

# Making a Difference

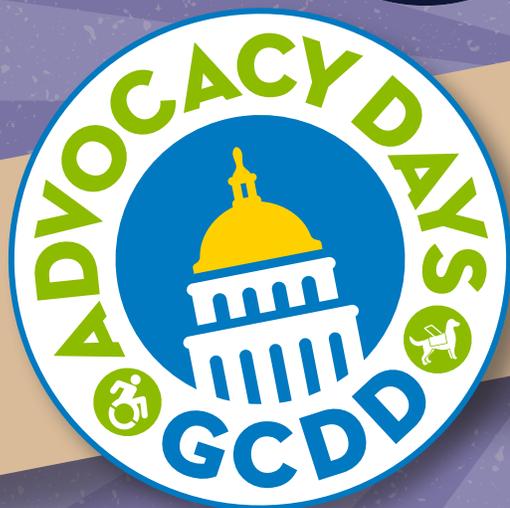
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Winter 2022

EMPLOYMENT FIRST

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**GCDD**  
GEORGIA COUNCIL ON  
DEVELOPMENTAL DISABILITIES



Advocating during the 2022 Georgia Legislative Session

The Georgia Council on Developmental Disabilities (GCDD) is driven by its Five Year Strategic Plan (2022-2026) goals of systems change; self-advocacy; and targeting disparity and diversity. The mission of the Georgia Council on Developmental Disabilities is to bring about social and policy changes that promote opportunities for the wide spectrum of diverse people/persons with developmental disabilities and their families to live, learn, work, play and worship in their communities.

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PUBLIC POLICY FOR THE PEOPLE

## 2022 Virtual Advocacy Days are Here & Advocating during the 2022 Georgia Legislative Session

by Alyssa Miller, PsyD  
*GCDD is getting ready for our busiest time of year, Georgia's legislative session. The legislative session may only be 40 days, but the decisions that are made during this time affect us all. Virtual Advocacy Days begin in January with three days of advocating for DSPs, Reducing the Waitlist and Employment First in Georgia.*



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by McKenzie Wren  
*Starting October 1, 2021, the Georgia Council on Developmental Disabilities kicked off its new Five Year Strategic Plan that set the goals which the Council aims to complete between 2022-2026. Learn more about the new plan.*

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Making a Difference magazine is now available online in an expanded website experience at <https://magazine.gcdd.org/> in: English, Spanish, audio and large print. Previous issues are archived on the website as well.



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On the cover: As the new legislative session kicks off in January, GCDD has a number of priorities they want to advocate for to improve the lives of people with developmental disabilities in Georgia.

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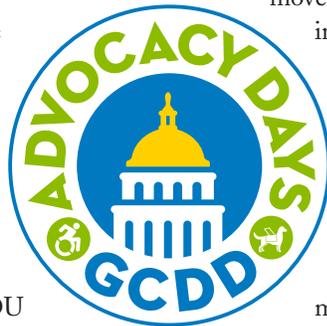


## WE NEED YOU!

**Advocacy – the Webster’s dictionary defines it as, “the act or process of supporting a cause or proposal.” For those in the disability community, advocacy is an opportunity to support both a cause (the disability movement) and proposals (funding to address the waiting list and efforts to increase job opportunities for people with intellectual and developmental disabilities (I/DD)).**

The Georgia Council on Developmental Disabilities (GCDD) hopes that these two come together into a growing disability movement that is working on issues like funding and legislation to improve the quality of life for people with I/DD and their families. But GCDD cannot do it alone. We are not the movement. The movement is composed of individuals with I/DD, families and allies. It takes all three to be successful in changing funding streams and passing legislation. In other words, we need YOU.

We often make the argument that the largest minority group are people with disabilities who have an almost \$4 billion spending market. So, it’s time for YOU to show your support for the Disability Movement and it’s easy to do. Take 10 minutes out of your busy schedule to contact your state representative and senator. Tell them that now is the time to make sure that those on the waiting list get the services they need; to make sure that there are additional funds to increase rates so that direct



support professionals can receive a living wage; and to support efforts that assist people with I/DD to get and keep a job that pays at least minimum wage. We will keep you informed of what is happening during the legislative session and we hope that you will let us know when you have contacted and heard from your legislators. It is easy to find your legislators if you don’t already have a relationship. You can find out who your elected officials are at [Open States](#).

You can also be a part of this movement by participating in [GCDD-supported Advocacy Days that will be held January 26, February 16 and March 16](#). Annually, we have about 150 people attend each of these days. While they may be virtual because of the COVID pandemic, it is still an opportunity to learn about the issues impacting people with disabilities. [Be sure to sign up to learn about the policy process and speak with your legislators.](#)

This edition of *Making a Difference* will cover the GCDD Public Policy Agenda, an update on self-directed services as an option for people



Nick Perry



Eric E. Jacobson

with I/DD and their families, and more! We hope that these articles plus updates on what is happening in Georgia will provide you with new and useful information. Let us know your thoughts and comments about the magazine by writing to [Tianna.Faulkner@gcdd.ga.gov](mailto:Tianna.Faulkner@gcdd.ga.gov).

**WE OFTEN MAKE THE ARGUMENT THAT THE LARGEST MINORITY GROUP ARE PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES WHO HAVE AN ALMOST \$4 BILLION SPENDING MARKET. SO, IT’S TIME FOR YOU TO SHOW YOUR SUPPORT FOR THE DISABILITY MOVEMENT AND IT’S EASY TO DO.** ”

*Eric E. Jacobson*  
Eric E. Jacobson  
GCDD Executive Director

*Nick Perry*  
Nick Perry  
GCDD Chairman

7000+  
WAITING

EMPLOY  
MENT  
FIRST

SUPPORT  
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ASK ME  
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WAIVERS

# 2022 VIRTUAL ADVOCACY DAYS ARE HERE!



ADVOCATE

TAKE  
ACTION

FUNDED

SUPPORT  
DSPs

Join advocates from across the state to learn about policies impacting people with disabilities and advocate for needed funding and legislation this year. The Georgia Council on Developmental Disabilities (GCDD) needs your help to educate Georgia’s lawmakers about topics important to the disability community.

- **Advocacy Day #1 – January 26, 10:00 AM - 1:00 PM**  
**Addressing the Direct Support Professional Workforce Shortage**

There is a growing demand for DSPs to support citizens with disabilities in home and community settings. This demand is outpacing the supply of available workers. Vacancy rates and voluntary turnover is high. Low wages and limited benefits, minimal training, ineffective supervision, and few opportunities for career growth, combined with the growing complexity of work, are barriers to creating a stable workforce.

- **Advocacy Day #2 – February 16, 10:00 AM - 1:00 PM**  
**Reducing the NOW/COMP Waiver Waitlist**

In Georgia, we have over 7,000 people with developmental disabilities waiting to receive a Medicaid waiver, some have been waiting more than a decade. Although Georgia is not alone in having a waiver waitlist, limited spending on Medicaid waivers in Georgia has resulted in a longer list than most states. Especially troubling is the result we see when waiver services are underfunded, which is the increased numbers of young people with disabilities who end up stuck in nursing homes. Join us in educating our state representatives and senators on this important topic.

- **Advocacy Day #3 – March 16, 10:00 AM - 1:00 PM**  
**Advancing Employment First in Georgia**

This Advocacy Day will focus on building a community for inclusive employment in Georgia, as it is currently legal to pay people living with disabilities below minimum wage. Georgia’s Employment First Council was created through the passage of House Bill 831, “Georgia’s Employment First Act,” during the 2017 Legislative Session and was signed into law by Governor Nathan Deal on May 8, 2018. GCDD’s goal this session is to work with partners to strengthen the Employment First Council by encouraging them to restart meetings, produce their biannual reports, and work to develop a strong strategic plan for the future of the Employment First Council. GCDD has been greatly encouraged by the development of the Employment First Council and do believe that it has an important role to play in advancing competitive, integrated employment options for Georgians with disabilities.



## Some Tips on Advocating

One of the most important steps we can take ahead of Advocacy Days is to look up our legislators, see what committees they are on and find out how they have voted on issues we care about.

One thing we must remember is that these state lawmakers are our friends and neighbors.

With the website [Open States](#), constituents can find bills they are interested in and also search for their legislators. To find your legislators' voting records, we recommend searching for them on [Ballotpedia](#). Both of these sites are great resources for any advocate to be properly informed.

Once we become informed on the issues and our legislators, we can better advocate for ourselves during the session and beyond.

But Advocacy Days are not the only opportunity to advocate! In fact, there are year-round opportunities. Once you have found who represents you and how they vote, feel free to reach out to them on social media or connect with them via email or phone before each Advocacy Day. Make sure to let them know you are a constituent in their district. Each legislator



## Learn About Your Legislators

To find your state legislators, visit the following website and enter your home street address at <https://openstates.org/>

Once you know who your state representative is, you can look up their picture, office location, phone number, assistant's name, short biography and contact information here by searching for their last name in the alphabetical listing provided <https://www.legis.ga.gov/members/house>

You can find the same information for your state senator by searching for their last name in the alphabetical listing at <https://www.legis.ga.gov/members/senate>

Questions? Contact Dr. Alyssa Miller, [alyssa.lee@gcdd.ga.gov](mailto:alyssa.lee@gcdd.ga.gov) or Charlie Miller, [Charles.Miller@gcdd.ga.gov](mailto:Charles.Miller@gcdd.ga.gov)

SUPPORT  
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## Advocacy Days Resources

### General Documents for all Advocacy Days

- [Find Your Legislators on Open States](#)
- [Advocate Tool: Letter/Email Template \(DOC\)](#)
- [Letter/Email Writing Advocacy Tips](#)
- [The Autistic-I/DD Self Advocacy Through Media Training](#)
- [The Dos and Don'ts of Staying Safe on the Internet](#)
- [Social Media Advocacy Tips Presentation Slides \(PDF\)](#)

has an important voice in their chamber, and they want to hear from their communities.

One thing we must remember is that these state lawmakers are our friends and neighbors. A lot of these legislators know some information about a lot of different things, so be prepared to educate them on issues you care about. If you are planning to attend our Advocacy Days, feel free to invite them to join you!

Like always, Georgia, let's keep advocating!

END THE  
WAITING  
LIST!

REGISTER  
NOW!

FOR ALL  
ADVOCACY  
DAYS!

*Events are free, however, registration is required. Dates subject to change.*

# Advocating during the 2022 Georgia Legislative Session

by Alyssa Miller, PsyD, GCDD Public Policy Research & Development Director



Welcome back to another exciting issue of Public Policy for the People! Here at the Georgia Council on Developmental Disabilities (GCDD), we are getting ready for our busiest time of year, Georgia’s legislative session. The legislative session may only be 40 days, but the decisions that are made during this time affect us all.

We know that advocating is more powerful when we can come together as a community. We are hopeful that this information will help you feel more informed and motivated to join our efforts this session as we advocate for necessary supports and services for Georgians with intellectual/developmental disabilities (I/DD) and their families!

## Session 101

To be effective advocates, it is important for us to understand some basics regarding Georgia’s legislative session. For example, the session typically starts on the second Monday of January (sometimes on a Tuesday if the Monday happens to be Martin Luther King Jr. Day) and lasts 40 days. However, the 40 days are not consecutive (meaning back-to-back), so a week could have five session days, but other weeks might only have three session days, which means the 40 days usually last until late March. Another important fact to know is that Georgia’s legislative session is a biennial session, which means it takes place over two years (or two consecutive sessions).

The 2022 legislative session is the second year of the biennial, so that means that any legislation that was introduced during the 2021 session, and did not become law, will be picked up in the current session. A great example of this would be

[House Resolution 372](#), which was introduced last session by [Representative El-Mahdi Holly](#), urging Georgia’s Employment First Council to make recommendations on advancing competitive, integrated employment options for Georgians with I/DD.

Although House Resolution 372 did not pass the House last session, it will be in the same committee it was in last session for us to continue advocating for it. Because the 2022 session is the last year of the biennial, that means any bill that does not pass and become law this year will have to be reintroduced during the 2023 session and start its path to passing from the beginning.

Lastly, the [Georgia General Assembly website](#) is a great source of information during session. You can locate legislators’ contact information, look up bills, and find the calendar of any committee meeting you might be interested in.

## GCDD’S PUBLIC POLICY TEAM



ALYSSA MILLER, PsyD, GCDD Public Policy Research & Development Director



CHARLIE MILLER, GCDD Legislative Advocacy Director



ISABEL KNOCZYNSKI GCDD Public Policy & Advocacy Fellow

**THIS YEAR, IT IS ESPECIALLY IMPORTANT FOR ADVOCATES TO MAKE THEIR NEEDS KNOWN BECAUSE THE STATE HAS UPWARDS OF TWO BILLION DOLLARS IN SURPLUS REVENUE THAT THEY WILL HAVE TO DECIDE HOW TO SPEND DURING THE 2022 SESSION.**



## Budget Advocacy

Each year, some of the most important advocacy work is centered around the budget process. It is important for advocates to take part in this process because this is how legislators will determine how all the revenue of the state will be spent, which includes supports and services for people with I/DD and their families.

**We know that advocating is more powerful when we can come together as a community.**

The budget process is an almost year-long process, starting in the summer when the Governor provides guidelines to state agencies on how to compile

their budget. This past summer, state agencies were told to put together a flat budget (meaning no extra money based on last year's budget).

Every September, state agencies submit their budget proposals to the Office of Planning and Budget (OPB), and between September through January, the Governor, with support from OPB, creates his official budget recommendations. The recommendations must be sent to the General Assembly within five days of the session starting. Both House and Senate budget subcommittees review key state agency budgets and adjust. Key state agencies' budgets that we often advocate around, such as the Department of Behavioral Health and Developmental Disabilities (DBHDD) and Georgia Vocational Rehabilitation Agency (GVRA), are located in the [House Human Resources Subcommittee](#) and the [Senate Human Development and Public Health Subcommittee](#).

This year, it is especially important for advocates to make their needs known because the state has upwards of two billion dollars in surplus revenue that they will have to decide how to spend during the 2022 session. During session, GCDD will provide email and social media alerts that include additional information about what community members might want to advocate for regarding the budget process, as well as dates and times of important committee meetings.

## Learn the Lingo!

As the session kicks off, get familiar with these phrases and words to understand how the legislation that matters to you moves across the General Assembly and how it's affected:

- **Crossover Day** The specific day of session happens on the 28th legislative day, about halfway through the session. It refers to a time marker in which any bill introduced must have passed through at least one chamber (either the House or Senate). If the bill passes in the chamber by the 28th day, it will "crossover" to the other chamber, and could still have a chance of being signed into law. If a bill does not pass at least one chamber by the 28th day, then that bill has no chance of becoming law that year. This date helps filter out many bills that will not have a chance to become law and allows GCDD to focus on the remaining bills we might want to advocate for or against.
- **Sine Die** This term, meaning "without a day" in Latin, is day 40 of the legislative session. Day 40 often goes until midnight (sometimes maybe a little later) and is filled with a flurry of activity while legislators, lobbyists and advocates all work to get their priority issues passed.
- **Appropriations** This basically means an amount of money devoted to specific projects. Sometimes appropriations and budgets might be used interchangeably during session as well. During session, the one legally required task legislators have is to pass a budget document, which means they will appropriate, or assign, the funds to specific supports and services provided by the state, such as traditional Medicaid and NOW/COMP waivers.
- **CLOB** This stands for Coverdell Legislative Office Building, which is the building located across the street from the Capitol that houses legislators' offices, as well as meeting rooms where committee meetings are often held.
- **Rainy Day Fund** - Georgia's rainy day fund is a large sum of money set aside for officials to use in times of emergencies, including recessions. This is also sometimes referred to as Georgia's reserve.
- **Surplus Revenue** This refers to money that is left over that will need to be appropriated. You will hear this term often this session because Georgia has a large amount of money left over in its budget year that was unexpected and will need to be spent.

# GCDD's Legislative Priorities

Each year, during the summer, GCDD's Public Policy Team works to develop its legislative priorities for the upcoming session. This year, the team focused on solidifying its policy vision as well as our specific policy priorities for the 2022 session. Our vision for policy in Georgia continues to be "[Disability in ALL policy](#)." As many of you might remember, GCDD introduced a legislative agenda that focused on "Disability in ALL policy" for the first time during Georgia's 2020 legislative session.

past summer, the Public Policy Team at GCDD sought public input on these priority areas and asked our partner organizations to submit policy areas in which they would like our support during the session. A survey was created to best reflect the priority areas of our new five-year plan and was disseminated broadly. We heard from over 300 people, and developed [GCDD's 2022 Policy Agenda](#) based on public input, and in support of [GCDD's Five Year Strategic Plan](#).

Laws. Based on the information already known to us, we believe that the state should invest its resources to increase provider rates with a direct passthrough for an increase in DSP wages.

## 2 Reducing the waitlist for NOW/COMP Waivers through increased funding.

This year, like last year, the DBHDD has asked for 100 new waiver slots in the upcoming budget. We are glad to see a request for additional slots but remain concerned that these low requests will do little to address the over 7,000 person (and growing) waiting list.

For the past few years, a limited number of slots have been funded, which has resulted in no major changes in our large waitlist. Because of this, people with I/DD and their families continue to wait years for needed services. GCDD was encouraged by the creation of DBHDD's multi-year plan, finalized in 2018, to address the waitlist, and GCDD would like to advocate to ensure DBHDD is receiving enough funding from the General Assembly to reach their goals and objectives. Based on these goals, GCDD is recommending

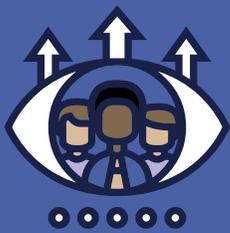
The Council's three policy priorities for 2022 include:

## 1 Addressing the direct support professional (DSP) workforce shortage and crisis

through increased funding for higher DSP wages.

Direct support professionals are integral to ensuring that people with I/DD can lead meaningful lives, fully included in their communities. Unfortunately, DSPs are drastically underpaid for the work that they do, which is one of the main contributors to the workforce shortage and crisis.

These issues have been extensively studied during Georgia's [2018 House Study Committee on the Workforce Shortage and Crisis in Home and Community Based Settings](#), as well as in GCDD's 2019 white paper "[The Direct Support Professional Workforce Crisis: Challenges, State Approaches, and Opportunities for Georgia](#)," written by Dr. Carol Britton



[Read GCDD's Public Policy Vision here.](#)

Our idea for this type of policy vision is to ensure that people with I/DD and their families are considered in all areas of legislation. Over the past two sessions, since "Disability in ALL policy" was created, we have worked to include the considerations of people with I/DD and their families in legislation ranging from voting rights to education to elevator maintenance. As a result, the voices of the disability community are being represented in new areas of policy, and our goal is to ensure that the disability community is represented across ALL areas of policy.

To be most effective in our advocacy, GCDD will lead on two to three priority areas each session, while also supporting our partner organizations in their efforts. This



[Read GCDD's 2022 Policy Agenda here.](#)

an additional 1500 waiver slots, which would be an approximate \$29.4 million in additional funding.

You can find DBHDD's multiyear plan, as well as an appendix document outlining specific target numbers, [here](#).

### **3** Strengthening Employment First in Georgia.

Georgia's Employment First Council was created through the passage of House Bill 831, "Georgia's Employment First Act," during the 2017 Legislative Session and was signed into law by Governor Nathan Deal on May 8, 2018. The Employment First Council is tasked with the following responsibilities:

1. Developing an Employment First training plan for providers.

2. Coordinating and conducting educational activities with other agencies to increase awareness of Employment First.

3. Evaluating the funding mechanism for inclusive post-secondary education (IPSE) programs in the state; and

4. Reviewing and making recommendations in a biannual report to the Governor and the General Assembly.

Although there was initial momentum when the Council was first created, there have not been meetings or recommendations produced from the Council for quite some time.

Our goal this session is to work with partners to strengthen the Employment First Council by encouraging them to restart

meetings, produce their biannual reports, and work to develop a strong strategic plan for the future of the Employment First Council. We were greatly encouraged by its development and do believe that the Council has an important role to play in advancing competitive, integrated employment options for Georgians with I/DD.

In addition to our three legislative priorities, GCDD will continue to support and advocate for [Georgia's inclusive postsecondary education \(IPSE\) programs](#). GCDD currently receives state funding to support the eight programs across the state, and we are committed to sustaining and growing those programs. Based on public input, we will also be supporting the work led by [Gwinnett S'ToPP](#) to disrupt the school to prison pipeline.

## Five Steps for a Successful 2022 Session



1. Identify your state legislators, including your state senator and state house representative, by visiting [openstates.org](https://openstates.org) and typing in your home address.



2. Once you have identified your legislators, reach out to them, either by phone or email, to let them know that you are their constituent, and you are most interested in how they can support Georgians with I/DD and their families. You can find their contact information at [openstates.org](https://openstates.org) as well.



3. Sign up for GCDD's email list so that you can stay up to date on all the happenings during the 2022 session. You can sign up [here](#).



4. Register and join us for our three virtual advocacy days where we will be focusing on the three policy priorities mentioned above. You can find out more information and register [here](#).



5. Lastly, make sure to tune in to our Public Policy for the People calls, hosted each Friday at noon by our Legislative Advocacy Director, Charlie Miller. You can register for the calls [here](#).

Join GCDD's  
Advocacy  
Network  
Today!



# A Greater Sense of Independence

by Adrienne Murchison

*Living Independently is an article series by the Georgia Council on Developmental Disabilities (GCDD). The series will cover self-determination and self-direction.*



**Participant self-directed services are growing in popularity as an avenue that can offer an increased autonomy for some individuals with intellectual/developmental disabilities (I/DD). The option offers the flexibility of personally directing services.**

“The intrinsic value is that feeling of being able to be in control of your life,” said Ron Wakefield of the state Department of Behavioral Health and Developmental Disabilities (DBHDD).

A 2019 national survey by [Applied Self-Direction](#) found 1.2 million people are self-directing, an increase of nearly 17% from [2016](#).

In Georgia, the number of people self-directing was down 10% during the three-year period. But according to DBHDD, there is robust interest.

Wakefield, director of the Division of Developmental and Intellectual Disabilities, said more than 3,000 individuals currently receive participant self-directed services.

An increasing number of people are hearing about the option from their friends. And while his department staff cannot steer a person or family to self-directed services, they can provide complete information and guidelines, he added.

“Our job is to make sure we present [people] with the entire array of services,” he said. “And we have lots of people who come in and say, ‘I don’t want traditional services, I want to self-direct.’”

Participant direction is a delivery option for services in which a person can decide and manage their support. They can hire the necessary staff and vendor companies, manage the budget for those services and even decide on the pay and hours of work.

It differs from traditional delivery of services in which the recipient or their representative select a company that manages services and the budget provided. With traditional delivery services, it’s the company that hires caregivers and support staff and decides on the pay rate and schedule hours.

DBHDD facilitates funding for both traditional and participant-directed methods of services through the New Options and Comprehensive Supports Waiver program of Medicaid, known as the [NOW/COMP Waivers](#).

Services provided through the waivers for people with I/DD can be carried out in the home or the community.

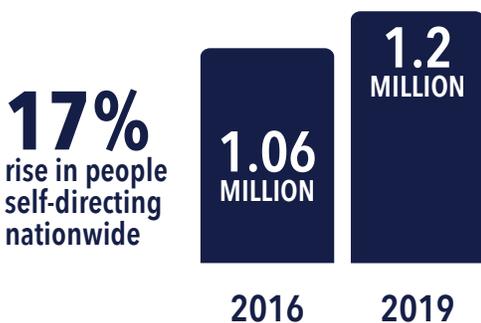
**WITH TRADITIONAL DELIVERY SERVICES, IT’S THE COMPANY THAT HIRES CAREGIVERS AND SUPPORT STAFF, AND DECIDES ON THE PAY RATE AND SCHEDULE HOURS.**



The New Options Waiver is for people who can live independently and would also benefit from support. The Comprehensive Supports Waiver is for people who need a great deal of support at home and out in the community.

In Georgia, participant direction is available only to people receiving the NOW/COMP Waiver and who can live independently or with a family member. It is not available to individuals who live in a residential facility, host home or a personal care home.

## SELF-DIRECTING BY THE NUMBERS



While a financial support services provider, also called a fiscal intermediary, is required for participant-directed services, Wakefield said there is a lot to teach for those who choose self-directed services.

“They will spend money on certain things in a certain way that may not be approved” he said. “That’s the main concern we have because we don’t want that to happen.”

**“We have lots of people who come in and say, ‘I don’t want traditional services, I want to self-direct.’”**

Wakefield added that if officials determine the recipient or representative of self-directed services unknowingly does this, the DBHDD will try to help them resolve and correct the problem with no penalties.

The Division is working to address the issue with training sessions and resources for individuals choosing participant-directed services, as well as their assistants and advocates.

“If someone isn’t fully educated on what it entails, they can literally get themselves into trouble,” Wakefield said. “We find that some people, after training and [starting] the services, don’t follow guidelines and that becomes problematic.”

The [Georgia Participant-Direction Advisory Group](#) provides invaluable insight advising the state on issues and needs that arise in families when using the service delivery options.

The advisory group is comprised of volunteers advocating for

participants and representatives using self-directed services.

Kate Murray, of Boston-based [Applied Self-Direction](#), said self-directed services date back to the 1970s when healthcare institutions were closing and people receiving services wanted more of a say and control over their lives.

Then in the 1990s, self-direction began to evolve through the work of the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, she added. Researchers were tracking outcomes for separate groups of individuals receiving self-directed services and traditional services.

“They had good outcomes with self-directing adults with developmental disabilities,” Murray said. “That gave us a mandate to replicate the model. The research was critical for getting full government approval.”

Applied Self-Direction works with states and the federal government to create new self-direction programs and consult on policy. Through membership, the organization provides such states as Georgia expert training and technology on all aspects of self-direction including employment laws and Medicaid rules.

“We work with states and families to help make sure services are high quality and person-centered, and work for the families,” Murray said.

In general, participant-directed programs can vary from state to state.

“We have seen nationally, a much greater uptake of folks who want self-direction,” Murray said. “Especially in wake of the pandemic, to limit exposure.”

The self-direction advocate said, for example, the state of Maine is in the process of adding self-directed services to their

## IN PARTICIPANT DIRECTION, THE RECIPIENT OR THEIR REPRESENTATIVE SELECT A COMPANY THAT MANAGES SERVICES AND THE BUDGET PROVIDED.

waivers serving people with developmental disabilities. And Maine has already added self-directed services to their waivers serving people with brain injury and certain physical disabilities during the pandemic, Murray said.

In Georgia, during the pandemic, Medicaid temporarily relaxed guidelines through a special waiver allowing family members to be caregivers to the person receiving self-directed services.

“Prior to the pandemic you weren’t allowed to hire dad and mom except in certain situations,” Wakefield said. “Families have reached out and asked us to [continue with the new policy]. We are looking at that. We are looking at other states to see what’s possible.”



*This article includes an interview with Ron Wakefield, director of the state Department of Behavioral Health and Developmental Disabilities' Division of Developmental and Intellectual Disabilities.*

# GCDD Kicks Off New Five Year Strategic Plan

by McKenzie Wren, Wren Consulting

Starting October 1, 2021, the Georgia Council on Developmental Disabilities (GCDD) kicked off its new Five Year Strategic Plan that set the goals which the Council aims to complete between 2022-2026.



**The federal government requires all Developmental Disabilities Councils to create new strategic plans every five years. The Five Year Strategic Plan determines how the Council will allocate funding to create systems change for individuals with developmental disabilities and family members through advocacy and capacity building activities.**

The plan is the foundation of how the Council does its work across the state. By hearing from individuals with disabilities, family members, caregivers, siblings and the community-at-large, it sets the course of what the Council must work on for the next five years.

All GCDD efforts aim to ensure that people with disabilities are independent and interdependent, have greater economic self-sufficiency, are integrated and included in their respective communities and are self-determined in their lives.

The Council began its work in July 2020 and over subsequent months, engaged over 500 Georgians through a survey, focus groups, interviews and town halls. The entire process was done virtually due to the COVID shutdown of 2020. The team had to use immense creativity to be as inclusive as possible to ensure access to townhalls, focus groups and the survey.

In addition, Dr. Alyssa Miller, Director of Public Policy Research at GCDD, conducted a comprehensive review and analysis of the ecosystem impacting people with developmental/intellectual disabilities (I/DD). She looked at overall state demographics, state of disability characteristics including residential and non-residential settings, employment poverty, access to service and many other relevant topics.

Through the process, several themes emerged as GCDD spoke with Council members, people with

and without disabilities throughout Georgia, and advocates. GCDD was particularly inspired by one of its focus group participants. This individual implored GCDD to think big and take the lead in creating a Georgia that welcomes and supports all people including those with I/DD.

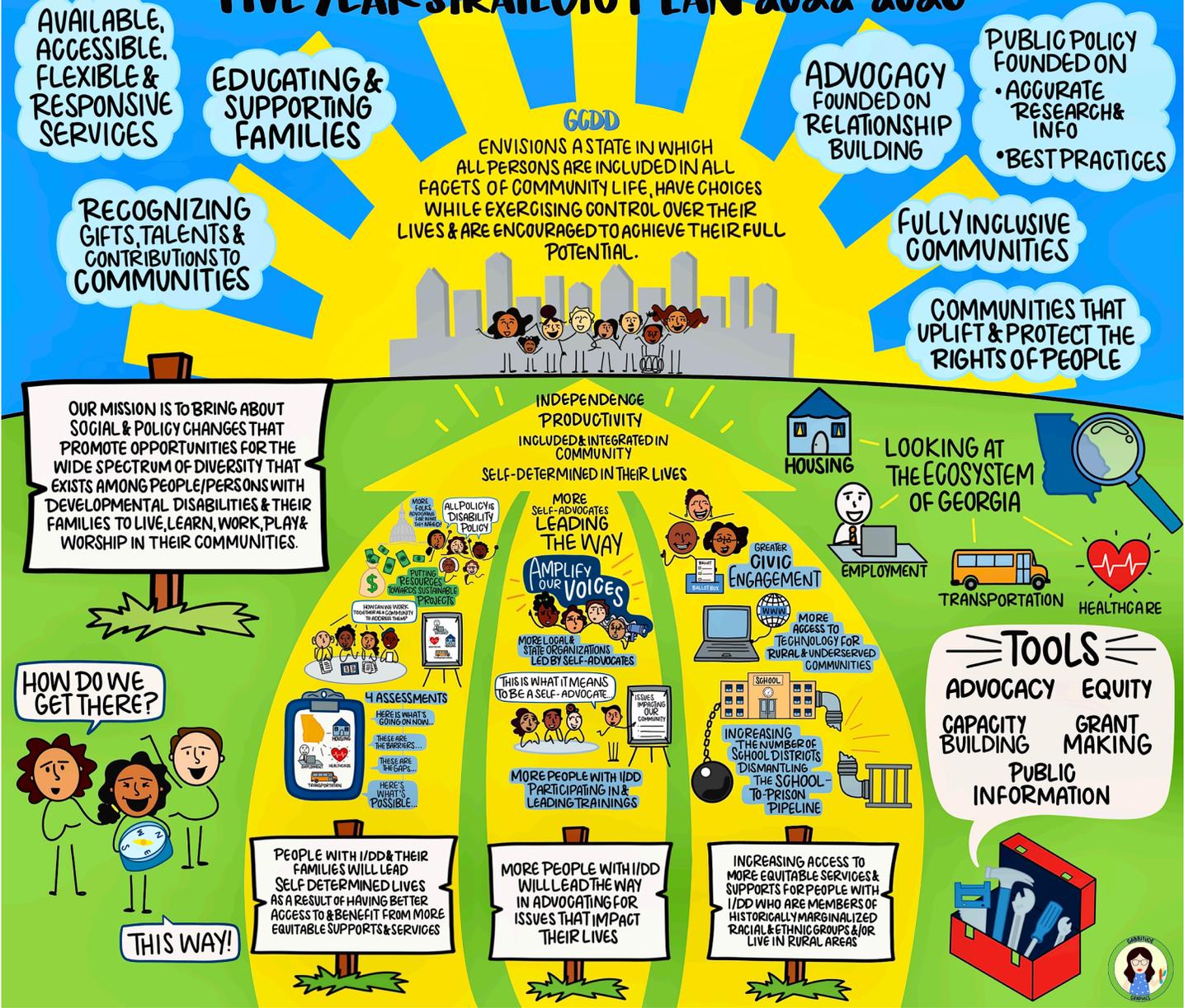
**The plan is the foundation of how the Council does its work across the state.**

To do this, GCDD must focus on people with intellectual/developmental disabilities being at the lead of every campaign and initiative. It means understanding and supporting the intersections of an individual's identity in a way that considers the various ways people describe themselves including a person's disability, race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, religion, age, etc. For GCDD's work, it means focusing on collaborative efforts not only with our partners in the "Developmental Disabilities Network," but also with those individuals and

**GCDD MUST FOCUS ON PEOPLE WITH INTELLECTUAL/DEVELOPMENTAL DISABILITIES BEING AT THE LEAD OF EVERY CAMPAIGN AND INITIATIVE.**



# GEORGIA COUNCIL ON DEVELOPMENTAL DISABILITIES FIVE YEAR STRATEGIC PLAN 2022-2026



The Five Year Strategic Plan infographic created by Gabby Melnick is designed to show the plan in a visually pleasing and simplified format.

organizations that represent people with physical disabilities, older adults, poor people, people with mental health issues, people who live in rural communities, and others working to create social change resulting in a better Georgia for everyone. Finally, it means supporting coherent public policies through analysis and advocacy that support individuals

with intellectual/developmental disabilities and their families to become more independent, productive, included and integrated in their communities, and self-determined in their lives.

GCDD believes that this strategic plan for the years spanning 2022-2026 is about creating and supporting the kinds of changes in Georgia that will dramatically

improve the lives of people with intellectual/developmental disabilities. GCDD will continue to influence the direction of public policy at both state and federal levels, to support capacity building through technical assistance and grants, to bring people together to discuss how to create change, and to promote public awareness of those in need.

# NEW PLAN GOALS

The goals read as follow:

## 1 SYSTEMS CHANGE:

In partnership with allies, advocates, stakeholders and communities, people who have intellectual/developmental disabilities and their families will have increased access to and benefit from equitable quality supports and services that increase self-determination and meet their needs and preferences.

## 2 SELF-ADVOCACY:

GCDD will provide more opportunities for the voices of individuals with intellectual/developmental disabilities to be heard by strengthening capacity among Georgia self-advocacy organizations and initiatives, and by supporting cross-disability coalitions and leadership development programs for and by people with intellectual/developmental disabilities.

## 3 TARGETED DISPARITY AND DIVERSITY:

The Council's activities and those done in collaboration will be conducted with a focus on equity that increases the access of marginalized communities with particular emphasis on racial and ethnic minorities and those in rural areas.



Each goal has two to four objectives with activities which will inform the work for the next five years. While GCDD has the required Targeted Disparity goal, GCDD is committed to embedding equity into its practices at all levels and not just through the specific targeted disparity. GCDD accomplishes its work through advocacy, public information, grant making and capacity building.

The goals and objectives went out to the public for feedback through surveys and townhalls. Feedback was overall positive and there were no significant changes made to the goals and objectives.

The planning team and Council worked to prioritize and budget the activities,

creating an evaluation plan and finalizing outputs, outcomes and performance measures.

Following successful adoption at the July 2021 Council meeting, the plan was approved and in September, the plan was uploaded and officially submitted. New to the process this year is an infographic to show the plan in a visually pleasing and simplified format.

[Read all the goals and objectives of the new Five Year Strategic Plan here.](#)

## Self-Advocacy In Action - Building on Sources of Strength

The Uniting for Change Leadership Collective came together for a retreat in early November in North Georgia called the Power of Resilience. We worked together, about 45 of us, to build fires inside of our hearts, and our minds, and between us, so that we would have the strength to carry on and strengthen the self-advocacy movement in Georgia.



This event was made possible with a lot of thoughtful planning and willingness of all participants to safeguard our time and space together. Everyone was vaccinated

against COVID-19 and tested negative before arriving.

We spent an afternoon reviewing

what it means to be part of this Leadership Collective; the expectations, our commitment and responsibility. We discussed and defined the role of each self-advocate as part of the Leadership Collective and as a Committee Member (Impact and Engagement Committee, Outreach Committee and Education Committee) within

Everyone committed to this work because we are all clear we are stronger together.

this Collective. We accomplished this in large and small groups together with allies and supporters. Everyone committed to this work because we are all clear we are stronger together.

The role of the Impact Committee is to provide resources to educate self-advocates across the state about the importance of being at the table and speaking up, communicating with local elected officials and state leaders in government, while providing input to state and local agency representatives. The Impact Committee's goals for this legislative session includes a letter writing campaign to:

- **Seek funding for a full array of transportation services throughout the state to support employment and meaningful community opportunities and activities.**
- **Increase affordable housing options that support more independent living.**
- **Create waiver service definitions that provide flexibility of service provision in order to build provider capacity.**

The Impact Committee continues to be concerned about voting rights, accessibility for all, and the impact of re-districting within

the state. Uniting for Change will continue to provide information to the legislature and the public with issues and concerns that arise around voting in the state.



In 2022, the Leadership Collective of Uniting for Change will focus on growing local area networks of self-advocates and allies and supporters by creating awareness, interest, participation, commitment and leadership within the self-advocacy movement. These networks will move the priorities of change forward with voices that will RISE UP and SPEAK OUT!



Uniting for Change leadership retreat



Uniting Georgians and influencing change by speaking up and taking control of our lives

**uniting for change**

- [www.uniting4change.org](http://www.uniting4change.org)
- [www.facebook.com/unitingforchangeGeorgia](https://www.facebook.com/unitingforchangeGeorgia)
- [www.instagram.com/uniting4changegeorgia](https://www.instagram.com/uniting4changegeorgia)
- [Uniting4ChangeGA@gmail.com](mailto:Uniting4ChangeGA@gmail.com)

# How to Fully Fund the NOW/COMP Waivers Waiting List over the Next Five Years

Featuring Georgia Senator Sally Harrell

*GCDD recently sat down with [Senator Sally Harrell \(D-40\)](#) to discuss [Senate Bill 208](#) that proposes to fully fund the NOW/COMP Waivers waiting list which is currently over 7,000+. As the 2022 legislative session begins, Senator Harrell discusses why the bill is important, how it aims to help the families, and why legislators need to hear personal stories to make sure they know what is important to people who vote for them.*

**Senator Sally Harrell (SH):** I represent State Senate District 40, which includes the cities of Dunwoody, Sandy Springs, Peachtree Corners, Brookhaven, Doraville, Chamblee, some of unincorporated DeKalb County around Tucker and a little bit of the City of Atlanta. And, I was elected to the Senate in 2018. I'm finishing my second term. Previous to that, I served in the Georgia House from 1999 to 2005. I took some time off in between to raise my kids.

House districts are running about 60,000 people right now. A Senate district is about three times as big as a House district. And when you compare it to congressional districts, Senate districts are about one quarter of the size of congressional districts. So congressional districts are huge.

I've enjoyed serving in the Senate. It's fewer people – there's 56 senators – whereas in the House, there are 180 representatives. So it's a little bit more of an intimate experience in the Senate in that you have fewer colleagues and you get to know them a little bit better. There are a couple of things that are different about serving in the Senate versus the House. We have to be more of a team player in the Senate because you've got this small group of people you're working with and everybody has to play a role.

**GCDD:** As you may know, the focus of the Georgia Council on Developmental Disabilities is to serve people with intellectual/developmental disabilities across Georgia. Specifically, we wanted to talk about [Senate Bill 208](#). But before we go into that, we want to know how this bill came about.

**SH:** Sure, [Senate Bill 208](#) is actually my bill. I authored the bill. The reason I was motivated to author [Senate Bill 208](#) is because when I



served in the House years ago, that was when the *Olmstead* decision was made, which started a campaign called Unlock the Waiting List. And so I was there when that started, when there was the first waiting list for community services. And I remember being very involved in that at the time, and I was actually pregnant with my first baby. I was hearing stories from the disability community for the first time when I was pregnant and it made a huge impact on me because I knew that this too could be my story – that anyone can have a child that lives with a disability. And I'll be honest, it scared me. But it also made the stories very impactful so that I never forgot. When I came back to the Senate and my kids were almost grown and I found out that waiting list was still there, I was heartbroken. And I just knew that I had to do something about that, I had to continue the work that I had started so many years ago. I used the resources at the Georgia State Capitol. I talked to people, got updates about what was different now about the waivers, and determined the best way forward was to eliminate the waiting list year by year, by advocating for appropriations in the budget so that the waiting list would go away in five years.

I had actually heard this idea stated by the Department of Behavioral Health and Developmental Disabilities (DBHDD) – they presented this plan in their budget hearing. So really the bill is just a replication of the department's plan

**That's why we're always saying, tell your story, tell your personal story, because that's what breaks through that kind of thinking. I know you've probably heard it over and over and over again, but I'm here to say that strategy works and that's what you need to do.**

**GCDD:** What has been your experience being back in the Georgia General Assembly, serving a very large district with very prominent cities that are growing very fast?

**SH:** It is a large district. We just went through redistricting. And, every Senate district is now supposed to be about 191,000 people. Whereas

in order to further support what the department already wants to do.

**GCDD:** Part of your bill brings in the expansion of the population. You're projecting that there's going to be 33,500 individuals between 2020 or early 2021 and 2030 who will be requiring services, in addition to everyone who's already there. So before we get into the other parts of the bill, how did you come to that number? How does that get defined?

**SH:** Sure, in a bill, it's a good idea to write a "Whereas" section at the beginning of the bill that provides the data to justify why you're presenting a particular policy solution. In getting ready to draft the bill, I went to the research office and asked them about future needs and future population projections. Writing a bill is a team effort.



**You want to elevate your issue. You want to become the issue that politicians want to outwardly support. This is a statewide issue that affects thousands and thousands of people. Give yourself that kind of clout.**

You've got the research team, you've got the Office of Legislative Council who are the lawyers who write the wording of the bill, because I'm not a lawyer. So there's a whole team of people who go into writing the bill. And then of course, there's the author who carries the bill through the process, and the co-sponsors who signed onto the bill to give the bill support.

**GCDD:** There's very specific language in it talking about providing appropriations to really take care of the entire waiting list, which is right now at 7,000+. That's been a big goal that the GCDD and, of course, other disability advocates have had since *Olmstead*, and since before *Olmstead*.

Can we dive into that part of the bill? What does that look like in terms of implementation and what that means for people with disabilities and their families and Georgians in general?

**SH:** Part of the problem and the reason we still have a waiting list is because in each state budget, there are only about 100 slots that are funded. And so obviously if you have a waiting list of six or 7,000 people, and you're only funding 100 at a time, you're never going to work through that waiting list. What I was told was that in order to come to the top of the waiting list, you pretty much had to have some sort of family emergency. And what I was told by families is that it pretty much takes having an emergency in order to get one of those slots. That's unacceptable to me.

What would happen under the bill if you're going to fund the waiting list in five years, you're looking at funding more like 1,800 slots per year, instead of 100. That's a big budget appropriation. To me, it is appropriate because caring for these families is a role of the government. That should be one of the top roles of government because the needs cost too much. The expenses are too high for almost every family to be able to manage alone. That's when society comes in to help and the most efficient way of doing that is through government. To me, it's an appropriation that is totally justifiable. Not all my colleagues agree with that, but to me, spending that kind of money is what the government is there for, because it's a collective expense.

**GCDD:** This bill would be attempting to get rid of the current waiting list and get everybody who is on there the services they need. How does the bill address the needs of people who are not yet on the waiting list, but who may have needs that arise later?

**SH:** The thought is that if you include more people, 1,800 people instead of 100 people for the next five years,



## 33,500

Estimate of how many Georgians will be in need of developmental disability services between 2020 - 2030



## \$440 Million

Estimated cost to fund the waiting list over five years



## 7000+

People with developmental disabilities currently on Georgia's waiting list

[READ THE BILL HERE.](#)

then for anyone who comes on later, the finances of that are going to be much more manageable because there won't be as many people. So you're looking at a larger appropriation for the next five years, but after that, you're kind of playing catch up. The number of people that would be coming on would be much more affordable and there just wouldn't be an issue. They just roll on.

**GCDD:** Community living and community supports are exactly what you're aiming to accomplish with this bill citing *Olmstead* and the *Americans with Disabilities Act* as its foundation. However, there is a DSP crisis – a shortage of direct support professionals. Once people are at...

**This interview was summarized due to limited space. Read the extended version here.**

# Inclusion is an Act of Good Faith

by Shannon Turner, Photography by Kelly Blackmon

“Hello, Dalia, how are you today? How do you feel today?” Hannah sings to Dalia. She begins dropping out words from the songs and waits. “I feel happy,” Dalia types out. There’s a certain kind of joy that comes with witnessing someone who is very good at her job while she’s in the middle of doing it. Hannah Rhinehart is indeed very good at her job.

Dalia Cheskes during a session with her music therapist Hannah

As a neurologic music therapist, she guides her clients through sessions that involve different modalities of singing and clapping together, playing instruments and dancing on footprints marked on the floor. As the song becomes more call and response, Dalia replaces the words that Hannah is missing. If she waits too long, Hannah points to Dalia’s [PRC](#) communication device and asks with a smile, “What’s the word?”

Dalia Cheskes is a 19-year-old young woman living in Roswell, Georgia. She has autism and Type 1 diabetes (T1D). The curriculum Hannah uses with Dalia is a combination of her own original music, songs by the founder of the [George Center Foundation](#), Jamie George, and even popular songs by Meghan Trainor that Hannah

has adapted. The two have been working together for three years. As Hannah and Dalia go over to the piano to work on their recital piece, “Call Me Maybe” by Carlie Rae Jepsen, Hannah lightly holds Dalia’s left hand over the keys and points to which fingers should play while singing the lyrics.

“What should we do next?” Hannah asks. “Song,” Dalia replies. “Not quite,” Hannah replies, encouraging Dalia to make a complete sentence with her device. They eventually move to an activity that involves hand drums that Hannah holds in upper and lower quadrants, asking Dalia both to hit with her hands and kick with her legs. “Eyes first, then hands,” she coaches, as Dalia struggles a bit to make contact quickly with the drums. Hannah is helping Dalia to link up her cognitive, motor and language skills throughout the session.

With the session over, Hannah and Dalia come out to the lobby to find Dalia’s mom, Rebecca. Hannah sits down with Rebecca to report on Dalia’s progress and accomplishments. Dalia hovers nearby in the noisy lobby, a little impatiently as many people are talking all at once, and Dalia is not a fan. She sits down with her iPad, so she can distract herself from

all the noise. Rebecca wonders together with Hannah about the upcoming recital. In a tale as old as time between teenagers and their parents, Dalia has developed a dislike of her mother’s presence when she plays or performs; it hurts her mom’s feelings. The two adults discuss whether they should create a visual schedule for Dalia that will ease her tension.

**IF REBECCA HAD A CHANCE TO SPEAK WITH A LEGISLATOR, SHE WOULD SAY, “FIRST OF ALL, THERE ARE PEOPLE WHO ARE ON THE WAITING LIST. WE NEED TO HAVE A STRONG PLAN TO GET THAT LIST ELIMINATED. IT JUST BREAKS MY HEART.”**

”

Dalia’s family uses her Medicaid waiver funds to pay for her participation in music therapy, and she also attends an annual summer camp at a theater. Even though she’s only 19, Dalia is on a full New Options Waiver (NOW) and has been for seven and a half years. Rebecca says they were lucky to get one so early, but unfortunately it was because there were dire health issues in the family. Rebecca started calling everyone she knew



Dalia practicing piano with Hannah

to see if they could help get the application moved up the list if possible. It was approved six months later. Thank goodness, those health issues were resolved, and now they do not have to worry about getting Dalia on a Medicaid waiver as she approaches graduation.



Dalia takes Zumba classes with Jaclyn and Stephanie at Friendship Circle.

Dalia attends Centennial High School and will likely stay there until she's 22 to receive her general education diploma. She's in a self-contained classroom there. Rebecca says she likes the program and feels Dalia is getting a good education. She especially likes that neurotypical youth have positions as "peer facilitators" that they apply for in order to serve. Around one or two peer facilitators come in per class period.

Speaking of getting out and socializing, Dalia gets a lot out of socialization opportunities provided through Atlanta's Jewish community, including programs like Friendship Circle and Birthday Club. Friendship Circle meets on Sunday afternoons

monthly. Around 25 people with intellectual/developmental disabilities (I/DD) attend Friendship Circle each time, with 25 young volunteers paired with them one-on-one. The entire group then comes together in a circle where they practice the prayers that are used at worship, as well as the importance of tithing, or giving back to the community. After that, small groups rotate through a series of activities, including Zumba dances, cooking, soccer and arts and crafts.

If Rebecca had a chance to speak with a legislator, she would say, "First of all, there are people who are on the waiting list. We need to have a strong plan to get that list eliminated. It just breaks my heart." She goes on to talk about how blessed she feels that Dalia has a waiver, but that we need to continue to fund and expand programs for people like her daughter. Even with what they have, she reflects, "There aren't even speech therapists for adults like Dalia. So, in the next five years, before she turns 22, I'm definitely gonna want her to have a new device."

Everyone fantasizes about their children growing up less fast, but



Dalia and her mom Rebecca at a music therapy session

**EVERYONE FANTASIZES ABOUT THEIR CHILDREN GROWING UP LESS FAST, BUT AS REBECCA'S THOUGHTS TURN TO DALIA'S GRADUATION NOT THAT FAR AWAY, SHE SAYS, "NOW, I'M LIKE, I SURE WISH SHE WAS 12 AGAIN."**



as Rebecca's thoughts turn to Dalia's graduation not that far away, she says, "When you have little children, in some ways, people are more understanding. You know, they're young, they're small. But when you're talking about a 17-, or 20- or 30-year-old person, it's real stuff. It's not just, 'Oh, they're going to grow out of it.' This is a real situation that families are facing, and as much as I wished she would grow up all her life, now, I'm like, I sure wish she was 12 again."



**Telling Our Stories** paints a picture of the complex systems of support that enable people with I/DD to live their best lives. Spanning Georgia's 56 state senate districts, these stories feature at least one individual who resides in each district - allowing this project to become a vehicle of advocacy for Georgians living with I/DD.

# ACL Awards Georgia-based Mentra Award for Inclusive Employment by Jennifer Bosk



The Administration for Community Living (ACL) in Washington D.C. recently awarded its top prize of \$100,000 in its “Inclusive Talent Pipeline for American Businesses” challenge to Georgia’s Mentra. Mentra is the brainchild of passionate disability advocates Jhillika Kumar and Conner Reinhardt who are trying to place neurodiversity at the core of recruiting in a way that scales, treating every individual as unique and more than just a resume.

The Georgia Council on Developmental Disabilities (GCDD) is excited about Mentra and its work, which is directly tied to several of the goals outlined in GCDD’s Five Year Strategic Plan, specifically around employment.

potential employers. GCDD staff met with the group and helped shape the product design and marketing effort. This is a real show of innovation and to win this award shows the potential when students come together to solve a problem,” said Eric Jacobson, executive director of GCDD.

Mentra matches neurodiverse individuals with employers who value their strengths. It puts recruiters in front of candidates rather than forcing neurodiverse individuals to navigate through the challenging process of finding a job. Mentra’s key innovation lies in its matching algorithm that learns from an employer’s hiring needs and a neurodiverse candidate’s strengths to create career success.

“GCDD’s partnership with Mentra has taught us an important lesson: We are stronger together. Our research with GCDD, as well as the signed partnership during

phase one of the competition, has been instrumental in understanding the needs of federal organizations across Georgia, as well as the pain points that exist for neurodivergents looking for employment. By joining forces with GCDD, advocacy organizations and inclusive employers, we believe that together we can bridge the ‘Disability Divide’ once and for all,” said Kumar.

In November 2019, [ACL](#) launched the Inclusive Talent Pipeline for American Businesses challenge competition to help businesses identify ways to help expand their recruiting and retention programs to better include workers with intellectual/developmental disabilities (I/DD).

According to ACL, research shows American businesses that hire and support workers with I/DD see improved performance and productivity – 28% higher revenue and 30% higher profit margins. However, businesses that want to diversify their workforces do not always know how to implement effective talent pipelines that include people with I/DD, who experience many barriers to employment that lead to a higher unemployment rate when compared to their peers without disabilities.

Mentra founders and disability advocates Conner Reinhardt and Jhillika Kumar

**BY JOINING FORCES WITH GCDD, ADVOCACY ORGANIZATIONS AND INCLUSIVE EMPLOYERS, WE BELIEVE THAT TOGETHER WE CAN BRIDGE THE “DISABILITY DIVIDE” ONCE AND FOR ALL.**



“The students who formed Mentra came to GCDD looking for an opportunity to share the product they were developing. This provides great opportunities for people with autism and other developmental disabilities to connect with

# Why the name Mentra?

A combination of the words:

## mentor

A mentor is a person who trains and guides someone, like the second-grade English teacher who saw the spark of creativity in your writing and encouraged you to become a professional author.

## mantra

A mantra is a motivating chant, like the "I think I can, I think I can" you repeat over and over to yourself on the last stretch of every marathon you run.

ACL received more than 50 proposals for the challenge; five were selected to move on to phase two, where three finalists were chosen. On October 19, finalists presented the results of their pilot projects, and Mentra was chosen as the grand prize winner by a panel of judges.

"As a fully neurodiverse team, winning this federal competition paves the path for Mentra to build a future that accepts and respects every human regardless of their gender, race or cognitive ability. We are excited to work alongside members of the Department of Health and Human Services to build a robust

talent pipeline for the neurodiverse and scale Mentra's services to every state in the U.S. by partnering with vocational rehabilitation centers, universities, and employers across the country," Kumar added.

**Employers wanting to learn more about Mentra are invited to schedule a demonstration [here](#).**

**To use Mentra's free, accessible web app to match with employers who value your strengths, click [here](#).**

Research shows American businesses that hire and support workers with disabilities see improved performance and productivity - **28% higher revenue and 30% higher profit margins.**



**Mentra Team**  
(l to r) Averie Brookie, Benjamin Lee, Conner Reinhardt, Shea Belsky, Jhillika Kumar, Jared Williams and Rachayita Giri

# Students Thrive at Kennesaw State's Academy for Inclusive Learning and Social Growth

by H. M. Cauley



**Jordan Winfrey, 18, grew up with his mom's assurance that college could be in his future. But the graduate of the Omega Learning Center in Douglasville found that his diagnoses of autism and speech impediment made finding the right fit a challenge.**

"My mom always told me I could go to college, but I'd need people to help me along the way," he said. "She stayed up all night one night and found the Academy for Inclusive Learning and Social Growth at Kennesaw State University (KSU), and once she showed me what they stand for, I knew I wanted to be a part of it."

Winfrey got his first introduction to the program during a summer session that connected him with other prospective students, the faculty and The Academy's goals.

"I found they are really supportive of everyone, no matter their disability," he said. "They're very patient; they take the time to see that every student is taken care of."

Officially dubbed the [Academy for Inclusive Learning and Social Growth \(AILSG\)](#), the program launched in 2009 and is the oldest [Inclusive Post Secondary Education \(IPSE\)](#) program out of the eight in the state to provide higher education opportunities for high school grads with intellectual and developmental disabilities (I/DD).

"We want to help them self-actualize as best as possible," said Neil Duchac, PhD, The Academy's executive director and an associate professor of social work and human services in KSU's WellStar College of Health and Human Services. "We look for someone with a third grade reading level and no significant behavioral

problems, who was part of an Individualized Education Program (IEP) or something similar. We also ask for recommendations and a psychological evaluation. And students need to demonstrate an interest in pursuing their education."

Many students come to the program with a two-year commitment and can be invited to remain for an additional two to work on advanced leadership and career development. But first, they participate in three academic, social and career enrichment classes each term and audit an elective from the general catalogue. Through the College of Professional Education, they also take courses in customer service, culinary skills or writing.

"As part of the inclusive piece, students also join a club on campus to be more integrated," said Duchac.

**They are really supportive of everyone, no matter their disability. They're very patient; they take the time to see that every student is taken care of.**



Jordan won student of the month for AILSG's Academic, Social and Career Enrichment Program.

The university has about 200 clubs, and many of AILSG’s students opt for those connected to soccer, Disney or a religious group.

After the first term, students also sign up for internships. Duchac said KSU has cultivated 40 on-campus partners who can offer students six to 10 hours of work each week. During their final year, they can bump that up to 15 hours a week at a job on or off campus. Of the 45 students currently in the program, some are working in the university’s bicycle shop, the student recreation area and the bookstore on both the main and Marietta campus.

“Since its inception, the program has produced 122 graduates who have moved on to a variety of jobs,” said Duchac.

“One works at the University of Georgia (UGA) bakery, another is a lifeguard for the city of Atlanta, and another is doing coding with an engineering firm,” he said. “And we had one go to another program at UGA. Along

with our support staff, we have advisors who follow them for six months to help them find a job.”

Winfrey said he’s been supported from the beginning. “People really take the time to make sure everyone is treated fairly, and everyone feels like they belong. I’m now thinking of staying for two more years and maybe getting a degree in psychology.”

Earning such a degree can change lives, and that’s the key point Duchac would make to legislators or others who ask about the program’s effectiveness.

“It changes lives in two ways: For our students, it may be the first time they feel accepted and have friends,” he said. “They’re not bullied, and they’re doing everything a typical student would do. It also influences any other student who interacts with them. The real gem of the program is that our campus has about 43,000 students, but you could never pick our students out.”

Discover more [here](#) about KSU’s post-secondary inclusive education program in Georgia that offers a unique university experience focusing on academic excellence, social enrichment and career development.

**SINCE ITS INCEPTION, THE PROGRAM HAS PRODUCED 122 GRADUATES WHO HAVE MOVED ON TO A VARIETY OF JOBS.**



Jordan (second from upper left) enjoying an afternoon of bowling with fellow KSU students.



# COMMUNITY CALENDAR

## JANUARY

January 13-14

**GCDD Quarterly Council Meeting** - Atlanta, GA

[Find more information online.](#)

January 16-19

**NAPSEC 2022 Annual Leadership Conference**

New Orleans, LA

[Register online here.](#)

January 18, 2 PM - 3:30 PM

**Accessible Technology on Smartphones and Tablets for Users with Hearing, Cognitive, and Mobility Disabilities - Virtual**

[FREE virtual registration here.](#)

January 22

**GA Southern Conference on Children - Virtual**

[Register online here.](#)

January 26, 10 AM to 1 PM

**GCDD Advocacy Day 1: Addressing the Direct Support Professional Workforce Shortage**

[FREE Registration on Zoom.](#)

January 26-28

**23rd International Conference on Autism, Intellectual Disability and Developmental Disabilities**

Clearwater Beach, FL

[More info and registration here.](#)

January 29, 8 AM to 12:30 PM

**35th Annual Focus + Fragile Kids Educational Conference**

Decatur, GA

[Registration opens January 3.](#)

January 29

**World Disability & Rehabilitation Conference**

Montreal, Canada

[Register here.](#)

## FEBRUARY

February 1 - 17

**2022 Virtual African American Conference on Disabilities (AACD)**

[Register FREE online here.](#)

February 3, 5 PM

**Closing Day for Georgia Artists with Disabilities** - Carrollton, GA

[More information here.](#)

February 11

**Night to Shine**

[Find Georgia locations here.](#)

February 15, 2 - 3 PM

**The Intersection of Race and Disability - Virtual**

[FREE virtual registration](#)

[by February 14 here.](#)

February 16, 10 AM to 1 PM

**GCDD Advocacy Day 2: Reducing the NOW/COMP Waiver Waitlist**

[FREE Registration on Zoom.](#)

February 28 - March 1

**37th Annual Pacific Rim International Conference on Disability & Diversity - Virtual**

[More information here.](#)

## MARCH

March TBD

**Strengthening Independent Living In Georgia** - Atlanta, GA

[Watch here for updates.](#)



### Register Now for Virtual Advocacy Days 2022!

Jan 26: Addressing the DSP shortage

Feb 16: Reducing the Waitlist

Mar 16: Advancing Employment First

10 AM to 1 PM on Zoom

[Register for all days here](#)

March 11, 3 - 7 PM

**2nd Annual Disability Fall Resource Fair** - Kennesaw, GA

[More information here.](#)

March 15, 2 - 3 PM

**Accessible Social Media 2.0 - Virtual**

[FREE virtual registration here.](#)

March 16, 10 AM to 1 PM

**GCDD Advocacy Day 3: Advancing Employment First**

[FREE Registration on Zoom.](#)

## APRIL

April 1, 8 AM to 4 PM

**2022 18th Annual American Indian Disability Summit**

Phoenix, AZ

[More details here](#)

April 14-15

**GCDD Quarterly Council Meeting** - Atlanta, GA

[Find more information online.](#)

For more events across the state, [visit GCDD's Calendar of Events.](#)