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# Babies can't wait

By TOM TURNER

COMMUNITY OPTIONS

The COVID-19 pandemic has presented many challenges to Community Options because we can't simply "shut down."

We have hundreds of people with disabilities still depending on us for their everyday support. As reported in last month's column, we closed our two day program facilities on March 18, and have found creative ways for our staff to provide day program activities in our residential facilities. We've previously never been allowed to provide day programs in our residential settings, but our state regulators have relaxed a number of requirements during this crisis, and we are grateful for this flexibility.

You can probably imagine that the way we provide services and supports for adults hasn't really changed that much while they have been confined to their homes. The location may be different and people are all wearing masks and practicing social distancing, but the core "hands-on" services that we provide are much the same.

But what about the infants and toddlers with special needs served through our Early Intervention program?

These services are based in each family's home and involve the child and their parents, and these children, from birth to age 3, are in a crucial period of development and can't afford to lose months waiting for their therapists to be able to come to their home again.

Our agency and our partners at the state of Colorado remain committed to helping children and families during this crisis, and we are embracing innovation and flexibility in service provision. Fortunately, virtually everyone has become familiar with Zoom and similar technologies over the past few months. Our new approach to providing these critical services is that families are visited by their speech therapist, occupational therapist, physical therapist or child developmental specialist over the internet via computer, tablet, or smartphone.

This is especially important when those

families are spread across six counties and nearly 10,000 square miles, and everyone is under "stay at home" orders. These tele-therapy services allow for the parent, child and therapist to interact in the home. During these visits the therapist can see the child and provide coaching and answer questions with the parents. It puts parents in the driver's seat as the therapist instructs them on what to do in real time. Initially, some families and therapists expressed reluctance about teletherapy, but over time it has become a comfortable, empowering, and efficient tool to help children continue with their individual intervention programs.

Despite the pandemic, babies don't wait to be born, and some will have developmental delays and need professional assistance. Community Options continues to receive referrals from hospitals and pediatricians, and we continue to add families and children to this important program during this difficult time.

*Tom Turner is the executive director of Community Options.*