**Addressing COVID-19 Vaccine Hesitancy and Information Needs in Delaware’s IDD Service System**

**Problem Statement**

As the COVID-19 pandemic has rippled across the communities all over this country, it has exposed deep, longstanding inequities in our public health infrastructure. Individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities sit at the nexus of many of these inequities, demonstrating the unique and challenging nature of the intersection of social, economic, and health factors in the midst of a public health disaster.

While the issue of vaccine hesitancy and acceptance is being actively surveyed nationally, including an emphasis on communities of color, no organization or institution to our knowledge is looking at the intersection of vaccine hesitancy and need as manifested so clearly in the disabilities community. Bringing a disability justice lens to this issue provides a unique opportunity to move beyond descriptive work and pivot to a phase that provides an opportunity for simultaneous data gathering with real-time engagement.

**Approach**

To meet this immediate need, we are proposing a unique partnership between the University of Delaware’s Partnership for Healthy Communities, Public Agenda, and the State of Delaware’s Division of Developmental Disabilities Services (DDDS). The partnership would encompass three phases of activity that will include engaging direct service professionals, individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities, and/or their families or guardians using a texting-based platform that enables users to learn and share information, weigh in on decision making, and solicit opinions.

Texting-enabled engagement is an accessible, convenient, and easy-to-use way to engage large numbers of people in a relatively short amount of time. Texting is the most ubiquitous technology we have in the U.S., and it is the form of online communication that the widest array of people are comfortable using.

We’ve used an approach we call [**Text, Talk, Engage**](https://www.publicagenda.org/services/text-talk-engage/) to facilitate small-group discussions, garner community input and build a network of engaged citizens. Participants can either gather in small  groups (3-4 people) with one cell phone per group or join the activity individually. They text a keyword to the number 89800 and receive a series of text messages that guide them through a focused discussion. Data is gathered and analyzed by the texting platform.

The guided conversation unfolds as participants respond to text prompts and provides prompts including pertinent information on COVID-19, discussion questions, links to resources, and policy questions. Throughout the process, participants receive links that allow them to learn more about information presented or see how others participating in the process have responded to the discussion and policy questions.

In the context of the work in Delaware, this approach would be effective because disability service providers could use it as a professional development activity with other service providers. They could also use it as part of their interactions with the people they are serving and their families - thus accounting for the messenger and process challenges, and not just the message challenge, in vaccine hesitancy.

Text, Talk, Engage is based on Text, Talk, Act, which was developed in partnership with the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration and focuses participants on mental health. Since 2013, Text Talk Act has engaged over 50,000 people in productive dialogue and action on mental health issues. It is a proven, cost-effective and efficient means to engage diverse members of a community, which can be applied as a stand-alone strategy or embedded in a larger engagement campaign. The approach can be adapted for many issues and situations. For example, Text, Talk, Engage to Fight COVID-19 includes resources for contact tracing and local volunteering opportunities, and links to an online platform called Pol.is that allows people to find common ground on tough policy questions related to the pandemic.

Execution of Text, Talk, Engage includes:

**Design and test script**  - Design, program and host an initial text messaging activity that  engages providers and service recipients. Public Agenda will conduct any needed background research to include appropriate and accurate information, videos, and links to existing resources. Public Agenda will also work with the DDDS to define  goals and data gathering efforts that will shape the text messaging activity. The current budget estimate assumes that we are using an existing contact database for engagement.

**Outreach assistance** - Work with DDDS to develop an outreach list and strategy. Create organizing and communications guides to ensure consistency in  messaging and delivery. Develop overall outreach strategy and script. Train vendors and providers to introduce TTE to providers, patients, caretakers, and family members.

**Research assistance** - Synthesize, analyze and theme data from Text, Talk, Engage activity. Collect and share data with stakeholders for use in decision making. Develop and deliver a participant survey to help measure indicators of success. Utilize follow-up text messages to measure  success over time.

**Partners**

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Delaware DDDS [...]

Public Agenda’s skills and experience in public opinion research and engagement bring a unique perspective and skills to some of these obstacles we are facing as a nation. We are requesting funding for an immediate need to assist the Delaware Division of Developmental Disabilities Services (DDDS) to engage service providers and recipients in texting-enabled engagement activities to address vaccine hesitancy. We would also like to build in measurement and evaluative functions to this work, to help us all prepare for future public health emergencies and develop more effective care for vulnerable populations.

University of Delaware, Partnership for Healthy Communities [...]

Delaware Developmental Disabilities Council

**Report of Findings and Efforts**

In partnership with the Division of Developmental Disabilities Services and the UD Partnership for Healthy Communities, Public Agenda will present its findings to DDDS leadership, outline recommendations for both short and long term engagement  with the Divisions’ service recipients and providers, and publish a research memo capturing methods, findings, and opportunities for further development.

**Next Steps and Scalability**

Following a pilot project with DDDS, this work could then be scaled and expanded to other populations within Delaware, general populations in other states, or specific vulnerable and hesitant populations across the country. Each phase would provide an opportunity to learn more about how populations are thinking about the vaccine, their level of knowledge regarding the vaccine, and their interest in getting vaccinated and the obstacles, as well as help inform future efforts to vaccinate populations should we be faced with a pandemic situation again.

**Budget**

Public Agenda is requesting $30,000 for this first phase of the project will implement TTE with DSP and recipients in the state of Delaware and to analyze data from the TTE interaction to make recommendations for addressing vaccine hesitancy in other locations and with other hesitant and vulnerable populations.