



*Promoting a Better Quality of Life for People with Developmental Disabilities*

## *FY2025 Annual Report*

*October 1, 2024 – September 30, 2025*

The Mississippi Council on Developmental Disabilities is supported by the Administration for Community Living (ACL), U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) as part of a financial assistance award totaling \$921,088 with 100% funding by ACL/HHS. The contents are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily represent the official views of, nor an endorsement, by ACL/HHS, or the U.S. Government.

# 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 continued to open doors for inclusion, advocacy, and opportunity across Mississippi. Each quarter brought 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. 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.



## Council Members

- \* Charlotte Myers, Council Chair
- \* Maddy Forrer, Vice-Chair
- \* Antonio Norwood, NACDD Delegate
- \* Shirley Miller, Evaluation & Monitoring Chair
- + KenYada Blake-Washington, Past Chair
- \* Mary Allsup
- + Dr. Jerry Alliston
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- + Nick Hartley
- \* Cynthia Johnson
- \* Cindy McCarley
- + Melissa Parker
- + Jamie Odom
- \* Glenn Sanford
- + Kimberly Sartin-Holloway
- \* Jessica Smart
- + Polly Tribble
- \* Dr. Alma Turner
- + Dorothy Young

+ *Agency or Organization Representative*

\* *Person with a developmental disability or family member*

## Staff

- Christy Ashley, Executive Director
- Vacant, Program Coordinator
- Arlandra Lewis, Administrative Assistant



## FY2025 Grants Funded by Congressional Districts

**Total: \$534,922**



District	Program Name	Grantee	Amount
1	No More Waiting	Autism Center of North MS	\$90,000
1	Community Autism Project	Autism Center of North MS	\$18,060
2	Premier Putters Golf Clinic	Ebony Pearls Foundation, Inc.	\$7,969
3	Bridges to Speak	MS State University, Dept. of Counseling, Higher Education, Educational Psychology, & Foundations	\$69,938
3	MSU Adapted Swim Camp	MS State University, Dept. of Kinesiology	\$74,627
3	Open Doors Theatre	Open Doors Theatre	\$26,512
3	U-THRIVE	MS State University, Dept. of Counseling, Higher Education, Educational Psychology, & Foundations	\$69,043
3	Empowering Families for Educational Collaboration Transitions (EFFECT)	MS State University, Division of Education	\$21,600
4	Pathway Weavers	The University of Southern MS Institute for Disability Studies	\$20,628
4	Family Advocacy Network	The University of Southern MS Institute for Disability Studies	\$70,000
4	I Want to Help: Emergency Management Training	The University of Southern MS Institute for Disability Studies	\$20,035
4	Education for Maximizing Personal Ownership, Wellness, Empowerment, and Respect (EMPOWER)	The University of Southern MS School of Child & Family Sciences	\$21,510
4	Maximizing Independence through Everyday Advocacy	The University of Southern MS School of Child and Family Sciences	\$25,000

## Areas of Emphasis Grants

**Total participants in the grants and community partnerships for FY2025 were 9,400. This included people with developmental and other disabilities at 3,007; family members at 1,937; and others (professionals, caregivers, policymakers, etc.) at 4,456.**

The following grant projects were funded during FY2025:

Throughout this year, **Pathway Weavers program** goal was fostering creativity, social connection, and skill development among individuals with developmental disabilities (DD) through the art of weaving. From its inception, the project grew steadily, offering participants a welcoming space to learn new skills, explore fiber arts, and engage with their community.

During the year, staff held two in-person weaving sessions per month. To increase accessibility, weaving materials were stored in a conference room where participants could join “open weaving sessions” outside regular meeting times.

The program was promoted through flyers, social media posts, and email listservs, reaching new participants and building community awareness. Each session emphasized social interaction, creativity, and collaboration, with participants encouraged to share information about the program with family, peers, and potential new members. Staff provided individualized support and facilitated group activities to build confidence and teamwork. The year also featured several educational field trips, which provided real-world learning opportunities related to weaving and fiber arts:

- January: Participants toured the Bill Waller Craft Center and the Mississippi Agricultural Museum, learning about spinning and weaving through hands-on demonstrations.
- March: Participants attended the Sheep to Shawl event at the Bill Waller Craft Center, observing sheep shearing, spinning, and weaving demonstrations.
- April: Participants visited Blue Barns Farm in Stringer, learning about alpacas and the process of shearing and spinning wool.
- May: The group toured Cowpen Creek Farm in Poplarville, interacting with farm animals including Pineywoods cattle, goats, and Gulf Coast native sheep. During the visit, participants were delighted to name a pair of newborn twin goats, Ace and Bella.

Participant feedback was overwhelmingly positive. Many expressed satisfaction with the program’s structure, field trips, and instruction. Several participants shared interest in advancing their skills beyond freestyle weaving to more structured projects, such as mug rugs, potholders, and scarves.

Through consistent engagement, creative expression, and community partnerships, Pathway Weavers became a meaningful and inclusive program that empowered participants to learn, connect, and grow through the timeless craft of weaving.

**Grantee:** The University of Southern Mississippi Institute for Disability Studies, \$20,628



Over the past year, **Open Doors Theatre** engaged extensively with individuals with developmental disabilities (DD), their families, and the broader community through inclusive theatrical productions and collaborative outreach. Throughout the year, a total of over 314 people with DD, 230 family members, 731 others, and at least 59 organizations participated in the program across multiple events and initiatives. Recruitment and community engagement were strengthened through partnerships with local organizations such as Wednesday Friends, Miracle League, Camp Sunshine, and Camp Kamassa, as well as outreach to staff and communities in Hattiesburg, Jackson, and the Mississippi Coastal areas. Local businesses played a crucial role in supporting productions, contributing both financial and material resources, with at least 36 businesses participating.



Open Doors Theatre presented several major productions this year. The company performed an adapted version of *The Wizard of Oz*, commissioned by a Mississippi playwright to ensure accessibility for participants with intellectual and developmental disabilities (IDD). Publicity efforts included social media campaigns, local radio announcements, and a dedicated fundraiser to support program visibility. Additionally, the organization was featured at the Mississippi Theatre Association (MTA) Festival, further highlighting its commitment to accessible theatre and community inclusion.

The organization hosted an accessible production of *The Lion, The Witch, and the Wardrobe*, attracting a large turnout of participants, family members, and community members. Following the performance, Open Doors Theatre facilitated an open panel discussion on accessible theatre, emphasizing ongoing community dialogue and inclusive practices.

Through these efforts, Open Doors Theatre successfully fostered creativity, inclusion, and community engagement, providing meaningful experiences for people with DD while strengthening partnerships and visibility within Mississippi's broader arts and disability communities.

**Grantee:** Open Doors Theatre, \$26,512

Over the course of the year, the **MSU Adapted Swim Camp** continued to grow and evolve, expanding its programming, community reach, and training opportunities while strengthening partnerships and building sustainable course offerings for individuals with developmental disabilities (DD) and their families.

Throughout the year, the camp engaged more than 53 individuals with DD, 82 family members, and over 189 others, including volunteers, staff, and community partners. Sessions were held across multiple semesters (Fall, Spring, and Summer) with participation steadily increasing and feedback consistently reflecting high satisfaction from both participants and families.

Staffing and training capacity were enhanced with the addition of two graduate assistants (GAs). One GA already held a Certified Adapted Swim Instructor (CASI/ASI) certification, while the other completed online modules and an in-pool practicum to achieve full certification. Both GAs contributed

to recruitment, camp planning, and instruction, while also teaching university-level adapted aquatics courses.

The camp strengthened its academic integration through the permanent offering of PE 4003/6003 Adapted Aquatics and two sections of PE 1301 Swimming, which provided hands-on teaching experience in both general and adapted aquatics. Plans are underway to expand these offerings through a partnership with Starfish Aquatics, enabling an on-campus ASI certification program beginning Fall 2025 that will train up to ten new Adapted Swim Instructors.

Camp operations were supported by numerous volunteers, primarily MSU kinesiology students, who assisted in teaching and supervision. Spring and Summer camps hosted multiple sessions, including a Summer Camp in May that accommodated 17 campers and received highly positive feedback from families. The camp also explored partnerships with Southern Miss to host additional sessions in Hattiesburg, expanding regional access.

Program visibility and outreach were enhanced with the launch of a new camp website, providing families with up-to-date information, registration details, and resources. Coordination with Starfish Aquatics facilitated ASI certification opportunities, supporting the long-term sustainability of the program by increasing the number of trained adapted swim instructors.

Overall, the MSU Adapted Swim Camp provided inclusive aquatic experiences for individuals with DD, developed future instructors, expanded academic offerings, and created a model for accessible, community-integrated aquatics programs. The camp's growth in scope and impact underscores its commitment to skill development, inclusion, and sustainability.

**Grantee:** Mississippi State University, Department of Kinesiology, \$74,627



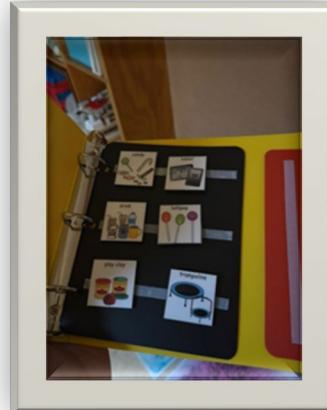
During the program year, the **Bridges to Speak** program has made significant strides in supporting students with communication challenges through Augmentative and Alternative Communication (AAC) and Picture Exchange Communication System (PECS) interventions. The program began with a thorough student identification and assessment process. Staff reviewed 130 applications to select students most likely to benefit from AAC and PECS supports, considering each student's communication abilities, behavioral needs, and the interest of families and teachers. Baseline assessments, classroom observations, and consultations with school staff, including teachers, speech-language pathologists (SLPs), principals, and other specialists, were conducted to establish individualized starting points and tailor interventions to each student's needs.

Implementation and training were carried out across multiple schools throughout the year. Students progressed through initial observation, baseline assessment, and active AAC/PECS implementation. By

year-end, 27 students were actively participating in communication programs, while three remained in the observation phase. Staff delivered in-person workshops and hands-on training to 33 teachers, eight speech pathologists, and additional school specialists. These workshops provided practical strategies, protocols, data collection tools, and video demonstrations to support consistent daily use of AAC/PECS in classrooms. Promising practices were developed and refined to enhance program effectiveness. These included multi-disciplinary team engagement, flexible implementation approaches, whole-classroom AAC strategies, and coordinated transitions from observation to intervention. Data collection and progress monitoring were key components of the program. Staff conducted classroom observations, gathered teacher feedback, and performed direct student assessments. Results indicated notable gains, including increased independent communication exchanges and advancement to higher PECS phases. This data informed program adjustments, ensuring that interventions remained individualized and effective.

Overall, Bridges to Speak successfully strengthened the capacity of Mississippi schools to support students with significant communication challenges. By combining direct student intervention, educator training, and caregiver engagement, the program established a sustainable model for AAC and PECS implementation. This year's work demonstrates the importance of individualized support, collaboration with school teams, and data-driven program refinement to maximize communication outcomes for students with developmental disabilities.

**Grantee:** Mississippi State University, Department of Counseling, Higher Education, Educational Psychology, & Foundations, \$69,938



This year, **U-THRIVE** delivered a structured social, educational, and community engagement program for over 16 individuals with developmental disabilities (DD), along with their family members, volunteers, and community partners. The program focused on skill development across multiple domains, including social relationships, independent living, money management, employment, nutrition, physical fitness, community access, and self-advocacy. Instruction was provided through a combination of virtual learning sessions and in-person community outings, allowing participants to apply new skills in practical, supportive environments.

Program participation was robust and varied, with participants engaging in interactive activities, virtual breakout discussions, and hands-on experiences during community outings. Each unit was designed to reinforce both social and practical life skills while fostering peer connections, volunteer engagement, and staff support. Key program units included:

- Independent Social Relationships: Participants learned strategies for forming and maintaining relationships, effective communication, respecting personal boundaries, and safe online interactions.
- Food and Nutrition: Sessions explored nutritional content, making healthy food choices at home and in restaurants, and mindful eating strategies, reinforced through farm tours and meal outings.
- Money Management: Instruction covered budgeting, distinguishing needs versus wants, and basic banking, with practice through interactive community-based simulations.
- Employment and Work Accommodations: Participants gained knowledge about workplace rights, reasonable accommodations, and self-advocacy in professional settings.
- Daily Living Skills: Units focused on home maintenance, personal hygiene, emergency preparedness, and safety, reinforced through hands-on demonstrations such as building first-aid kits.
- Community Access: Participants explored civic engagement, non-verbal communication, and community contribution, including tours of Mississippi State University facilities.
- Exercise and Physical Fitness: Guided sessions emphasized safe exercise practices, the benefits of physical activity, and proper nutrition.
- Self-Advocacy: Participants practiced assertive communication, boundary-setting, and advocating for themselves in various real-life contexts, reinforced through interactive outings with family and community partners.

U-THRIVE was supported by a graduate assistant, eight graduate student volunteers, and ten undergraduate volunteers who assisted with virtual sessions, breakout activities, and individualized support. Volunteers received specialized training for each unit to ensure effective facilitation.

The program collaborated with six community partners in Starkville, including The Gathering, Chick-Fil-A, Jilly Bean's Pail of Paint, Juva Juice, the MS Institute on Disabilities, and the MSU ACCESS Program. These partnerships provided participants with real-world opportunities to practice social, budgeting, and self-advocacy skills while connecting with local organizations.

Throughout the year, participants demonstrated growth in social engagement, independent living, money management, nutrition awareness, and self-advocacy. Community outings and interactive activities reinforced classroom learning, and resources were consistently shared with families to extend skill development beyond program sessions. Feedback from participants, families, and volunteers indicated strong satisfaction and meaningful engagement.

Overall, U-THRIVE successfully provided a comprehensive and interactive framework for skill-building and community inclusion. By combining virtual instruction, in-person application, and robust volunteer and community support, the program enhanced participants' independence, social competency, and self-advocacy, establishing a model for effective engagement and lifelong learning for individuals with developmental disabilities.

**Grantee:** Mississippi State University, Department of Counseling, Higher Education, Educational Psychology, & Foundations) \$69,043



Throughout the past year, the **Maximizing Independence through Everyday Advocacy** project focused on developing a sustainable train-the-trainer model to equip parents and community members with the tools needed to support the independence of children with developmental disabilities (DD). The primary goal was to create a comprehensive training guide accompanied by PowerPoint slides that were accurate, accessible, and practical for use in diverse community settings.

Staff worked closely with content experts throughout the year, incorporating feedback from post-workshop surveys and expert reviews to refine the initial training guide outline. This collaborative and iterative process ensured the guide addressed real-world challenges faced by parents, clarified complex concepts, and highlighted essential strategies for everyday advocacy.

The training materials were carefully developed and refined. The completed guide was complemented by PowerPoint slides for each section, incorporating graphics and visuals to illustrate key concepts. Slides were formatted for ease of use, allowing future trainers to adapt presentations to different audiences without compromising content. Sample copies of the guide and slides were prepared, with plans for printing and distribution once final revisions were completed.

In addition to material development, staff established an implementation plan for trainers, drawing on best practices from other train-the-trainer models. This plan ensured that trainers could navigate the materials efficiently and tailor the content to meet the unique needs of parents, caregivers, and community members.

By year's end, the training guide and accompanying slides were finalized and ready for dissemination, providing a strong foundation for ongoing training and capacity building. This work represented a significant step toward empowering parents to advocate effectively for the independence and well-being of children with DD, while establishing a sustainable framework to expand the program's reach into communities across Mississippi.

**Grantee:** The University of Southern Mississippi, School of Child and Family Sciences, \$25,000



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Over the past year, the **Family Advocacy Network (FAN)** significantly expanded its outreach and support for families of children with developmental disabilities (DD) across Mississippi. The program engaged over 265 participants with DD, 333 family members, 588 other individuals, and 53 organizations through a combination of in-person and virtual sessions, workshops, community events, and Project ECHO training opportunities, providing comprehensive advocacy, education, and technical assistance. FAN strengthened its regional presence by expanding family cohorts in the Southern, Delta, Central, and Coastal regions. Cohort growth included families in Lamar, Jones, Walthall, Lawrence, Rankin, Forrest, Warren, Coahoma, Marshall, Sunflower, Panola, and Tate counties. To increase accessibility, particularly for rural families, meetings shifted to partially virtual formats. Each cohort appointed lead family members to organize and facilitate meetings, while surveys ensured training topics aligned with families' needs and interests.

Throughout the year, FAN delivered a variety of workshops and educational sessions for families, youth, and professionals. Sessions on IEP development and special education guided families through evaluation processes, eligibility versus medical diagnosis, behavioral intervention plans (BIPs), and individualized education plans (IEPs). Behavioral support and intervention trainings focused on distinguishing accommodations from interventions, developing effective BIPs, and supporting children with behavioral challenges or trauma. Transition and self-advocacy sessions prepared youth for post-school life, emphasizing skills to navigate educational and community settings. Families also received guidance on accessing community programs and resources to strengthen social networks. Professional development included Project ECHO sessions with Head Start staff, early intervention providers, and Part C service coordinators, covering IDEA compliance, evaluation procedures, and referral processes. FAN actively engaged in the community, participating in events such as the Knox Academy Open House, SeaBee Fleet and Family Support Resource Fair, MS-PTI Born to Be Wild Picnic, Rosemont Conference Panel, ToTal Job Extravaganza, and multiple resource fairs. These events provided families with opportunities to connect with peers, learn about local services, and practice advocacy skills in real-world contexts. The program also offered individualized technical assistance, supporting families and guardians of children with complex behavioral needs or trauma. Staff assisted with obtaining IEPs for young children, accessing community resources, and navigating school and service provider communications. Additionally, FAN provided consultation to doctoral students and education professionals, extending the reach of advocacy knowledge to school settings and service providers.

Over the year, FAN achieved substantial growth in cohort participation, enhanced accessibility for rural families through virtual meetings, and delivered targeted training to strengthen family advocacy skills. Families and youth demonstrated improved understanding of special education processes, behavioral interventions, and self-advocacy strategies. Collaborative efforts with schools, community organizations, and professional partners increased local capacity to support students with DD and their families. Overall, the Family Advocacy Network successfully established a sustainable, community-centered model for empowering families of children with DD. Through workshops, individualized support, and community engagement, FAN strengthened family knowledge, advocacy skills, and access to resources, fostering independence and positive outcomes for children with developmental disabilities across Mississippi.

**Grantee:** The University of Southern Mississippi Institute for Disability Studies, \$70,000

Throughout the year, **No More Waiting** program provided ongoing support, education, and resources to families of children with developmental disabilities (DD), serving more than 403 individuals with DD, 188 family members, 480 other participants, and three organizations. The program's mission focused on equipping caregivers with evidence-based parenting strategies, guidance on navigating complex service systems, and connections to local resources while families awaited formal interventions. Program activities were delivered through daily in-person and Zoom resources and training meetings. These sessions offered practical skill-building opportunities tailored to the unique challenges of raising children with autism, ADHD, trauma, and co-occurring disorders. By combining intake, case management, and therapeutic support, the program created a comprehensive system that helped families access services beyond the Autism Center's direct offerings. Caregivers consistently reported that the program was effective and empowering, providing guidance on actionable next steps and increasing the support available to their family members with DD at home and in the community.

The Autism Center's Resource Library remained a critical component of the program, offering evidence-based materials on autism, ADHD, trauma, educational support, and related disorders. Families actively used the library, frequently checking out materials that enhanced their understanding and application of strategies for daily life. When resources ran low, ACNM facilitated access through local libraries and maintained an Amazon "wish list" to replenish essential materials.

Throughout the year, families gained practical knowledge and strategies that strengthened their ability to support their children with DD, while individuals with DD experienced greater acceptance, support, and opportunities to thrive in both home and community settings. By bridging gaps in services during waiting periods, No More Waiting reinforced family resilience and provided a vital lifeline for caregivers navigating complex systems. Overall, the program successfully integrated training, resource access, and multi-layered support, empowering families and improving outcomes for children with developmental disabilities in Mississippi.

**Grantee:** Autism Center of North MS, \$90,000

During the year, **I Want to Help: Emergency Management Training** program successfully established and conducted its inaugural emergency management training tailored specifically for individuals with developmental disabilities (DD). The program focused on equipping participants with CPR, First Aid, and emergency preparedness skills while ensuring accessibility through accommodations for diverse needs, including mobility, vision, hearing, learning, communication, and behavioral supports. During the program's development and preparation phase, staff conducted extensive research on available training resources and certification pathways. The American Red Cross (ARC) Inclusion Resource Guide was identified as the primary reference for adapting materials to meet participants' needs. Both ARC and American Heart Association (AHA) certifications were reviewed, with ARC certifications serving as the primary credential offered and AHA options available on an as-needed basis. Intake forms were drafted to assess participants' baseline knowledge, and post-training surveys were developed to capture feedback, measure skill gains, and evaluate participants' confidence and understanding of emergency preparedness. Budget and resource planning were also completed, including the identification of training equipment, sites, and partner agencies, with essential supplies such as AED units procured to support hands-on learning.

The training series was delivered in a hybrid format to accommodate participants' schedules. Initial sessions focused on foundational emergency preparedness concepts and introduced the five key phases of emergency management: Prevention, Protection, Mitigation, Response, and Recovery. Subsequent sessions provided practical instruction in managing specific emergencies, including severe weather,

cardiac events, breathing difficulties, severe allergic reactions, burns, and wounds, as well as proper 9-1-1 communication protocols. Participants completed assessments and post-training surveys that offered valuable feedback for future program refinement.

The impact of the program was evident in participants' increased knowledge, practical skills, and confidence to respond effectively in emergency situations. By providing accessible and inclusive instruction, the program ensured that individuals with DD could actively engage in emergency preparedness and skill practice. Feedback collected from post-training surveys guided ongoing improvements and future sessions, enhancing program delivery and effectiveness. Overall, the I Want to Help: Emergency Management Training program successfully launched its first year, establishing a strong foundation for continued emergency management training that empowered individuals with DD to respond safely and confidently in a variety of emergency situations.

**Grantee:** The University of Southern Mississippi Institute for Disability Studies, \$20,035

Across the year, **Education for Maximizing Personal Ownership, Wellness, Empowerment, and Respect (EMPOWER)** program successfully advanced its mission to provide sexual health education and healthy relationship training to adults with intellectual and developmental disabilities (IDD), their families, and caregivers. During the program development phase, two facilitators were selected and trained in the Elevatus Curriculum, preparing them to deliver workshops tailored to the unique needs of adults with IDD. A statewide needs assessment was created and distributed to 60 facilities to identify priority topics for workshops, ensuring the content was relevant and responsive to community needs. Staff also developed pre/post-tests and exit interviews to measure participant knowledge, skill acquisition, and overall program impact. Marketing and outreach materials were designed to be accessible, inclusive, and destigmatizing, promoting awareness and enrollment in workshops. Throughout the year, the program conducted six workshops, engaging participants with DD, family members, professionals/volunteers, and other organizations. Workshop content emphasized healthy relationships, personal boundaries, consent, sexual health, online safety, and recognizing healthy versus abusive behaviors. Participants gained practical skills to make informed decisions about their sexuality and relationships, including identifying trusted support persons and applying consent and boundary-setting strategies in workshop activities.

The program's impact was evident in participants' increased knowledge and confidence in navigating sexual health and relationships. Families and caregivers were actively engaged in supporting adults with IDD to apply learned skills in real-life situations. Additionally, the program established a sustainable foundation for ongoing curriculum delivery, with six spring sessions scheduled to expand its reach across Mississippi. Overall, EMPOWER successfully provided accessible sexual health education for adults with IDD, equipping participants with the knowledge, practical skills, and confidence needed to foster healthy, respectful relationships.

**Grantee:** The University of Southern Mississippi, School of Child and Family Sciences, \$21,510

During the past year, the **Premier Putters Golf Clinic** successfully provided inclusive golf instruction and recreational opportunities for individuals with developmental disabilities (DD). Planning and preparation began early, with ten coaches recruited and promotional materials, including a brochure, developed and distributed to participants and families. Family orientations were conducted to introduce participants and caregivers to the clinic's format, goals, and expectations. Families expressed excitement about the opportunity to learn golf and engage in meaningful recreational activities. Recruitment and

organizational efforts continued throughout the preparatory period to ensure adequate staffing, accessibility, and participant engagement. The clinic was held in May 2025, and included 22 participants with DD, three family members, 21 other supporters, and two organizations. Lessons were customized to accommodate varying abilities, promoting inclusive learning and enabling participants to develop golfing fundamentals, improve physical coordination, and build self-confidence. The clinic also emphasized community engagement, highlighting accessible recreational opportunities through active promotion and collaboration with local organizations.

Participants demonstrated notable skill development, including improved motor skills, increased confidence, and mastery of basic golf techniques. To support continued growth, five participants enrolled in a six-week follow-up golf clinic. Overall, the Premier Putters Golf Clinic successfully combined recreational skill-building, inclusive participation, and community engagement, providing a meaningful, enjoyable, and confidence-boosting experience for individuals with DD and their families.

**Grantee:** Ebony Pearls Foundation, Inc., \$7,969



This year, the **Community Autism Project** focused on planning, organizing, and delivering a comprehensive conference designed to support individuals with autism, their families, clinicians, and community organizations. Planning efforts began with multiple conference committee meetings each quarter to coordinate logistics, identify and confirm speakers, and secure vendor and sponsor participation. The speakers were carefully selected to provide expert perspectives on a variety of topics, including behavioral analysis, psychology, legal advocacy, and state-level educational policies.

Throughout the year, the project team worked to engage vendors and sponsors relevant to the neurodiverse community, confirming 12 organizations that provided practical resources for families, clinicians, and individuals with autism. Marketing efforts included targeted email campaigns, social media promotion, and networking with agencies to encourage registration. Adjustments were made to the registration process to accommodate agency payment options, including purchase orders and invoices, addressing challenges with online payment requirements.

The conference was successfully held in March. Attendees included a diverse mix of individuals with autism, family members, clinicians, and community organizations, with a total of 100 participants, including vendors and sponsors. Sessions provided practical strategies for parents, educators, and clinicians supporting neurodiverse individuals. Evaluations showed a 19% response rate, and feedback highlighted the desire for additional content on adults on the spectrum, classroom strategies, and parenting skill-building. Verbal feedback from attendees and vendors was overwhelmingly positive, noting the value and relevance of the sessions.

Following the conference, Autism Center of North MS distributed resource books to participants to provide practical strategies that could be applied at home, in classrooms, and in clinical settings. Limited-supply resources were made available on a first-come-first-serve basis. Post-conference engagement continued through follow-up with attendees, vendors, and community organizations to strengthen partnerships and support networks. Overall, the Community Autism Project successfully delivered a well-organized and impactful conference that provided meaningful education, resources, and networking opportunities. The event strengthened community connections, increased awareness of evidence-based strategies, and offered practical tools to improve outcomes for individuals with autism and their families.

**Grantee:** Autism Center of North MS, \$90,000



This year, the **Empowering Families for Educational Collaboration and Transitions (EFFECT)** program focused on empowering families of children with developmental disabilities to actively engage in their child's education and transition planning. Early in the year, the project team developed and disseminated a survey via email, social media, and in-person activities to identify family needs and preferences for upcoming workshops. Survey results highlighted key areas of interest, including transition planning, understanding IEPs and rights under IDEA, supporting academics and behavior at home, social-emotional support, community involvement, and effective collaboration with teachers. Families indicated a preference for both in-person and online sessions, with evenings identified as the most accessible time to meet, and childcare availability recognized as a barrier for participation.

The first parent informational was attended by family members, students, and volunteers. The session focused on IEPs, parent and student rights, and the planning and implementation process. Participants engaged in age-appropriate activities, including inflatables and crafts for children, and received comprehensive resource materials including local support guides, IEP guidance documents, and MSPTI resources. Planning continued for subsequent sessions to address positive behavior supports, supporting learning at home, and community engagement.

The second family workshop focused on positive behavior supports and interventions and was attended by 17 families. Families and teachers learned practical strategies for reinforcing positive behavior at home and in the community, including PBIS principles, prevention strategies, teaching new behaviors, and managing consequences. Children participated in structured, station-based activities such as sensory play, gross motor games, crafts, and interactive learning exercises.

The third workshop focused on supporting learning at home. Families explored strategies to use everyday materials and spaces to reinforce academic, behavior, and social skills. Resource materials,

including math and reading manipulatives, were provided for at-home use. Structured student activities accompanied the workshop, with 14 children rotating through STEM-based stations designed to enhance social, communication, and executive functioning skills.

Throughout the year, the EFFECT program successfully increased awareness of educational support, provided families with practical strategies to support their children at home, fostered meaningful parent-student engagement, and strengthened connections with community resources. By offering hands-on workshops, accessible resources, and targeted family supports, EFFECT empowered families to advocate for their children's academic, social, and behavioral growth while facilitating collaboration between families, schools, and community organizations.

**Grantee:** Mississippi State University, Division of Education, \$21,600



## Community Collaborations

- ❖ University of Mississippi Medical Center, MIND Center
- ❖ Disability Connection
- ❖ Brain Injury Association of Mississippi
- ❖ The Arc of Northwest Mississippi
- ❖ Alzheimer's Association, MS Chapter
- ❖ Coalition for Citizen's with Disabilities
- ❖ National Federation of the Blind of Mississippi
- ❖ Mississippi State University
- ❖ The University of Southern Mississippi
- ❖ The Arc of Mississippi
- ❖ Prestige Professional Development and Consulting, LLC
- ❖ Hope Hollow Ministries
- ❖ Alzheimer's Association, Mississippi Chapter
- ❖ Disability Rights Mississippi
- ❖ Metra Area Community Empowerment (MACE)
- ❖ Mississippi Institute on Disabilities (MS State University)
- ❖ Autism Center of North MS

## DD Network News

The Council collaborates with our DD Network Partners to produce newsletters throughout the year. These newsletters serve as a key connection between our organizations and the communities we support. Each edition highlights important initiatives, shares success stories, and provides updates on programs, events, and advocacy efforts. By showcasing the achievements of our participants, partners, and staff, the newsletters offer a clear snapshot of the impact of our work and the progress made toward our mission. They also serve as an engaging resource for stakeholders, keeping readers informed, inspired, and connected. Please see below for links to each newsletter for FY2025.

### All About the DD Network

<https://drive.google.com/file/d/1Gg48TamzGIfn2b3FVOb6yDkGk6efoZVl/view?usp=sharing>

### Fall 2024

<https://drive.google.com/file/d/1c272TVUWAh4mdbLGLO9g8GxLOk3v5IZ9/view?usp=sharing>

**Spring 2025**

[\*\*https://drive.google.com/file/d/1vNbq\\_reW2c7N1I79TF1VUnF2T9wtH/p/view?usp=sharing\*\*](https://drive.google.com/file/d/1vNbq_reW2c7N1I79TF1VUnF2T9wtH/p/view?usp=sharing)

## **Mississippi disAbility MegaConference**

The MS Disability MegaConference is an annual cross-disability event in Mississippi designed for individuals with disabilities, their families, students, and professionals. The conference features speakers, exhibitors, and workshops covering a wide range of topics, including assistive technology, education, employment, and healthcare, with the goal of sharing information, fostering connections, and empowering attendees. In FY2025, the event welcomed over 300 participants, including people with disabilities, family members, professionals, and students. More than 30 organizations and companies provided information and resources to support and engage attendees.

### **Keynote speakers included:**



#### **Cody Clark**

From Louisville, Kentucky, Cody was diagnosed autistic at 15 months and defied early predictions about his abilities. Inspired by a magic show at age 11, he pursued magic through the Louisville Magic Club, the Jeff McBride Magic & Mystery School, and his Marketing and Theatre Arts degree from the University of Louisville. Cody blends magic with theatre, comedy, storytelling, classic country music, and autism advocacy.

His honors include performing with magic legend Lance Burton, being named the Society of American Magicians Rising Star of Magic, and receiving a Kentucky Colonial award from Gov. Andy Beshear for his work in magic and disability advocacy.

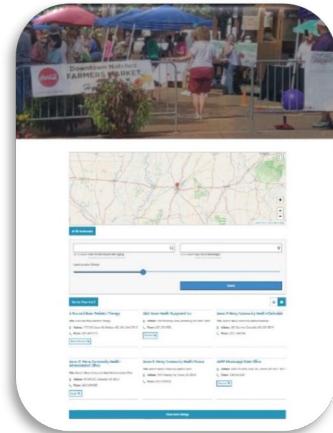


#### **Michelle Bishop**

Michelle Bishop is a recognized expert on voting rights and engagement for people with disabilities. At NDRN, she leads initiatives to ensure accessible, voter-focused elections and collaborates with civil rights organizations to shape inclusive federal policy. Michelle brings over 15 years of experience advocating for disability voting and is passionate about empowering every voter.

## 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. FY2025 data indicated over 5,400 visits by 2,000 unique users to the site. Technical assistance for the directory is provided by the Institute for Disability Studies. Visit [www.msocrd.org](http://www.msocrd.org).



239 N. Lamar St., Suite 1001  
Jackson, MS 39201  
Phone: 601-359-6238  
Web: [www.msdd.org](http://www.msdd.org)  
Resource Directory: [www.msocrd.org](http://www.msocrd.org)

Alternative formats available upon request.