

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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Wolf Administration Reminds Pennsylvanians Experiencing Anxiety, Loneliness, Stress Amidst Holiday Season That They Are Not Alone

Harrisburg, PA – The Wolf Administration today shared resources for people struggling with anxiety, depression, loneliness, isolation, and other stressors this holiday season. The holidays can be both a time of joy and a period of stress for people, depending on their circumstances. However, given the continued surge in COVID-19 cases in Pennsylvania and around the country, close adherence to mitigation recommendations is critical to stopping the spread of COVID-19 and keeping people safe. Staying at home and being apart from loved ones is difficult, but it is necessary to protect ourselves, our loved ones, and our communities from COVID-19.

Mental Health

People who experience feelings of anxiety or depression may experience more distress during the holiday season than during normal times. Given the challenges we are all currently facing, all Pennsylvanians should take extra care to be mindful of their mental health and tend to their overall health and wellness during this time. Check in with yourself, be honest about how you are feeling to yourself and your support network, and if you need someone to talk to or a little extra support, help is available.

“This year has challenged all of us in ways that we could not have anticipated, and whether you normally deal with feelings of depression or anxiety or you are experiencing these for the first time, your feelings are valid,” said Department of Human Services (DHS) Secretary Teresa Miller. “The holiday season and our family traditions will look different this year because it’s what we must do to keep each other safe, but there can be a grief that comes from that. No matter what you are feeling this year, please know that you do not have to endure it alone. Talk to your loved ones, talk to your support network, and don’t be afraid to make a call to resources that exist to help.”

DHS’ mental health support & referral helpline, Persevere PA, is available 24/7 and is a free resource staffed by skilled and compassionate caseworkers available to counsel Pennsylvanians struggling with anxiety and other challenging emotions. The helpline caseworkers can refer callers to community-based resources that can further help to meet individual needs. Pennsylvanians can contact Persevere PA at 1-855-284-2494. For TTY, dial 724-631-5600.

If you or someone you love is in crisis, the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline is available by calling 1-800-273-8255. The hotline is staffed 24/7 by trained counselors who can offer free, confidential support. Spanish speakers who need immediate assistance can call 1-888-628-9454. Help can also be accessed through the Crisis Text Line by texting “PA” to 741-741.

Substance Use Disorder

The holidays may also be difficult for individuals with a substance use disorder or people in recovery, especially if they become stressed by changes to their schedule or daily routine, are not able to see their support network in-person, have strained or non-existent relationships with family members, or are faced with potential triggers. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, the most dangerous time of the year for substance use and alcohol-related deaths are around the holiday months.

“It is important for all of us to remember that as the COVID-19 pandemic continues to devastate the lives of our loved ones, the opioid epidemic hasn’t ended,” said Department of Drug and Alcohol (DDAP) Secretary Jen Smith. “We are still losing far too many Pennsylvanians in drug-related fatalities. Each of us have a responsibility to be a support system for our loved ones, especially during the holiday season, and it starts with recognizing substance use disorder as a disease – not a moral failing. I cannot stress enough that if you need substance use disorder services, help is available. There is absolutely no shame in seeking help to lead a happy, healthy life.”

DDAP also maintains a toll-free helpline that connects callers looking for treatment options for themselves or a loved one to resources in their community. You can reach the Get Help Now helpline at 1-800-662-HELP (4357). The helpline is available 24/7 – including Christmas and New Year’s Day. An anonymous chat service offering the same information to individuals who may not be comfortable speaking on the phone is also available at www.ddap.pa.gov.

Naloxone is still available to all Pennsylvanians through Secretary of Health Dr. Rachel Levine’s standing order, and carrying this on-hand at all times can be a life-saving action. The Wolf Administration encourages all Pennsylvanians to take advantage of the standing order to obtain Naloxone over the holidays.

“We understand how difficult it is not being together with our loved ones during the holidays. However, it is essential that we stop all gatherings, even small gatherings, to prevent the spread of COVID-19,” said Ray Barishansky, deputy secretary for health preparedness and community protection at the Pennsylvania Department of Health. “We must not lose sight, however, of the opioid epidemic that still rages on in our communities. Now is the time to have naloxone on hand, and to assist loved ones in need. Treatment works and recovery is possible.”

Learn more about how to obtain naloxone at www.pa.gov/opioids.

Older Pennsylvanians

Because the risk of COVID-19 is more acute among older Pennsylvanians, we must be diligent about protecting our older loved ones from potential exposure to the virus. This distance undoubtedly creates difficulties, but regular communication can help families stay connected while they are not able to be together in person.

“At the Department of Aging and throughout the administration, we are very committed to ensuring that older adults in need of help are able to obtain it. During this holiday season, if any older adult is struggling emotionally or mentally, we want them to understand they are not alone and many resources do exist to support them,” said Aging Secretary Robert Torres. “Local Area Agencies on Aging (AAAs) can connect you to programs and services that can help if older adults or caregivers are in need of services, like meals, in-home care or other supports. While the physical AAA offices may be closed, they are still operating and taking calls. Their contact information can be found on our website using the Area Aging on Aging Locator.”

The PA Link to Aging and Disability Resource Centers, also known as the PA Link, assists older adults and individuals with disabilities by providing information and connecting them to supports including assistive technology to access telehealth services, receive check-in calls and reduce social isolation. Any older adult needing support can contact the PA Link Call Center by phone at 1-800-753-8827 or online at www.carelink.pa.gov.

The Pennsylvania Department of Aging’s Council on Aging (PCoA) recently released an interactive guide with information and resources to help older adults cultivate a healthy mind, body and spirit

amidst the challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic. The guide, titled “SOLO: Strengthening Older Lives Online,” was produced by PCoA’s Risk Reduction Committee, which is made up of older adults and was formed in response to the council’s State of Older Adults Report released in May 2020. The committee is an extension of the Social Isolation Task Force formed in 2019 to help mitigate social isolation among seniors.

The SOLO guide is designed to go beyond some of the physical safety reminders during the COVID-19 pandemic. Using bold, color graphics, the guide incorporates ways for aging adults to combat some of the pervasive stressors exacerbated by the pandemic while helping them live their best lives.

Tools available in the guide include:

- Activities and videos to help stay mentally, spiritually, and physically fit;
- Resources available to assist with those three areas; and,
- Short questionnaires to build active health plans.

The interactive health and wellness guide is available in English [here](#) and in Spanish [here](#).

Kinship Families

The Wolf Administration also wants grandparents and aunts, uncles, and cousins who are finding themselves caring for children who lost parents or whose parents are not able to be their primary caregiver to know that help is available via the KinConnector helpline. The helpline is staffed by Kinship Navigators – compassionate, knowledgeable social service professionals prepared to help families locate, understand, and access resources that may be able to help them during the holiday season. It can be reached by calling 1-866-KIN-2111 (1-866-546-2111) or online at www.kinconnector.org.