

Questions from the Townhall to introduce the Supports Intensity Scale- Adult Version

May 25, 2021

1. What is the SIS®?

Answer: SIS stands for Supports Intensity Scale, and it was first published in 2004 by the American Association on Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities (AAIDD). It is a strength-based standardized assessment tool that is used to determine the pattern and intensity of support a person (16 years and older) with an intellectual or developmental disability needs to be successful in everyday life in their community. The SIS® looks at needed supports and not current supports the person may be receiving or what the person can or cannot do for the activity. A refreshed version, the Supports Intensity Scale- *Adult Version*® (SIS-A™) was published in 2015 and this version will be used in Vermont. The SIS-A™ assesses support needs in the areas of exceptional medical, exceptional behavioral, home living, community living, lifelong learning, employment, health and safety, and social activities. There is an additional section, Supplemental Protection and Advocacy, with items related to activities associated with self-determination.

2. How are assessors supposed to gauge what the consumers need if they are strangers to the consumer?

Answer: The SIS-A assessment is completed by trained and qualified assessors who ask questions about the support needs of a person. The person being assessed and at least two other people who have known the person for at least three months are invited to the assessment meeting. The information about the person's support needs is gathered from the person (as much as they choose to participate) and the other participants, also known as respondents. The assessor asks questions and works with the team to determine the type, frequency, and amount of support the person needs in many areas of adult life. The SIS-A Assessor relies on the respondents to give accurate information regarding the supports needs of the individual.

3. Can the assessment be broken out into multiple interviews so you can have different team members present if you are uncomfortable with them being present the whole time?

Answer: Ideally, the SIS-A is completed in one session which typically averages around 2 hours. The SIS-A requires, at a minimum, two valid respondents to participate in the whole assessment. Vermont is requiring 2 valid respondents in addition to the person being assessed. Valid means the respondent has known the individual for at least 3 months, has interacted with the individual in a variety of settings and is well versed on the support needs of the individual. The respondents are people the person being assessed knows well and would have rapport with the individual which would assist the individual being comfortable having the respondents discuss their support

needs. The person being assessed should be encouraged to participate as much as possible, but he/she may take a break if needed. If the person needs to take a break, but wants to be part of the full assessment, a request can be made to continue the assessment at another time.

4. How were VT stakeholders included in the decision to choose this assessment?

Answer: The Department of Disabilities, Aging and Independent Living (DAIL) invited stakeholders to participate on a workgroup called the Standardized Assessment Workgroup. This workgroup is one of 4 committees/workgroups who are providing advice and recommendations to the State on the Developmental Disabilities Services (DDS) Payment Reform project. Membership includes individuals, families, advocacy organizations, providers, and state staff. The workgroup started meeting in November of 2018 and continued to meet through 2021, with several pauses. DAIL researched tools used nationally for assessing needs of people with developmental disabilities. The workgroup developed criteria for selecting an assessment tool. The workgroup used the criteria to evaluate several available tools, including the current assessment tool used in the DDS program. While the workgroup indicated that the SIS-A was the best available option, they were unable to recommend that the State move forward with the use of the tool without having a full understanding of how the results of the assessment would be used to assign individual funding. The State was comfortable moving forward with selecting a tool and working out the details of assigning funding as a future phase of DDS Payment Reform. Using the criteria developed by the workgroup, the State selected the Supports Intensity Scale-Adult Version (SIS-A).

5. How were stakeholders chosen?

Answer: On October 16, 2018, DAIL sent a memo inviting stakeholders to participate on the 3 DDS Payment Reform workgroups. The memo was sent to Vermont Family Network, Green Mountain Self-Advocates, Legal Aid, the DDS State Program Standing Committee, provider agencies, and the DD Council. It was requested that the invitation be shared with anyone who might be interested. The workgroups were to be balanced between representatives of provider agencies and other stakeholders. Most of the people who volunteered to participate were welcomed to participate on a workgroup on a first come first serve basis until we had enough members in each workgroup.

6. It is unrealistic to expect some individuals to be able to do the SIS in one sitting. Answers will take longer for the individual to share and many individuals with communication differences will need several sittings.

Answer: Assessors have experience working with people with IDD. This experience, along with the required SIS-A training, help assessors recognize when a team member may need a break.

Assessments usually take an average of 2 hours to complete. The team will work together to determine how to complete the assessment in a way that respects the individual's right to participate in as much of the assessment as fits that person. As noted in question #3, a request can be made to continue at a later date, if necessary.

7. How often do the assessments need to be conducted?

Answer: DAIL decided that assessments would be conducted when someone initially applies for services and then every three years. If a person's needs change significantly, a new assessment may be requested before the three-year time period.

8. What if you use an alternative communication device?

Answer: When the assessment is being scheduled, the scheduler will ask about the way the person communicates. The case manager will be asked to ensure that any accommodations needed for communication are available at the assessment. This would include having an alternative communication device and any support to use it available during the assessment. It would also include having interpreters for those who are deaf/hard of hearing or whose primary language is not English.

9. More than one assessment in a year may be difficult, especially if you get other benefits, can you opt out during the trial basis?

Answer: It is possible that people may receive more than one type of assessment in a year. However, people cannot opt out of these assessments. When they are called to participate in an assessment with PCG, they will have an opportunity to schedule the assessment at a time and location that is convenient for them. Participation in the SIS-A assessments is a condition of participating in the DDS Home and Community-Based Services program.

10. How many state governments have chosen to use the SIS A as a budget setting tool?

Answer: At present, 17 U.S. states and two Canadian provinces use the SIS-A to assess support needs. Out of those, approximately 11 use the score from the assessment with additional information to determine budget levels. The SIS-A score is not the only information that will be used by DAIL to determine an individual budget.

11. If the assessment will translate to a score and a budget how will advocacy to receive appropriate services occur if the assessment results are insufficient?

Answer: DAIL has not yet determined exactly how the scores from the assessments will be used to develop individual plans and budgets. However, the process under consideration includes using the SIS-A scores and information gathered through additional supplemental questions to get a full picture of a person's needs. When a person is assigned a budget amount, if the person or their guardian feels that it is not sufficient to meet their needs, they have a right to appeal as they do now. In addition, there will be an exceptions process in which people can request additional funding for people with extraordinary needs. While the budget assigned to a person is appealable, the results of an assessment are not. There will be a complaint process for people who feel that there was a problem with the manner in which the assessment was conducted. DAIL will be providing the process for submitting complaints soon.

12. If assessments are done every 3 years do agencies need to conduct an internal assessment yearly or will the guidelines be changing regarding a yearly needs assessment?

Answer: Initially, the SIS-A assessments will be used to help DAIL design the new payment model for DDS services. It is anticipated that the new payment model will not be implemented until sometime in 2023. Until then, providers will continue to complete the annual yearly review of needs as outlined in 4.12 of the *Regulations Implementing the DD Act* using the current periodic review tool. The process for annual review of needs under the new payment model is yet to be determined.

13. How will SIS-A work for intakes? A needs assessment needs to be done to determine if they meet a funding priority, will that be determined with the SIS or still with the DA?

Answer: The process of determining whether a person's circumstances meet a funding priority and when and how the SIS-A results are part of that determination have not yet been determined. The use of the SIS-A assessments for requesting funding will not occur until the new funding model is implemented.

14. Will provider agencies still perform an annual periodic review? Is that the current periodic review tool or one related to SIS?

Answer: See answer to #12 above. There is a SIS-A Annual Review Protocol tool available from AAIDD. DAIL has not yet determined the tools or process for annual reviews under the new payment model.

15. Who will be responsible for coordinating the SIS-A assessment meetings and tracking them in accordance with the regs and individual's needs as they align with the ISA, which is an everchanging document based on needs/goals/dreams.

Answer: As noted above, the provider agencies will continue to conduct needs assessments using the current needs assessment tool and coordinating those with the person's ISA development or review. This will continue until a new payment model is implemented. At that time, the State's contractor (currently Public Consulting Group) will be scheduling the SIS-A assessments. DAIL is currently working with PCG on the process for coordinating the timing of assessments after the initial phase.

16. Will the assessments still be virtual after the pandemic is over?

Answer: Ideally, assessments are conducted in person. When the Governor lifts all the restrictions related to the public health emergency, there will be a transition from virtual to in-person assessments. Research conducted by AAIDD indicates that there is no significant difference in results from assessments conducted in person compared to virtually. Therefore, DAIL is allowing some flexibility to allow for some assessments to be conducted virtually when agreed to by the team, in situations such as bad weather events or other emergencies.

17. What is the time frame for those requesting a new assessment or reassessment?

Answer: DAIL's contract with PCG specifies that most assessments should be completed within 15 days of a referral for an assessment or reassessment. They agency should then receive the report of the assessment results within 20 days of the referral.

18. Will the assessment's questions be made public in advance of the interviews?

Answer: The SIS-A interview forms are copyright materials from the publisher, the American Association on Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities (AAIDD), and therefore will not be provided ahead of the assessment. AAIDD will provide resources to PCG and DAIL in the form of two short videos and a Respondent Handbook to prepare all respondents for the SIS-A interview.

19. What is the expectation if the individual doesn't have access to the internet or a computer? Is calling acceptable?

Answer: Yes. When the schedulers contact individuals, they will determine if they have access to a computer for virtual assessments and if not, a phone number will be made available.

20. Service requests have to meet a funding priority, you gave an example of employment and looking at what someone would need to be successful at work. How will the SIS drive the services that are determined to be needed? What tool will VT use for those under 16?

Answer: See answer to question #13. As there are less than 50 children using DDS Home and Community-based Services funding, DAIL did not invest in a new assessment process for children. For now, children will continue to be assessed as they are currently.

21. My son has significant physical and cognitive disabilities and is unable to communicate his needs and can't answer complex questions. If this is virtual how can someone who never met him assess his needs over a virtual 2-hour meeting? He needs support and supervision 24/7.

Answer: See answer to question #2 above. When a person is unable to communicate his needs or answer the questions, the assessor will gather the information from the other respondents who were invited to participate. It may be difficult for some people to participate in a full 2-hour assessment session. The individual is encouraged to participate to the greatest extent possible, but if they need breaks or want to end their involvement, that is acceptable.

22. How much time do the supplemental questions add to the assessment on average?

Answer: This is still being determined. The SIS Assessors are completing assessments as part of their training, which includes asking the supplemental questions. The time it is currently taking is not an accurate gauge while the assessors are in the training phase. PCG will monitor this throughout the first several months and provide regular feedback to DAIL.

23. Where is the money coming from to pay for an outside consulting firm to do these assessments?

Answer: DAIL had unspent funds from a prior year that were set aside to cover the contract for an organization to conduct independent assessments. There were no funding cuts to the provider agencies or individuals' service budgets to cover the cost. The funds are a combination of state and federal dollars.

24. What if some services are being provided presently that are not addressed by the assessment questions?

Answer: The SIS-A measures the level of support a person needs in a variety of daily life activities. It does not assess what services are currently being provided to meet those needs or specify which services should be provided. Those conversations will occur during the person-centered planning process. In addition, DAIL reviewed the SIS-A to determine if there were some areas of

need that were not fully addressed in the tool and developed supplemental questions to capture that information. The supplemental questions focus on needs related to medical, behavioral, sleep, and parenting.

There is the opportunity to document what is important to and important for an individual as they relate to the items within the SIS-A. In addition, each item provides the opportunity for the assessor to document additional information related to that item.

25. How will SIS apply to children?

Answer: See answer to question #20. The SIS-A will be used for youth 16-18. The information gathered can be very useful for planning the transition from school to adulthood. It will not be used for children under 16.

26. If a person has issues with quantity/portion control around food and beverages, will this be included in the assessment?

Answer: SIS-A provides opportunity to address an individual's needs as best fits the person. For example, Subscales 2A and 2E of the assessment, identify a person's support needs for eating food as well as health and safety. This includes maintaining a nutritious diet. Depending on the reasons for the support, this may also be assessed in section 2E when assessing support needs for maintaining physical health and fitness as well as maintaining emotional well-being.

27. Can the different agencies get a copy of the blank SIS-A so we can review the questions prior to training?

Answer: See answer to question #18.

28. Does the state expect that monies used to afford an additional assessment firm will come from costs saved by reducing waiver dollars related to using the SIS-A?

Answer: See answer to question #23.

29. How is variability in a child's functioning level considered due to past trauma and heightened anxiety?

Answer: The SIS-A assesses the level of support needed to be successful in everyday life. It does not consider the underlying reasons for the need for support. That being said, the variability in the need for support is reflected in the questions related to the frequency of support needed.

Vermont has specified that when asking the questions, the assessors look at what was needed in the past year and what is anticipated to be needed in the upcoming year. In this way, responses will capture variability in need over the year. In addition, as noted in the answer to question #24, there is an opportunity to provide additional information regarding a person's needs to capture details regarding variability in need.

30. How often will an ISA need to be revised and who will track the ISA progress and efficacy?

Answer: Provider agencies will continue as they do now to track ISA progress and efficacy and to revise ISAs at the frequency specified in the *ISA Guidelines*.

31. Has best practice been discussed during the pandemic in other states with the outcomes with virtual assessments?

Answer: In early Spring '20, AAIDD developed best practices for its training program and completing assessments using a virtual format. A recent study looked at the impact of administration format, that is, face-to-face (f2f) versus virtual had on SIS—A scores. SIS—A results from assessments conducted virtually during April/May of 2020 were compared to SIS—A results from assessments conducted f2f in the same states during April/May of 2019. Nine U.S. states verified their SIS—A results from assessments using these two formats.

Differences in the scores from the two time periods were small and not meaningful, which suggests that neither the assessment format nor other potential factors had much of an influence on how the SIS—A was operating. Based upon this study, AAIDD concluded that States could have confidence in the results of SIS—A assessments that had been conducted virtually during the pandemic.

32. So, what will be the role of an agency case manager?

Answer: Agency case managers will be invited to participate in assessments. They will provide basic demographic information prior to the assessment. They will also ensure that interpreters or other communication supports are available to the person during their assessment. They can help support the individual and other team members to prepare for their assessment and during the assessment. They will be responsible for sharing a copy of the assessment report with the individual and guardian or other team members as appropriate.