

DD 101

An Introductory Guide to Developmental Disabilities



A developmental disability (DD) is a severe, chronic disability that begins at birth or during childhood and young adulthood and is likely to continue throughout one's life.

According to the federal Developmental Disabilities Assistance and Bill of Rights Act, a DD:

- attributes to a mental and physical impairment or both;
- manifests before a person turns 22;
- will likely continue indefinitely;
- results in substantial functional limitations in three or more of the following areas of major life activity: self-care, receptive and expressive language, learning, mobility, self-direction, capacity for independent living, and economic self-sufficiency; and
- reflects a person's need for individually planned and coordinated services, supports, or other forms of assistance that are lifelong or for an extended duration.



Common DD examples include autism spectrum disorder, cerebral palsy, Down syndrome, fetal alcohol spectrum disorder, and fragile X syndrome.



Risk factors for DD can include genetic and chromosomal conditions, low birth weight, premature birth, multiple births, maternal infections during pregnancy, smoking or drinking during pregnancy, and more.



Recent estimates show that about 1 in 6, or about 17%, of children ages 3 through 17 years have DD, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

Estimates show over 600,000 individuals in Texas have DD.



March is Developmental Disabilities Awareness Month!

With proper services and supports, individuals with DD can generally live, work, learn, and participate fully in their communities.

The DD Act and Disability Programs

The Developmental Disabilities Assistance and Bill of Rights Act of 2000 (DD Act) is a comprehensive federal law created to support people with developmental disabilities (DD) and their families. The law gives people with DD equal rights to access and to be included in their communities.

Originally signed in 1963, the DD Act has been updated multiple times. The U.S. Administration for Community Living oversees DD Act programs.

Programs authorized by the DD Act empower individuals with DD and their families to help shape policies that impact them. Among those programs are the members of the DD Network, which has affiliates in every U.S. state and territory. DD Network members often participate in related, complementary work and collaboration even though they have different mandates.



State Councils on Developmental Disabilities are federally funded, self-governing organizations charged with identifying the most pressing needs of people with DD in their state or territory. Councils are committed to advancing public policy and systems change that help these individuals gain more control over their lives.

In Texas, the DD Council is TCDD, which is established under state law.



University Centers for Excellence in Developmental Disabilities Education, Research, and Service (UCEDDs) are a nationwide network of independent yet interlinked centers that represent an expansive national resource for addressing issues, finding solutions, and advancing research related to the needs of individuals with DD and their families.

Texas has two UCEDDs: The Texas Center for Disability Studies at The University of Texas at Austin and The Center on Disability and Development at Texas A&M University.



State Protection & Advocacy Systems (P&As) work at the state level to protect individuals with DD by empowering them and advocating on their behalf. They provide legal support to traditionally unserved or underserved populations to help them navigate the legal system to achieve resolution and encourage systems change. P&As operate independently and may partner with agencies that provide other services.

Disability Rights Texas is the P&A for our state.

Additional initiatives established by the DD Act include:

- **Projects of National Significance**, to support innovation, provision of practical information, and data collection with respect to people with DD, as well as training and technical assistance.
- **Family Support Programs**, to help boost comprehensive state systems of support services for family members providing care.
- **Direct Support Workforce**, which has not yet been funded by Congress, to increase the workforce serving people with DD.

"Texas is better off when all citizens can flourish, so we must commit ourselves to do everything possible to facilitate personal and professional success for people with developmental disabilities."

Gov. Greg Abbott, in his 2026 DD Awareness Month proclamation