



of Wisconsin Disability Organizations

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Supreme Court Ruling calls the question: how will Wisconsin reopen in a way that protects people with disabilities and older adults from COVID-19?

The state Supreme Court's declaration that Wisconsin's Safer at Home order extension is invalid raises many critical questions for people with disabilities and older adults. Disability and aging groups had filed an amicus brief in the case detailing how COVID-19 poses specific risks of irreparable harm to the aging and disability populations if the state reopens too quickly.

COVID-19 is particularly dangerous to people with disabilities, older adults, and people with certain underlying conditions. Workers providing in-home care and services are at greater risk of contracting the disease or spreading it to the most vulnerable. Many families caring for children with disabilities or high-risk individuals of any age will need to return to work, which may increase their risk of carrying the virus into their own homes.

"People at high risk of serious illness or death from COVID-19 rely on the actions of the entire community for protection," said Beth Swedeen, Survival Coalition Co-Chair. "Re-opening means a new normal. Wearing masks, continuing social distancing, flexibility for employees to work from home, online and curbside options, and strategies to safely conduct in-person business will need to continue for the foreseeable future."

People who live or receive services in congregate settings are at extreme risk (e.g. group homes and other residences, day service and prevocational facilities, programs that offer center-based services etc.). Nearly half of all Wisconsin's COVID-19 related deaths have occurred in long-term care facilities or group housing.

"We've seen infections and deaths skyrocket in institutional settings throughout the nation and in our state. And when workers become infected, they expose their families and communities again," said Lisa Pugh, Survival Coalition Co-Chair. "

Many people with disabilities and older adults rely on caregivers—including direct support professionals, personal care assistants, home health aides, in-home therapists, peer specialists, care coordinators, and others—for daily care.

"These essential workers should be prioritized for Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) and COVID-19 testing and eventual vaccination against COVID-19 to protect themselves and their vulnerable clients from infection," said Pugh.



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Many epidemiologists and public health experts are concerned that an increase in activity may result in more infections and continued community spread of COVID-19.

“The State and local communities need to carefully consider how to safely reopen, monitor congregate settings, and make sure they are prepared to respond should a local or regional outbreak occur,” said Kit Kerschensteiner, Survival Coalition Co-Chair. “The pandemic is ongoing. Our vigilance must be too.”