

# The Council Connection

April 2026

*Building inclusion and opportunity across Mississippi.*

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## **From the Director's Desk** ~ *Reflections on leadership, inclusion, and progress across Mississippi.*

- By Christy Ashley, Executive Director

As we move through 2026, I am excited to share a few updates about what has been happening at the Council and what we are looking forward to in the months ahead.

One exciting change for us is that we will soon be moving into a new office space. While the move has not happened yet, we are looking forward to this transition and the opportunities it will bring. The new space will better support our staff as we work together, plan for the future, and continue serving individuals with developmental disabilities and their families across Mississippi.

We are also excited to welcome a new Program Coordinator, Mitzi Morris, to the Council staff. Her position helps support our programs and projects and strengthens the work we do with partners across the state. We look forward to the ideas, energy, and dedication she brings to the Council.

As we look ahead to the rest of 2026, the Council is focused on continuing to support projects and partnerships that promote independence, inclusion, and opportunity for people with developmental disabilities. We are excited about the work ahead and remain committed to listening to individuals and families, so their voices help guide what we do.

The Council's work would not be possible without our members, partners, and community supporters. Thank you for your continued commitment and willingness to serve.

We look forward to a great year ahead!

**Christy Ashley, LMSW**  
*Executive Director*  
Mississippi Council on DD



# Program Spotlights

Over the past year, the **MSU Adapted Swim Camp** expanded its reach, serving 53 individuals with developmental disabilities, 82 family members, and 189 others across multiple camps. The program enhanced impact through added graduate assistants, increased instructor certification opportunities, and hands-on university training. With strong partnerships and volunteer support, the camp continues to grow and provide inclusive swimming opportunities for people with developmental disabilities.

Throughout the past year, **Family Advocacy Network (FAN)** supported more than 265 individuals with developmental disabilities and 333 family members through workshops, events, and virtual trainings. The program expanded regional cohorts and improved access for rural families. Trainings on IEPs, behavior supports, and self-advocacy, along with Project ECHO sessions, strengthened knowledge for families and professionals, building a sustainable network of support across Mississippi.

# Council Highlights

During the second quarterly meeting in Gulfport, Mississippi, the Council welcomed two new members: Yashika Nicholson of Laurel and Shatireale Hill of Meridian. Both are parents of individuals with developmental disabilities and bring valuable insight through their lived experiences. We look forward to their contributions.

Council-funded grants delivered meaningful impact this quarter, reaching 232 individuals with developmental disabilities, 180 family members, and an additional 69 community members. As this successful grant cycle approaches its conclusion on June 30, 2026, these outcomes reflect the continued strength and reach of the Council’s investments.



Of the 11 active grants, six have been approved for continuation. These grants will begin July 1, 2026, and run through June 30, 2027.

Looking ahead, MSCDD is excited to build on this progress. With new members, continued grant support, and strong leadership, the Council will keep working to expand opportunities, promote inclusion, and improve outcomes for people with developmental disabilities and their families across Mississippi.

# Celebrating Impact

The Council's programs continue to make meaningful differences in the lives of individuals with developmental disabilities and their families across Mississippi.

**Community Garden** through The Arc of Northwest MS engages participants in hands-on gardening to build teamwork, leadership, and self-advocacy skills. **Julia's Place** supports toddlers and families with inclusive therapies, advocacy, and school transition preparation. **Bloom Center for Neurodiversity** prepares neurodivergent students for life, academics, and careers with personalized guidance in self-advocacy, social skills, and independent living.



Skill-building and independence are advanced through programs like **BLAST**, which strengthens young adults' social, emotional, and practical life skills, and **SMILE**, which trains future dental professionals to provide inclusive, behaviorally informed care. **Pathway Weavers** fosters creativity, self-expression, and relaxation through freestyle weaving, while **MSU Adapted Swim Camp** expands inclusive aquatic opportunities and trains instructors statewide. **Bridges to Speak** improves functional communication for students through AAC and caregiver/educator training, and **U-THRIVE** equips adults with life skills, social engagement, and advocacy tools.

Family support and advocacy are strengthened through **Special Education Advocacy Family Network**, increasing family inclusion in Individualized Education Plans (IEPs) and Behavior Intervention Plans (BIPs), and **No More Waiting**, which provides training, resources, and case management for families awaiting services. Together, these programs promote skill development, independence, inclusion, and community engagement, creating lasting impact and opportunities for individuals with developmental disabilities and their families across Mississippi.

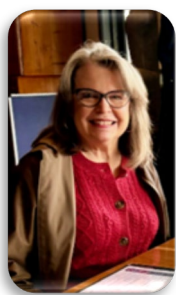
By fostering independence, communication, social skills, and advocacy, these programs not only improve individual outcomes but also strengthen families, communities, and local systems statewide. As participants gain skills and confidence, the state benefits from a more inclusive, capable, and engaged population, ready to contribute meaningfully to education, the workforce, and civic life.

## Council Member Spotlight

*Spotlighting the amazing people behind the scenes*

Our parents and family members bring valuable lived experience, insight, and dedication to the Council's work. By sharing their perspectives and advocating for meaningful change, they help ensure that the needs, strengths, and goals of individuals with developmental disabilities and their families remain a central focus of our efforts.

**Charlotte Myers, Parent**



Charlotte is a devoted mother to her daughter Claire and wife to her husband Don and has been a dedicated member of the Council for more than 25 years. During her time of service, she has contributed her leadership as both Vice Chair and Chair of the Monitoring and

Evaluation Committee, helping guide important efforts that strengthen supports for individuals with developmental disabilities across Mississippi.

Her passion for advocacy began when her daughter, who has cerebral palsy, was young. She chose to serve on the Council to become more involved in an organization that could help her daughter, and others with developmental disabilities, live fuller, more enriched lives in their communities.

Outside of her advocacy work, she enjoys a variety of creative and relaxing hobbies, including reading, watercolor painting, crochet and knitting, gardening, interior design, and cooking.

One of the aspects she values most about serving on the Council is the opportunity to meet people from across the state who share a common commitment to supporting meaningful programs and being a strong voice for individuals with developmental disabilities in Mississippi.

**Yashika Nicholson, Parent**



Yashika chose to serve on the Mississippi Council on Developmental Disabilities because “I believe every individual deserves access to opportunity, resources, and a voice in their community.” As a parent, she also had to advocate for her own child, which showed

her firsthand how important support, awareness, and strong systems are for families. Through this service, she hopes to help strengthen pathways, uplift voices, and ensure that people with disabilities in Mississippi are supported, valued, and empowered to live full and meaningful lives.

**Shatireale Hill, Parent**



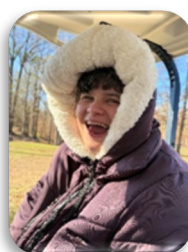
Shatireale is the mother of Jamarria Ramsey, an 18-year-old with autism who is nonverbal. Her experiences as her mother, along with her relationships with others in the disability community, inspired her decision to join MSCDD. She states, “I am committed to using my voice to advocate for individuals with disabilities and to stand in the gap for those who may not always be heard.”

**Corrin Taylor, Parent**



Mrs. Taylor states “serving on the Mississippi Council on Development Disabilities is deeply personal to me as both a mother and an advocate.” Through her family’s journey caring for a child with complex medical and developmental needs, she has gained firsthand insight into the challenges many Mississippi families face. She reported “I participate so that those experiences can help inform conversations about support, access to resources, and opportunities for individuals with developmental disabilities across our state.” What she enjoys most about serving is collaborating with other dedicated families, professionals, and advocates who share a passion for strengthening systems and ensuring that every person with a disability in Mississippi is valued, supported, and given the opportunity to thrive.

**Cindy McCarley, Parent of Jullia (Pictured)**



Cindy reports that in 2002, she and her husband felt God calling them to adopt from Russia. After working multiple jobs to fund the journey, they boarded a plane for a foreign country to bring home a baby they had never met. She stated “Sounds crazy, right? Exactly.

But God...”

After meeting five other children, an orphanage director told them, 'We have one more we'd like you to see. She became available for adoption the

moment your plane landed; her mother passed away from starvation while you were in route.' That child was Jullia. People often ask if her if she knew then that Jullia had special needs. Cindy's daddy's words, best capture that moment: **'I think you knew it, but your heart didn't care.'**

Cindy reported "Our journey has been a whirlwind of 'liquid sunshine' and significant hurdles. Jullia changes everyone she touches, but this path has changed us even more." Cindy chose to serve on the Council because she has lived through both the strengths and the gaps in our state's support systems. She believes lived experience is the most powerful tool for driving meaningful systems change. Her mission on the Council is to ensure that no parent in Mississippi feels they are navigating these challenges alone, and to foster a culture of inclusion where every child is recognized as a valued member of our community.

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Behind every meeting, recommendation, and initiative are parents who continue to show up and serve with heart. Their advocacy not only supports their own family member but helps create brighter futures for countless individuals with DD across our state. Their service and voice matters.

**We also extend special thanks to the rest of our parent representatives who faithfully serve on the Council:**

Teresa Ayers, Hillary Earnest, Maddy Forrer, Cynthia Johnson, and Shirley Miller

## Family and Caregiver Corner



*~Navigating Services~*

Finding the right services for a family member with developmental disabilities can feel overwhelming, but it doesn't have to be. A few simple steps can make the process easier and less stressful.

Start by learning what supports are available. These may include early intervention programs, special education services, therapies, employment supports, and community programs. Knowing your options can help you make informed decisions and find the right resources for your family.

Staying organized is key. Keep evaluations, service plans, medical records, and provider contacts in one folder so you can easily find what you need for meetings or follow-ups. This helps you stay on top of appointments, paperwork, and important deadlines.

When attending school or service planning meetings, preparation matters. Write down questions you have in advance and think about your family members' strengths and goals. Your input is a vital part of the decision-making process.

Connecting with other caregivers can also make a big difference. Parent groups and advocacy organizations provide valuable tips, guidance, and support, and they can help you feel less alone in your journey.

Finally, remember to follow up regularly. Keep track of your family members' progress and don't hesitate to ask for changes if something isn't working. By staying informed, organized, and involved, you help ensure that your loved one receives meaningful and effective support.

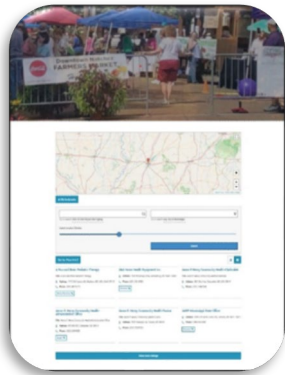
### Quick Tips:

- **Know your options:** Early intervention, therapies, special education, employment supports, community programs.
- **Stay organized:** Keep all evaluations, service plans, medical records, and provider contacts in one folder.
- **Prepare for meetings:** Write questions and goals; highlight your family member's strengths.
- **Connect with others:** Join parent groups or advocacy organizations for support and guidance.
- **Follow up:** Monitor progress and ask for adjustments when needed.

# Mississippi Community Resource Directory

MSCDD continues to maintain the Mississippi Community Resource Directory. This is an online, searchable database of resources for people with developmental and other disabilities, family members, providers, professionals, policymakers, and others in the community.

Technical assistance for the directory is provided by the Institute for Disability Studies. Visit [www.mscred.org](http://www.mscred.org).



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