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DEPwD issues comprehensive disability inclusive guidelines to States/UTs for protection and safety of persons with Disabilities (Divyangjan) in light of COVID-19

The Department of Empowerment of Persons with Disabilities (DEPwD) under Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment has issued “Comprehensive Disability Inclusive Guidelines” to States and Union territories for protection and safety of Persons with Disabilities (Divyangjan) in light of Pandemic Covid-19 (Corona Virus). In view of the pandemic situation due to the outbreak and rapid spread of COVID19 across the world, the public health has been endangered both nationally and internationally, necessitating urgent measures on the part of both the Central and State Governments, aimed at containing the spread of the disease. The Government of India has declared the situation arising out of COVID 19 as a National Disaster and necessary guidelines have been issued under the National Disaster Management Act, 2005.

The Ministry of Health and Family Welfare, Government of India being the nodal Central Ministry on health issues has issued guidelines for general public as well as health workers to contain the spread of the disease. These are available on their website (www.mohfw.gov.in) which *inter-alia* contains:-

- Awareness material (both in Hindi and English) for citizens and frontline workers;
- Advisory on mass gatherings and social distancing;
- Guidelines and procedure to be followed by hospitals including telemedicine practices for patient care;
- Common Helpline Numbers: 1075, 011-23978046, 9013151515
- Frequently Asked Questions

While COVID 19 is impacting the entire population, persons with disabilities are more vulnerable to the disease due to their physical, sensory and cognitive limitations. As such, there is a need to understand their disability specific requirements, daily living activities and take appropriate and timely measures to ensure their protection and safety during situations of risk.

Section 8 of the Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act, 2016 guarantees equal protection and safety for persons with disabilities in these situations. It also mandates Disaster Management Authorities at District/State/National levels to take measures to include persons with disabilities in disaster management activities and to keep them duly informed about these. These authorities are mandatorily required to involve the concerned State Commissioner for Persons with Disabilities during disaster management. In September 2019, National Disaster Management Authority, Union Ministry of Home Affairs issued National Disaster Management Guidelines on Disability Inclusive Disaster Risk Reduction (DiDRR) in line with the above provisions. Further, recently on 24th March 2020, Ministry of Home Affairs has issued guidelines for various authorities so as to prevent spread of COVID 19 for a period of 21 days starting from 25.3.2020.

While the guidelines issued by the Ministry of Health and Family Welfare and Ministry of Home Affairs are applicable to all citizens, the following measures are suggested which need to be acted upon by various State/District authorities to give focused attention to protection and safety of persons with disabilities during COVID 19.

General action points

- All information about COVID 19, services offered and precautions to be taken should be available in simple and local language in accessible formats; i.e. in Braille and audible tapes for persons with visual impairment, video-graphic material with sub-titles and sign language interpretation for persons with hearing impairment and through accessible web sites.
- Sign language interpreters who work in emergency and health settings should be given the same health and safety protection as other health care workers dealing with COVID19.
- All persons responsible for handling emergency response services should be trained on the rights of persons with disabilities, and on risks associated with additional problems for persons having specific impairments.
- Relevant information on support to persons with disabilities should be a part of all awareness campaigns
- During quarantine, essential support services, personal assistance, and physical and communication accessibility should be ensured e.g. blind persons, persons with intellectual/ mental disability (psycho-social) are dependent on care giver support. Similarly persons with disabilities may seek assistance for rectification of fault in their wheelchair and other assistive devices.
 - Caregivers of persons with disabilities should be allowed to reach Persons with disabilities by exempting them from restrictions during lockdown or providing passes in a simplified manner on priority.
 - To ensure continuation of support services for persons with disabilities with minimum human contact, due publicity needs to be given to ensuring personal protective equipments for caregivers.
 - The Resident Welfare Associations should be sensitized about the need of persons with disabilities so as to allow entry of maid, caregiver and other support providers to their residence after following due sanitizing procedure.
 - Persons with disabilities should be given access to essential food, water, medicine, and, to the extent possible, such items should be delivered at their residence or place where they have been quarantined.
 - The States/UTs may consider reserving specific opening hours in retail provision stores including super markets for persons with disabilities and older persons for ensuring easy availability of their daily requirements.
 - Peer-support networks may be set up to facilitate support during quarantine for PwDs ;
 - Additional protective measures should be taken for persons with disabilities based on their impairment who need to be given travel pass during the emergency period and should also be sensitized for their personal safety and

- Persons with disabilities should be given priority in treatment, instead they should be given priority. Special care should be taken in respect of children and women with disabilities.
- Employees with blindness and other severe disabilities in both public and private sector should be exempted from essential services work during the period as they can be easily catch infection.
- On-line counselling mechanism should be developed to de-stress persons with disabilities as well as their families to cope with the quarantine period.
- 24X7 Helpline Number at State Level be set up exclusively for Divyangjan with facilities of sign language interpretation and video calling.
- The States/UTs may consider involving Organisation of Persons with Disabilities in preparation and dissemination of information material on COVID 19 for use of PwDs.

Mechanism to resolve disability specific issues during the period

(a) State Commissioner for PwDs

- The State Commissioners for PwDs should be declared as the State Nodal authority in respect of persons with disabilities.
- They should be the overall in-charge to resolve disability specific issues during the crisis period.
- They will coordinate with State Disaster Management Authority, Health, Police and other line Departments as well as District Collectors and district level officers dealing with persons with disabilities.
- They will be responsible to ensure that all information about COVID 19, public restriction plans, services offered are available in local language in accessible formats.

(b) District Officer dealing with empowerment of PwDs

- The District Officer dealing with empowerment of PwDs should be declared as the District Nodal authority in respect of persons with disabilities.
- He should have a list of PwDs in the District and monitor their requirements periodically and should have a separate list of persons with severe disabilities who need high support in the locality.
- He will be responsible for resolving the issue within the resources available and if necessary may take the help of Non-Governmental Organisations and Civil Society Organisations/Resident Welfare Associations.

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