home residents can now enjoy virtual visits through FaceTime, Zoom, and Facebook Messenger.

To enhance communication efforts during COVID-19, special phone lines and email for people supported, families, and staff were created, along with frequent updates on the agency website and Employee Intranet. The Emergency Management Team has twice daily briefings and ongoing contact with those supported by the agency and their families.



Additionally, the People Inc. Advocacy Department is conducting meetings twice daily across the state via Zoom to address various concerns, and an Advocacy Phone Line is available for non-emergency issues.

People Inc. is about people, and we are dedicated to communicating and creating the best possible support available at this time. Follow ongoing updates at [www.people-inc.org](http://www.people-inc.org).

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With quick hiring procedures available, **People Inc. is here to help you now!**

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\*Additional pay available for overnights and weekends.

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