Adults and youth with disabilities disproportionately use tobacco and other substances, experience behavioral health conditions, and confront barriers accessing behavioral health treatment, compared to those without disabilities.

Definitions of disability
Functioning in daily life is the essence of the current approach to classifying disability. Data collection standards issued by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services identify six areas of difficulty in functioning when defining disability status.

Vision
Ambulatory

Hearing
Self-care

Cognitive
Independent Living

Disability Prevalence
Nearly 1 in 3 adults in Delaware report having a disability.

1 in 4 children in Delaware have at least one functional difficulty.

Prevalence of overall substance use (except alcohol) is higher for people with disabilities than for people without disabilities.1

Adolescents with disabilities have rates of cigarette use that are 4 times the rate of their peers without disabilities.2

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People with Disabilities and Opioids
Nationally, adults with disabilities report higher rates of heroin and oxycodone use than other populations4, are prescribed opioids at higher rates5, and experience higher mortality related to opioid overdoses6. However, people with disabilities are less likely to receive substance abuse treatment than adults without disabilities2.

High school students with a disability in Delaware report prescription painkiller misuse at three times the rate of students without a disability (Youth Risk Behavior Survey, 2017).

Recommendations
• Enhance surveillance of disability status and monitoring of disparities through routine collection of disability indicators in Delaware.
• Leverage existing DHSS policy (Policy Memorandum #70) to strengthen efforts to achieve health equity for vulnerable populations.
• Provide resources and training to ensure that evidence-based public health programming is inclusive of people with disabilities and reaches at-risk populations to target disparities.
• Ensure that in Delaware environmental and programmatic design – in facilities, electronic communication, assistive technology, etc. - is accessible and available to people of all abilities.

Barriers to Treatment
People with disabilities seeking treatment for substance use disorders may be denied service or encounter barriers to treatment including physical inaccessibility and a lack of communication materials in alternative formats. 7, 8 Additional barriers include:
• Financial and insurance-related issues
• Practitioner Cultural Competency

Diagnostic overshadowing occurs when clinicians determine that any problems or symptoms expressed by a patient are the result of their disability, without considering other possibilities.


Delaware Health and Social Services
Division of Substance Abuse and Mental Health

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University of Delaware Center for Drug and Health Studies
252 E. Main Street, Suite 110, Newark DE 19716.