



Statement by Disability Rights Connecticut

April 28, 2020

Disability Rights Connecticut (DRCT) demands that the Connecticut Commissioner of Public Health protect the rights of people with disabilities in hospitals.

People with disabilities in Connecticut want the Commissioner of the Department of Public Health to issue a directive to hospitals in our state to respect our health, safety and rights. Representatives and community groups have directly requested the Commissioner take action. As of today, we have been met with silence and half-measures. People with disabilities are at heightened risk of contracting COVID-19 and receiving less care than others. Only the Department of Public Health (DPH) can set licensing requirements to protect us. DPH must do just that.

Today, state government took an inadequate half-step in the right direction. The Department of Developmental Services (**not** the Commissioner of Public Health) issued a letter asking Connecticut hospitals to allow people with intellectual disabilities to bring one support person with them to the hospital if they need help with matters related to their disability. The letter states that it was developed with the Connecticut Hospital Association (CHA) and the DPH. The letter, addressed to families and guardians (not hospitals), lets us know that CHA “will *strongly recommend* and *work with* hospitals to allow one support person to accompany an individual served by DDS” to a hospital. It does not require hospitals to do anything.

The letter does nothing to address people in Connecticut *not* served by DDS who have cognitive, behavioral or communication disabilities while having equally critical needs for a support person to accompany them to the hospital. The “guidance” guarantees no real protection because neither DDS nor CHA have authority over hospitals in Connecticut. DPH is the agency with licensing and enforcement authority. But, again, DPH and its Commissioner, Renee Coleman-Mitchell, remain silent.

This is not the first instance in which DPH has been a no-show. Disability advocates in Connecticut have sent letters, emails and made calls to the Governor and Commissioner Coleman-Mitchell on many occasions for over six weeks. Two weeks ago, DRCT wrote to Coleman-Mitchell asking her to direct hospitals to allow designated visitors to accompany patients with disabilities who need assistance due to the specifics of their disability (including patients with altered mental status, intellectual or cognitive disability, communication barriers or behavioral concerns). DRCT provided examples from other states (such as New York) where public health departments had issued guidance on hospital visitor policies. DPH failed to respond. DRCT reached out again, repeating our request and providing the Commissioner with real life examples of persons who could not communicate, went to two different hospitals in Connecticut, and were denied effective communication. DPH again failed to respond.

DRCT has raised many concerns about treatment of people with disabilities during the COVID-19 crisis. Thus far, the Governor and his Department of Public Health have not responded directly or adequately to protect people with disabilities and their families from isolation, exposure and inadequate care caused by their non-COVID related disabilities. We ask the simple question, why not?