

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE
December 2, 2020

Contact: Morna Murray
860-538-1007

Federal Disabilities Partners Demand Access to Health Care for People with Disabilities

Providence, Rhode Island -- Today, Disability Rights Rhode Island (DRRI), the independent, federally mandated Protection and Advocacy (P&A) System for the state of Rhode Island, asked Governor Gina Raimondo to issue an Executive Order directing enforcement of the Rhode Island Department of Health policy permitting people with disabilities to have the accompaniment of essential support persons while in the hospital. The request comes after months of unsuccessful negotiations with state personnel to enforce the policy, and amidst numerous complaints from individuals and families who have been denied appropriate access to care. DRRI is joined in this request by the Paul V. Sherlock Center on Disabilities at Rhode Island College, Rhode Island's University Center for Excellence on Developmental Disabilities (UCEDD), and the Rhode Island Developmental Disabilities Council.

"Many individuals with disabilities require essential support persons to assist in facilitating access, including communication with healthcare providers and providing informed consent for medical decisions," said Morna Murray, Executive Director of DRRI. "We are deeply concerned people are being denied the essential support they need, effectively denying them access to critical health care. This can literally be the difference between life and death."

"Our families need this policy to be enforced immediately and consistently," said Amy Grattan, Executive Director of the Paul V. Sherlock Center on Disabilities. "We have received dozens of calls from families who report their loved ones have been traumatized because the policy has not been enforced, and as a result are now afraid to seek necessary care for fear of further distress and harm."

"It is imperative that all people have the ability to access medical treatment that is appropriate, proper, and with the person's informed consent," said Kevin Nerney, Executive Director for the Rhode Island Developmental Disabilities Council. "Denying an individual the ability to understand or communicate their needs is clear discrimination and a denial of civil rights."

The three federal partners have asked for a meeting with Governor Raimondo to resolve this issue as quickly as possible. In addition to ensuring that people with disabilities have access to health care, they seek to address the chilling effect the non-enforcement of the Department of Health policy is having upon families who are reluctant to subject their family members to additional trauma while hospitalized.

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