June 3, 2020

Commissioner Judith M. Persichilli

New Jersey Department of Health

369 South Warren Street Trenton, New Jersey 08608

Re: Hospital Policy Regarding Use of Wheelchairs during Coronavirus Pandemic

Dear Commissioner Persichilli:

Recently, we received a complaint from one of our consumers, a gentleman with spina bifida who uses a wheelchair. He was admitted to Overlook Hospital with a severe urinary tract infection. He was treated and released later in the day. However, upon arrival at the emergency entrance to the hospital he was told by hospital personnel that he was not allowed to bring in his wheelchair.

Citing precautions to reduce the risk of spreading the coronavirus, they made the gentleman transfer to a hospital transport wheelchair, which was wheeled by an attendant to an examination room. His friend, who accompanied the gentleman to the hospital, offered to wipe down his wheelchair with disinfectant, but hospital staff still would not allow him to use his own wheelchair while at the hospital. (It’s important to point out that he did not have any symptoms of the virus and had been tested for it with negative results). The consumer did communicate his concerns with the Overlook Hospital Administrator about the situation but as of today there has been no resolution.

During the coronavirus pandemic, situations endured by this consumer were common throughout NJ, as people with disabilities sought emergency treatment at hospitals, clinics and other medical facilities.

Taking someone's personal mobility device away, even for a few hours, makes that person extremely vulnerable and deprives him or her of independence, dignity, and the ability to have some control over their environment. In addition, wheelchairs and other mobility devices are often mishandled and damaged unwittingly by hospital personnel, who may not have experience handling such equipment.

We ask that the NJ Department of Health establish guidelines and protocols permitting use of patients’ own mobility devices while seeking treatment in hospitals and other medical facilities and at all levels of care and services. We recognize that permitting the use of mobility devices must be balanced with reducing the spread of the virus.

ACI welcomes the opportunity to work with you and your department to establish guidelines to ensure that people with disabilities maintain their independence and dignity in a coronavirus free medical environment.

The Alliance Center for Independence is a non-profit 501(c)(3) disability organization based in Edison and assists over 3000 individuals and their families in Middlesex, Union and Somerset counties. Our mandate is to serve all disabilities and ages, including intellectual, mental health, physical and healthcare related disabilities.

Thank you for your consideration of this important issue.

Sincerely,

Luke Koppisch

Deputy Director