

GCPD Video Transcript

Equal Access to Health Care for People with Disabilities.

From the Governor's Committee for People with Disabilities.

Total run time: 08:53

Brenda, mother and caregiver:

We were told that due to COVID, that because he was an adult that nobody could go in with him to the emergency room. That didn't sit well with me and I told them that he had autism and that he needed a support person to go with him.

Lawrence, caregiver and advocate for people with disabilities:

A lot of hospitals had no visitors policies and it was up to the nurse whether people like myself were even allowed into your appointments. So, it's very frustrating. It's very, like there's tons of barriers up there and to me that puts a barriers between him and his good health.

David Morstad, Immediate past chair, current member of GCPD:

Access to quality, affordable health care is of critical importance to ensuring the health and well-being of every person. It is essential that every patient feel heard, supported, and respected when receiving care. But for individual with disabilities receiving essential health services can often come with the obstacle of navigating burdensome challenges and this issue has been underscored by the COVID-19 pandemic. These challenges can include both communication and physical access barriers. According to a survey conducted by the Governor's Committee for People with Disabilities, individuals with disabilities faced these barriers in a variety of health care settings, including hospitals, doctor's offices, dentists, emergency rooms, and mental health facilities across the state.

Rhonda Staats, Vice-Chair of GCPD and Statutory Council on Blindness Representative:

The COVID-19 experience has certainly affected every one of us, but it hasn't affected all of us equally.

Tom O'Connor, member of GCPD, and Wisconsin Council for the Deaf and Hard of Hearing Representative:

The COVID-19 pandemic created modified policies and procedures in nearly every business. One such policy common in health care is the practice of not allowing a support person to accompany someone with a disability during medical appointments and treatment due to social distancing guidelines to help prevent spread of COVID-19. While this practice was put into place to protect patients, their family members, and health care providers, in some cases it created significant challenges for people with disabilities to effectively access health care services.

In a recent survey conducted by the Governor's Committee for People with Disabilities, nearly half of survey respondents reported that medical providers did not allow them to have a support person present during their appointment or treatment. In nearly a third of reported cases, the person with a disability either felt afraid to ask questions or didn't know what to ask.

One third of survey respondents also reported that they simply didn't get the medical treatment they needed. That shouldn't happen. In a medical appointment, good communication is critical. I need to communicate to doctors and nurses, and they need to do the same with me. Sometimes, disabilities can make that communication difficult, both during the appointment and as part of follow-up care and treatment.

People who are blind, deaf, or hard of hearing, or have disabilities that may affect their ability to understand information may need someone else to be with them during an appointment.

This is a reasonable accommodation. Without it, meaningful communication may be difficult or even impossible. I was very, very anxious for him, you know. Worried that he would not get the medical care that he needed. That, and thinking about well, where else can we go?

Becky, caregiver and owner/operator of an adult family home:

Due to his intellectual delays, he would not have been able to communicate to the degree that he was physically failing. I explained this to the ER personnel, and they still were adamant that I could not enter the facility.

Ben Barrett, member of GCPD and Council on Physical Disabilities Representative:

It's not just communication. Some people with physical disabilities may require a support person to help with positioning in wheelchairs, transferring from a wheelchair to an examination table, or other assistance to ensure a complete and thorough examination. This is also a reasonable accommodation.

If I'm not with him that they're not going to be able to provide the same level of care. He's not going to be able to follow up because he doesn't remember what they tell him in terms of what he needs to do after an appointment.

By and large it's been very harsh. While we understand the general needs, we expect reasonable accommodations. I can be a lot better of assistance both to Mark and to physicians if I'm there.

The term "reasonable accommodation" is found in the Americans with Disabilities Act, which has been in place for over three decades. In plain language, it means that some policies in effect for employers, schools, public services, and health care providers may need to be modified in a reasonable way to support the needs of people with disabilities.

If you are a person with a disability, or a family member or an advocate, and you feel you are being denied appropriate access to health care, there are steps you can take: The first step is to talk to your provider and explain why it is important to have a support person. Ask for a reasonable accommodation. Remember that most large health care organizations have an individual or an office that deals with issues of patients' rights. Ask to speak to them. While it is

probably most efficient and most effective to work through your individual provider network, it may be necessary to engage other protection and advocacy services, or file a formal complaint.

The Governor's Committee for People with Disabilities partnered with the Council on Physical Disabilities to create the Emergency Preparedness Communications Folder. This folder was designed as a resource for health care providers and people with disabilities to address communication and access barriers in health care settings.

Margaret Kristan, Chair of the GCPD:

The Governor's Committee for People with Disabilities is a resource for people with disabilities, their families, or caregivers, and health care providers and facilities. The GCPD can provide tools and training to any of these audiences to assist with making health care accessible for all. For people with disabilities and their caregivers we have tools in the Emergency Preparedness Communications Folder on how to request a reasonable accommodation in health care settings, communication tools if there are barriers to effective communication, and how to file a complaint if your reasonable accommodation is denied. For health care providers GCPD can provide training on the Americans with Disabilities Act, reasonable accommodations, and ways to make health care settings and policies accessible. This makes health care accessible for all individuals and provides everyone the opportunity to receive quality health care. Health care providers can also utilize the communication tools in the Emergency Preparedness Folder until the individual's requested communication accommodation can be provided. If you would like more information on the rights of people with disabilities or where to turn if you have encountered barriers to needed health care, visit: www.dhs.wisconsin.gov/gcpd.