

HHS Office for Civil Rights in Action



March 16, 2020

BULLETIN: Civil Rights and the Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19)

In light of the Public Health Emergency concerning the [coronavirus disease 2019 \(COVID-19\)](#), the Office for Civil Rights (OCR) at the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) is providing this bulletin to ensure that entities covered by civil rights authorities know that civil rights laws and their implementing regulations are not set aside during an emergency. These laws and regulations prohibit discrimination on the basis of race, color, national origin, disability, age, sex and exercise of conscience and religion in HHS funded programs.

“HHS is committed to leaving no one behind during an emergency, and this guidance is designed to help health care providers meet that goal,” said Roger Severino, OCR Director. “Providers should not place persons using wheelchairs or needing accommodations at the end of the line for health services during emergencies.”

[NOTE: The CDC has advised that the best way to prevent illness is to avoid being exposed to this virus: clean your hands often; avoid close contact; stay home if you are sick; cover coughs and sneezes; and call your healthcare provider if you believe you may be infected. <http://www.coronavirus.gov>.](#)

OCR at HHS remains in close coordination with federal partners to help ensure that the Nation’s response effectively addresses the needs of at-risk populations. To this end, government officials, health care providers and covered entities should consider adopting, as circumstances and resources allow, the following practices to help make sure all segments of the community are served:

- Employing qualified interpreter services to assist individuals with limited English proficiency and individuals who are deaf or hard of hearing;
- Making emergency messaging available in languages prevalent in the affected area(s) and in multiple formats, such as audio, large print, and captioning and ensuring that websites providing emergency-related information are accessible;
- Making use of multiple outlets and resources for messaging to reach individuals with disabilities, individuals with limited English proficiency, and members of diverse faith communities;
- Considering and planning for the needs of individuals with mobility impairments and individuals with assistive devices or durable medical equipment in providing health care during emergencies;

- Stocking facilities with items that will help people to maintain independence, such as hearing aid batteries, canes, and walkers.

Being mindful of all segments of the community and taking reasonable steps to provide an equal opportunity to benefit from emergency response efforts, including making reasonable accommodations for persons with disabilities as required by law, will help ensure that the emergency response is successful and minimizes stigmatization.

<https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/about/related-stigma.html>.

For information regarding how Federal civil rights laws apply in an emergency, please visit:

<https://www.hhs.gov/civil-rights/for-individuals/special-topics/emergency-preparedness/index.html>

For information regarding Emergency Preparedness Resources for Persons from Diverse Cultural Origins please

visit: <https://www.hhs.gov/civil-rights/for-individuals/special-topics/emergency-preparedness/diverse-cultural-origins/index.html>.

OCR also enforces the Privacy Rule and Security Rule of the Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act (HIPAA), which also remain in force during an emergency.

For information about HIPAA Privacy and COVID-19, please visit:

<https://www.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/hipaa-and-covid-19-limited-hipaa-waiver-bulletin-508.pdf>

Filing a Complaint with OCR

If you believe that a person or organization covered by HHS civil rights, conscience protection and religious freedom or HIPAA authorities (a "covered entity") violated your civil rights or health information privacy rights, you may file a complaint at <https://www.hhs.gov/ocr/complaints/index.html>

Other Resources

You may send inquiries to OCRMail@hhs.gov or call the OCR toll-free phone line at (1-800-368-1019), (TTY: 1-800-537-7697) for further information.

This is an announce-only list, a resource to distribute information about HHS civil rights authorities.

This email is being sent to you from the OCR-Civil Rights listserv, operated by the Office for Civil Rights in the US Department of Health and Human Services.

If you would like to learn more about **Civil Rights, Conscience and Religious Freedom, the HIPAA Privacy Rule and the HIPAA Security Rule** subscribe to the OCR Civil Rights Listserv [here](#).