



March 19, 2020

Dear Chairwoman DeLauro, Ranking Member Cole, Chairman Blunt, and Ranking Member Murray,

On behalf of the National Disability Rights Network (NDRN) and the nationwide network of Protection and Advocacy (P&A) agencies we represent I write today with an urgent request for additional funding for the advocacy work P&A agencies have been taking regarding the COVID-19 pandemic, and the critical work that will need to occur over the coming months. P&A agencies around the country have been on the frontlines of this pandemic as they work with persons with disabilities in facilities (like nursing homes in Washington state) and in the community to protect them from abuse and neglect and ensure access to needed services and supports (like COVID-19 testing).

NDRN is the non-profit membership association of Protection and Advocacy (P&A) agencies that are located in all 50 States, the District of Columbia, Puerto Rico, and the United States Territories. In addition, there is a P&A affiliated with the Native American Consortium which includes the Hopi, Navajo and San Juan Southern Paiute Nations in the Four Corners region of the Southwest. P&A agencies are authorized under various federal statutes to provide legal representation and related advocacy services, and to investigate abuse and neglect of individuals with disabilities in a variety of settings. The P&A System comprises the nation's largest provider of legally-based advocacy services for persons with disabilities.

Following Hurricane Katrina, NDRN and the P&A Network entered into Memorandums of Understanding (MOUs) with both the Federal Emergency Management Administration (FEMA) and the Red Cross to ensure that the needs of people with disabilities were being considered in the actions these organizations took in response to natural disasters and other emergency situations. These MOUs have given the P&A Network direct access to work with FEMA and the Red Cross on the frontlines to address issues that arise for people with disabilities in emergencies. These experiences have given the P&As insight and knowledge into addressing the critical needs of people with disabilities during emergencies that is unparalleled in the nation.

Congress gave P&A agencies strong authority to protect people with disabilities no matter where they may live, work, or receive services, and even in these uncertain times P&As are working to fulfill this critical mandate and support the disability community. But, in this new environment, additional costs and expenses have arisen that require extra funding resources this year. Here are some examples of these additional expenses:

Many P&As have moved to a virtual office. As a result, they have had to invest in more laptops and cell phones to cover staff who don't have those resources at home or must share with children who are also learning from home. P&As may also have to pay to increase internet speeds at home for staff when their spouse and children are home using the internet as well.

While the P&As are fully operational the work is shifting to COVID-19 issues which were not part of the original priorities of the P&As work for the year. This is creating a need for extra training. P&As are also adding more staff to the front lines of intake to cover the increase in phone calls. Social media is also playing a larger role in this emergency, and requiring staff with those skills. While some P&As may be working from home for the foreseeable future, they will still need to pay rent on their offices while supporting the needs of the staff at home. Thus, operational costs will increase.

COVID-19 issues P&As are seeing include: special education, employment, transportation, waiver issues, direct support care workforce issues, concerns about the spread of the virus in facilities (including prisons and juvenile detention), and more. Using P&A access authority will require special training and protective gear for staff which is another increased cost and expense to get into facilities. It is imperative that P&As continue this vital work to uncover abuse and neglect in these facilities, but the training and protective gear are imperative before we send them in for abuse and neglect investigations and monitoring. Finally, we know there will be a large number of issues to address when the pandemic passes. Reintegration of people with disabilities back into the community, school, and the workforce will all come to the forefront and require immediate attention.

This is an evolving situation. It is difficult to predict what costs will arise as the state of things change for people with disabilities. So many policies are not taking people with disabilities into consideration. Rights violations are and will happen under the emergency declarations. Only the P&A will be there to advise and protect people with disabilities. It is imperative that Congress understand this need and support the work of the P&As with the inclusion of \$30 million for Protection and Advocacy agencies in your next COVID-19 response package.

Thank you for your consideration of this request. We welcome any questions you may have. Please feel free to contact Eric Buehlmann, Deputy Executive Director for Public Policy at eric.buehlmann@ndrn.org or 202-870-2779.

Sincerely,



Curtis L. Decker
Executive Director