

UNITED SPINAL^{NOW}

Homecare and Coronavirus

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A couple of weeks before you read this, the World Health Organization and even Pres. Trump agreed that the coronavirus became a pandemic. This is a worldwide problem with an unknown end-date, an unpredictable level of contagion and an unknown fatality rate.

One thing that is known, however, and repeated often by health experts, is that the population most likely to be affected negatively by the virus are people with underlying health conditions and senior citizens. These are also the populations that rely most heavily on homecare workers.

Homecare workers, upon whom so many people with disabilities are dependent, if they are to live in community settings, have traditionally been overworked and underpaid. Homecare workers needed an executive order late in Pres. Obama's administration, just to be eligible to receive minimum wage and overtime. This is the plight of homecare workers who routinely do not receive paid vacation, sick leave and health benefits.

These workers, largely immigrants, will be desperately necessary to people with disabilities, even when schools close due to the virus, and they must stay home to take care of their children. Is there a contingency plan for homecare recipients being put forth by government? Certainly not yet.

Do persons in need of homecare want homecare workers coming in and out of their homes in this time of coronavirus, after they've used public transportation? Is there guidance available on these issues for homecare workers? If a homecare worker has a cold, should they go to work? Will they be paid if they stay home?

There's lots of talk about how businesses are being affected by the virus. First, the discussion was about the travel and tourism industry. Now that some communities have experienced viral spread, government is considering lockdowns, school closings and banning mass assemblies. That will hurt local businesses and so government is considering support not only for travel and tourism, but also for small businesses.

As I write this, United Spinal Association is developing a plan to have most of its employees — including people with disabilities — work from home; however, we pledge to advocate for adequate in-home care to keep those most vulnerable out of nursing homes, which are more likely to subject people with disabilities to exposure. Commissioners of the New York State Health & Social Services departments must engage in contingency planning now for the potential absence of home health workers who fall ill or must self-isolate.

Of course, follow the Center for Disease Control (CDC) guidelines and stay current as they change. The guidelines can be found at www.coronavirus.gov. We will try to keep you informed, as well. Check with United Spinal's Resource Center, <https://askus-resource-center.unitedspinal.org/>.

While this situation is likely to change, the one thing that is a constant is the dependency of severely disabled people on homecare workers to lead healthy, active lives in the community and avoid institutionalization. The strain of coronavirus may not only overwhelm hospitals, as some experts already fear, but also burden the homecare industry.

Virus-free workers need to be protected, encouraged to stay on the job and compensated if they get sick. People with disabilities, and especially the board, staff and members of United Spinal Association, deeply value the work of this underappreciated, essential workforce.