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The Council Connection

December 2025

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 wrapped up FY2025, I'm proud to reflect on another year of meaningful work by the Mississippi Council on Developmental Disabilities (MSCDD). Throughout the year, we have continued to open doors for inclusion, advocacy, and opportunity across Mississippi. Each quarter brings new partnerships, fresh ideas, and real impact for individuals with developmental disabilities and their families.

This past fiscal year, the Council focused on strengthening community support, education, early intervention and childcare, recreation, and health. We funded 18 grants statewide, covering both continuing and new projects, and collaborated with over 18 organizations to host conferences, training, and events addressing leadership, self-advocacy, entrepreneurship, recreation, mental health, and other priority areas. Through these initiatives, approximately 9,400 participants were served, including individuals with DD, family members, and professionals. We also continued to provide resources and information through our website, the Mississippi Community Resource Directory (in partnership with the USM Institute for Disability Studies), and social media, reaching thousands of users across the state.

Additional efforts included disseminating annual reports and newsletters, providing accessible materials, and promoting awareness campaigns such as Developmental Disabilities Awareness Month and the 35th Anniversary of the ADA. Our participation in the Disability MegaConference once again reminded us of the power of shared learning and partnership. Together, we amplified the voices of self-advocates, connected families with essential resources, and helped policymakers see what inclusion truly looks like in practice.

We also began shaping our 2027–2031 State Plan, a roadmap that will guide the next five years of systems change and community development. As we look forward to FY2026, I am filled with gratitude for the advocates, families, and partners who make this work possible. Your dedication drives our mission and ensures that Mississippi continues moving toward a more inclusive future for everyone.

Warm regards,

Christy Ashley
Executive Director
Mississippi Council on DD





Program Spotlights

Bloom Center for Neurodiversity (Itawamba Community College)

Students at the Bloom Center built self-awareness, independence, and career skills in a hands-on learning environment. With guidance, participants explored careers, practiced professional communication, and developed real-world skills like scheduling and emailing. These experiences fostered confidence, independence, and readiness for internships and everyday life. So far, 24 individuals with DD, 26 family members, and 11 others have participated.

No More Waiting (Autism Center of North MS)

The program supported families of children with DD through evidence-based parenting strategies, practical tools, and emotional guidance. A total of 90 individuals with DD, 43 family members, and 96 community members participated. Families reported feeling empowered and better equipped to support their children, while children experienced greater understanding and support at home and in the community. Through intake, case management, and therapeutic guidance, the program helps families access resources and navigate complex systems.

Council Highlights

MSCDD kicked off FY2026 with a strong first quarterly meeting welcoming five new Council members (pictured left to right with Certificates): Robert “Taylor” Carley, self-advocate; Kris Adcock, MS Department of Health; Misty Jenkins, MS Division of Medicaid; and not pictured are Keyannah Mosely, parent; and Tonya Green, MS Department of Education. A meeting highlight was a presentation by Dr. Erica Smolinski from the University Medical Center on UMMC SMILE, a Council-supported program training dental students to manage behaviors in clinical settings, helping future dental professionals provide inclusive care for patients with developmental disabilities.

In FY2026, the Council awarded 11 grants that began July 1, 2025, and will end June 30, 2026. During the first quarter, these programs served 248 individuals with DD, 200 family members, and 350 others, providing critical services, resources, and opportunities that empower individuals and families statewide.

The Council Director attended the Executive Director Leadership Summit in Hershey, PA, bringing together DD directors from across the nation. Participants explored policy updates, advocacy strategies, program evaluation, and emerging trends, and focused on leadership development, strategic planning, team building, and succession planning. The insights gained from the summit will help MSCDD enhance services and advocate for inclusive, person-centered supports statewide.

With new members, impactful grants, and strengthened leadership, MSCDD is well-positioned to continue advancing opportunities, inclusion, and meaningful outcomes for people with developmental disabilities and their families across Mississippi.

Celebrating Impact

In **U-THRIVE**, individuals are gaining valuable life and self-advocacy skills. Several participants reported learning how to better manage money, budget for activities, and make independent financial decisions. Others described becoming stronger self-advocates, speaking up for themselves at work, communicating their needs, and supporting peers. One participant shared that the program “helped me grow more and more on who I am... to do well in my life through independence.”



Through the **Family Advocacy Network (FAN)**, families of children with DD are gaining the knowledge, confidence, and tools needed to advocate for appropriate services and inclusive education. In one case, FAN staff assisted the single mother of a second-grade student with autism who faced alternative school placement after multiple suspensions. During IEP meetings, FAN staff identified procedural violations and discovered that the child, whose IQ was 132, qualified for gifted services but had been denied access. With FAN’s guidance, the IEP team revised the behavior plan, granted access to the gifted curriculum, and provided behavioral support. Since then, the student has remained successful in general education, and his mother no longer receives calls to pick him up early.

Another family of a 7-year-old girl with autism turned to FAN when their daughter was at risk of retention and alternative placement. FAN staff helped the family advocate for evidence-based behavioral supports and coordinated with the district to fund Applied Behavior Analysis (ABA) therapy. The family later transitioned to a more supportive district, where, with FAN coaching, they developed a comprehensive Behavior Intervention Plan. By spring 2025, the student was performing at grade level and successfully participating with her peers.

A third family, living in a rural district with limited resources, sought FAN assistance when the school proposed alternative placement for their 7-year-old son with autism. FAN helped the mother secure appropriate evaluations, services, and supports, including a classroom aide, sensory tools, and an AAC device. Today, her son is thriving in an inclusive setting.

In the BLAST program, a participant who had long struggled with workplace bullying developed self-advocacy and emotional regulation skills through guided sessions. With support from staff, they practiced setting boundaries and ultimately made the courageous decision to resign from a harmful job, describing the experience as a “relief.” Today, they are employed in a position better aligned with their strengths and exploring leadership opportunities. Their caregivers expressed tearful gratitude for the remarkable growth and confidence they witness each week, evidence of how targeted, individualized interventions can transform lives.

The **Adapted Swim Camp** built swimming skills and confidence for children and adults with DD. One parent shared, “By the end of camp, he was doggy paddling and his confidence in the water grew immensely. He is excited to continue practicing his skills!” Another remarked, “She has built her confidence and wakes up happy every day ready to attend camp. I am very appreciative of this camp because it is hard to find people willing to work with kids who have disabilities.”

Council Member Spotlight

Spotlighting the amazing people behind the scenes

Jessica Smart, Self-Advocate



Ms. Smart lives in Olive Branch, MS and works as a bookkeeper for a local landscape company. She currently serves on the Board of Directors for the ARC of Northwest MS and volunteers there twice a week.

She is a former board member of the National Down Syndrome Congress and is currently a member of the Self Advocate Council. She also serves on the National Down Syndrome Congress Policy and Advocacy Council. At the NDSC convention every year, she teaches an advocacy training bootcamp, which she describes as “great for advocates of all types.”

She reports “I am honored to serve on the MSCDD. I think it is important for self-advocates to have a voice. People want to hear what we have to say, and it is important for us as self-advocates to speak about issues that are important in making our lives better.

From my time serving as a self-advocate board member, I know just how powerful it is when self-advocates have a seat at the table. It is not just about holding a position, it’s about being active, visible, and vocal members of our community. I believe every person’s advocacy will be different, but all of us can make a difference.

I am honored to serve on this council and look forward to making a difference.”

Tremilya Bracey, Self-Advocate



Tremilya Bracey lives in Clinton, MS and works at Froghead Grill. She graduated from Clinton Public Schools. Tremilya says “I am passionate about self love and positivity. I love the color pink. I also enjoy arts and craft, word search puzzles, going to church, and listening to music. I chose to serve on the Council to be an advocate for a better quality of life for people with developmental disabilities.

Robert “Taylor” Carley



Robert Carley is a Self-Advocacy Coordinator for IDS (Institute for Disability Studies). He states “I love using my voice to make a difference and help others find their voice!

My motto is: A Disability is an Ability, I’m just like anybody else!”

Antonio Norwood, Self-Advocate



Mr. Norwood lives in Hattiesburg, MS. He graduated from the University of Southern Mississippi with a bachelor's degree in communication studies. He has served on the Council as a self-advocate

since January 2023. He states the reason he chose to serve the council is "to help improve the quality of life for all individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities."

Family and Caregiver Corner



Welcome, Caregivers!

Caregiving can be both rewarding and challenging. This section will provide helpful tools, resources, and encouragement to support you along the way while reminding you to care for yourself, too.

Please check out the following websites for tips on self-care while providing care!

"Disability and Health Information for Family Caregivers"

<https://www.cdc.gov/disability-and-health/about/information-for-family-caregivers.html>

"Taking Care of Yourself: Tips for Caregivers"

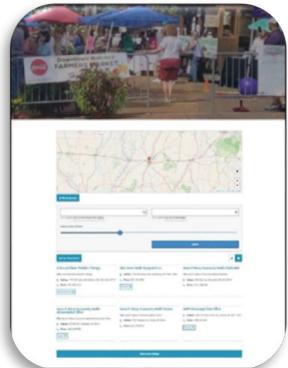
<https://www.nia.nih.gov/health/caregiving/taking-care-yourself-tips-caregivers>

"Caring for a Loved One with a Disability"

<https://www.mentalhealth.com/library/help-for-caregivers-of-family-with-disabilities>

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.msocrd.org.



Warm wishes for a safe and joyful holiday season!





Contact Us:

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