

Family Forum

A NEWSLETTER PRODUCED BY VISION FOR EQUALITY

NEW YEAR, A NEW BEGINNING FOR CHAZ

by: Grady Chambers

What a start to the year for Chaz, who moved into his own apartment the first week of January!

This is Chaz's first time living on his own, and we couldn't be more proud of him for embarking on this exciting step towards even more independence in his life. Chaz's choice to move into his own place is another reflection of the courageous and open person he is. Both at work and in the community, Chaz is always making connections, meeting new people, and getting involved in a range of endeavors. He sits on five community boards, has organized donation drives for children and people experiencing homelessness. He volunteers regularly with organizations serving people with disabilities.

Even neater, Chaz is about to publish a memoir—Open Doors—in which he shares his life story, so keep on an eye out for more on that soon!

Chaz's passion for helping people extends to his work life, where he works on the administrative team at the Department of Behavioral Health and Intellectual disAbility Services and helps organize the Department's two annual award ceremonies honoring direct support workers and the businesses and organizations they work with. Chaz had a smooth move-in day, and he's already feeling right at home. He told us he loves his new place and the greater independence that living on his own will bring. "It's great," he said. "It's been a long time coming."

Congrats on finding a home of your own, Chaz—we're excited for everything to come!



BE A PART OF THE SOLUTION



Features Inside:

Revitalization of the Right to Education Task Force (LTF).....2

Speaking for Ourselves: Forging New Partnerships, Building Community.....3

From Embreeville to Home: Anthony's Story.....4, 5

Philadelphia Parent Support Groups (PPSG) Information.....6

Upcoming Events.....7

To include an event or submit an article for publication,
please email:
visionforequality@visionforequality.org

THE REVITALIZATION OF THE PHILADELPHIA RIGHT TO EDUCATION TASK FORCE

by: Heidi Allen

Over the past year there has been a concerted revitalization of the Local Task Forces (LTF) across Pennsylvania. This includes Philadelphia's Intermediate Unit (IU) 26 LTF.

The Task Force exists to help any Philadelphia County parent or caregiver whose child is receiving Special Education services (has an IEP) and attends either a Public Charter School or the School District of Philadelphia. The purpose of the LTF is to address locally issues that the child or family may be having accessing their education and to identify and address any systemic issues that may be seen in Philadelphia. The LTF has been run since the historic PARC decree and the Bureau of Special Education (BSE) has revitalized the Local Task Forces through partnership with the local Arc, the Intermediate Units and the parents who serve as LTF chairs across the state.

My name is Heidi Allen, I am the current chair of LTF 26, I am fortunate to have been vice chair for the past several years under Cecelia Thompson who served as a dedicated chair for the LTF for many years. I have an 11 year old son Michael with multiple disabilities, who is the reason I am so strongly committed to this work. Shane Janick and Bonita McCabe are the Arc of Philadelphia representatives for the LTF, and Deputy Elizabeth Farrugia and Lisa Werts are the IU representatives for School District of Philadelphia and Melissa Aufiero is the IU representative for Charter Schools.

Meetings are held the first Tuesday of the month virtually from 11-12pm. We want to welcome any family or caregiver just to check out the meetings. We also want it to be an opportunity to share resources, connect with community partners that can help your child access services. Parents can develop a relationship with staff from the intermediate unit that can assist you in making sure your child has the support they need in school. If there is an issue, that it is resolved early and in a timely fashion.

We want to emphasize the meetings are only a small part of what we do, the Local Task Force is available at any time to talk with and support parents and caregivers. Statewide there is a resource directory being developed that parents will be able to access to local resources in their area, but again we are available to refer you to appropriate community partners that can assist with various needs that help support the students' ability to access their education.

We also want to be sure that Charter School families are welcomed, in Philadelphia the Intermediate Unit (IU) is the School District of Philadelphia and they do provide support through the IU to Charter School families. Their contact information would be through the School District of Philadelphia as the IU is not a separate entity as it is in other counties but their responsibilities remain the same. As the LTF we would still work with your school to try to resolve the issue but we would want to address any systemic issue that may be present.

Again we look forward to meeting you and hearing your concerns, systemic issues also get elevated to the State Task Force so that Bureau of Special Education can see how they can address issues and allocate needed resources.



IU26
Philadelphia County Intermediate Unit 26

Join The Local Right to Education Task Force (LTF) for Parents of Students with Disabilities

Virtual sessions | 1st Tuesday of the month | 11:00AM-12:00PM
Join the School District of Philadelphia's Lunch & Learns immediately following at 12:00-1:00PM

What to Expect:

- Problem solving for students' disability services
- Solutions for Special Education concerns
- Collaborate with School District and Charter School staff
- Referrals to community organizations

Dates:

October 7th	April 7th
November 4th	May 5th*
December 2nd	*Committee Elections for School Year
February 3rd	
March 3rd	2028-2027

About The Right to Education Local Task Force for Parents of Students with Disabilities (LTF)
LTF Mission: to initiate, develop, and maintain a space for constructive interaction between parents and their School Districts and Charter Schools for students with IEPs (Individualized Education Program)/Special Education.

Pennsylvania supports The Right to Education Local Task Forces across the state to unite families, schools, and education leaders to champion inclusive excellence for students with disabilities in their regions.

Contact Mark Houldin for questions | MHouldin@ArcPhiladelphia.org

The Arc of Philadelphia
www.philasd.org

Click the link below to register
<http://bit.ly/4paNgpY>



Parent & Family UNIVERSITY

JOIN US TO LEARN, GROW, & STRENGTHEN OUR COMMUNITY —TOGETHER.

Parent & Family University provides **free resources, courses and support** to help parents & families engage with their children, schools, and community in the following areas:

- Student Attendance & Joy
- Civic Engagement
- Health & Wellness
- Financial Literacy

PFU makes learning accessible, supportive, and fun—here's how:

- In-person and virtual courses offered citywide
- Free and open to the public (Registration Required)
- Designed and led by experts from the District and local partners
- Raffles, prizes, & learning materials
- Meals and childcare are available
- Translation/interpretation available (upon request, see site for details)

LOCATIONS

- Washington High School
10775 Bustleton Ave.
Philadelphia, PA 19116
- Cassidy School
6523 Lansdowne Ave.
Philadelphia, PA 19131
- Clemente School
122 W Erie Ave.
Philadelphia, PA 19140
- Northeast Community Propel Academy
7500 Rowland Ave.
Philadelphia, PA 19136
- South Philadelphia High School
2101 S Broad St.
Philadelphia, PA 19148
- T. M. Peirce School
2500 W Cambria St.
Philadelphia, PA 19132
- Thomas G. Morton School
2501 S 63rd St.
Philadelphia, PA 19142
- MLK High School
6100 Stenton Ave.
Philadelphia, PA 19138

VIEW THE COURSE CATALOG
SCAN CODE OR VISIT → philasd.org/pfu

SPEAKING FOR OURSELVES: FORGING NEW PARTNERSHIPS, BUILDING COMMUNITY

by: Suzanne Erb

Speaking for Ourselves and Vision for Equality have been busy forging new partnerships throughout the Philadelphia community. Organizations focusing on providing services throughout Philadelphia are realizing the importance of including the voices of people with disabilities at the table. As a result, we are reaching families and people with disabilities who might not know about us.

The Director of the CareerLink centers throughout Philadelphia, Jamaine Jackson, invited us to join the group of agency partners throughout the city that meet quarterly. This will not only give us an opportunity to engage with CareerLink® staff and partners, but will also give us an opportunity to provide information to other partners about programs of Vision for Equality.

On October 9th, Suzanne Erb partnered with Temple University Institute on Disability to provide a workshop during the Technology Learning Collaborative Conference. This conference brought together over 150 groups advocating for internet access and equity in Philadelphia. We also pointed out that people with disabilities and people who are aging often have many of the same needs.

Also in October, we participated in the 47th Annual Developmental Disabilities Conference at a co-presenter and resource.

Speaking for Ourselves presented at Communication Champions about how to communicate with people who are blind or who have low vision.

Self advocates are part of every community, and our voices need to be heard everywhere.

In December, we partnered with self advocates, families, and Temple students to develop a game that self advocates, families and teachers can use to introduce skills important for transitions from school to life. We will be sending out information about this shortly, and would like to have input from self advocates, family members and people who care, so that we can make this a fun and informative resource for everyone.

Indeed, we are all stronger together; and we hope that our efforts will make our voices louder and stronger as we advocate for ourselves, each other, our loved ones, and all those who share our values.



Speaking For Ourselves 2026 MEETING DATES AND ZOOM LINK

January 21st
February 18th
March 18th
April 16th
May 19th

Time: 1:00 PM-2:30 PM via zoom

Call Suzanne Erb to register at:
215.313.0550 or email her at:
sfo.suzanne@visionforequality.org

Zoom link: Join Zoom Meeting by clicking below:
<https://us06web.zoom.us/j/83396181632?pwd=TqhbtSFMTyGSv2s9RC8jjPb6eFuP24.1>



FROM EMBREEVILLE TO HOME: ANTHONY'S LIFE TELLS THE TRUE STORY SINCE 1997

by: Kendria Clark-Davis

When Embreeville State Center closed in 1997, hundreds of Pennsylvanians were forced into a moment of decision. Entire generations of people with disabilities had spent their lives inside large state institutions, often isolated from their communities. It was not simply a change in address. It was a total dismantling of the world they had known.

Anthony was one of those Pennsylvanians.

He lived in Embreeville. He was known there as the “official greeter,” welcoming people as they came through the units. He mattered there in the way one can matter inside a system: a role, a task, a job-like identity inside a building that is locked at night.

When the doors of Embreeville shut for the last time, Anthony needed more than a placement. He needed a life.

There is a story that is almost mythic in its tenderness: a nurse at Embreeville, Mrs. Bingaman, would sometimes bring residents home for weekends and holidays. She saw the people sworked with not as problems, not as cases, but as human beings. Anthony was one of the people she felt connected to. When Embreeville closed, she and her family opened their home and their lives to him through what was called Family Living, the community base model we now call Life Sharing. They gave him room at their kitchen table, a place to sit in the living room, a family, children and dogs to love. That is how Anthony entered the larger world.

At that same time, long before Vision for Equality formally existed, two parent advocates were handling a different kind of fear. Maureen Devaney and Dee Coccia were quietly helping families make decisions that would shape the rest of their loved ones' lives. They sat with mothers and fathers who had been told for decades that their children “belonged in institutions.” They answered questions. They helped interpret what the future could be. They helped families imagine their sons and daughters in ordinary houses, on regular streets, with lives that looked like everyone else's. Vision for Equality was born directly from this kind of care, this kind of proximity to real families.

The Embreeville State Center settlement led to the creation of Vision for Equality and the Consumer Family Satisfaction Team (CFST), a program designed to ensure that community life truly offered safety, dignity, and belonging after the institutions closed. CFST teams visit people where they live and work, speak with them, their families, and those who support them, and document whether their services genuinely reflect the person's needs and choices. CFST keeps people's experiences at the center of the system and ensures their voices are not lost in the transition from institutional to community life, giving the person and their family's eye view of their “new” life in community.

If we look at Anthony's early CFST reports, we see how slow and awkward the culture shift was. In 1997 - the year Embreeville finally closed — Anthony was already “in the community,” but the community was still built like a small shadow of the institution: structured day programs, fixed schedules, no community outings, medical metrics as the primary measure of quality.

By 2008 and 2009, his life was more stable, but still described in terms of compliance, attendance, medication lists, and program participation. It was gentler than the institution, but still system centered. It was the “after” — but it wasn't yet the “home.”

Over time, though, the meaning of Anthony's days has changed.

After many years in Life Sharing, Anthony eventually transitioned into his own community home with residential support. It was another major step towards independence and stability in the life that he was building.

Today, Anthony lives in a community home in Springfield, Pennsylvania. The house is quiet, warm, and his own. When I visit him, he is tucked comfortably under a blanket, watching his favorite movies. His room is personalized. His things are where he wants them. He smiles easily. Part of what makes this possible is the deep continuity of the people who support him, including staff who have known him for years, and another important team member, Ms. Freeman, who since he moved into his group home has been by his side for more than two decades. He is no longer being managed. He is known. (Continued on page 5)



Know Your Winter Energy Assistance Options



#CallUtilitiesNow



(Continued from page 4)

His weeks are filled with real life — not programs:
 He goes to Atlantic City.
 He goes to Linvilla Orchards.
 He goes to church.
 He walks around the Navy Yard.
 He participates in a flower-making class.
 He chooses where he wants to go next — and he is planning a trip to the New Jersey Aquarium.
 Anthony has preferences. He has relationships. He has staff who understand him. He has a home that is his own. He has a life that is lived, not scheduled.

This — not the closure of Embreeville — is the real victory of the movement.
 The accomplishment was not shutting down a building. It was building a world where a man like Anthony can live an ordinary, joy-filled life among neighbors and friends.
 There is a profound lesson here for all of us who are still doing this work: system transformation is not measured by policy change or court orders. System transformation is measured by whether the people who once lived behind the walls now have warmth, belonging, agency, comfort, choice, and connection.
 Anthony is proof that the vision was not naïve.

He is living the future that Maureen and Dee imagined when they sat with frightened families in the 1990s.
 The promise of community was not a theory. It is a kitchen table, a favorite movie, a day trip to the ocean, a class on making flowers, a smile under a blanket, and a life that continues to unfold.

We are, still, building the world they imagined for us in 1994.

What is 988?
 988 is a free, three-digit lifeline that connects you to trained behavioral health professionals who can help.

- CALL 988
- GET SUPPORT
- MORE HELP

988 SUICIDE & CRISIS LIFELINE

City of Philadelphia
DBHIDS
 DEPARTMENT OF BEHAVIORAL HEALTH & INTELLECTUAL & ABILITY SERVICES
988PHILLY.ORG

PHILADELPHIA PARENT SUPPORT GROUPS

The Parent Support Groups are grassroots groups organized by families for families of individuals who have Intellectual Disabilities and Autism. They share and network with one another to become better informed about resources in the community.

Interested in joining? Contact the PPSG Representatives listed below to check that the meetings, dates, places have not changed and they can provide you the information you need to join. Or you can also contact the PPSG Co-Coordinators:
Doreatha Davis at ddavis@visionforequality.org or
Carol Costello at ccostello@visionforequality.org

**All meeting schedules exclude holidays and July and August.*

GROUP NAME AND NEIGHBORHOOD	MEETING TIMES AND DAYS	REPRESENTATIVE AND CONTACT INFORMATION
Abriendo Caminos a los Latinos con Familias Exceptionales "Opening Paths for Latinos with Exceptional Families" (Citywide)	Second Wednesday of each month* 10:30 am-12:30 pm Meetings Are Virtually / In Person Events To Be Announced	Marisol Ramos mramos@visionforequality.org (267) 773-5296
Northeast Support Group Navigated by Families (Northeast Philadelphia)	Third Wednesday of each month* 11:00 am-1:00 pm Meetings Are Virtually /Outreach Events In Person	Joan Nelson enVision.JTN@visionforequality.org (267) 773-5282
NW Family Support Group (Germantown, Mt. Airy, Chestnut Hill)	Second Tuesday of each month* 6:00 pm -7:30 pm Meetings Are Virtually / In Person Events To Be Announced	Roberta Bellamy westphilapacs@gmail.com (267)231-4120
Roxborough Parent Support Group (Roxborough/Andorra/Manayunk/Wissahickon)	Fourth Thursday of each month* 1:00 pm -2:00 pm Meetings Are Virtually / In Person Events Will Be Announced	Carol Costello ccostello@visionforequality.org (215) 923-3349 x 204
The Heart of the Family Parent Support Group (Center City/South Philadelphia)	First Friday of each month* 12:00 pm -2:00 pm Meetings Are Virtually / In Person Events Will Be Announced	Marjorie Anderson phoenixibi@gmail.com (267) 307-6915
There's A Place for Us Parent Support Group (North Philadelphia)	Fourth Friday of each month* 10:30 am -12:30 pm Meetings Are Virtually / In Person Events Will Be Announced	Cleo Dupree cleodupree@aol.com (215) 329-5219
West Philadelphia Parent Support Group (Mantua/Overbrook/Southwest/West/Wynnefield)	Second Saturday of each month* 1:30pm - 3:00pm In-Person Sept - Dec, June Virtually January to May	Doreatha Davis ddavis@visionforequality.org (215) 303-3501



DISABILITY AWARENESS SERVICES

Sponsored by the Deliverance Evangelistic Bible Institute
2001 W. Lehigh Avenue, Philadelphia, PA 19132



2026 DISABILITY AWARENESS MONTH EVENT

SATURDAY, APRIL 4, 2026

9:00am - 2:00pm

Honoring Our 5th Anniversary *"Celebrating Our Parents, Caregivers & Support Services"*

Come Join Us!

Meet & Greet with Parents,
Caregivers and Support Teams as they
Share their Success Stories.

Learn how others have succeeded
in getting the answers they
need such as:

When should I begin?

What do I need?

How do I get started?

Where do I go?

Who do I talk to?

Registration is now open.

To register...

1. Fill our registration form at the Information Circle after Sunday Morning Service or place your completed form in the drop box located in the DEBI office during the week.
2. Email disability19@gmail.com and leave your name, number & email.
3. Call the church at 215-226-760, ext. 3001 or 3050 and leave your name, number & email.
4. Register online at www.eventbrite.com
Type in: "Disability Awareness Month Event ~ Honoring our 5th Anniversary"
5. Scan the QR code:





Vision for Equality

Serving People with Disabilities and Their Families

718 Arch St., 6N, • Philadelphia, PA 19106 • visionforequality.org

T: 215 . 923 . 3349 F: 215 . 923 . 8075

SAVE the DATE
May 15, 2026
34th Annual
Brighter Futures Awards
My City, My Place

RING IT IN!
Let Freedom Ring
in ALL Communities.

City of Philadelphia
DBHIDS
DEPARTMENT of BEHAVIORAL HEALTH
and INTELLECTUAL disABILITY SERVICES
DBHIDS.ORG

Division of Intellectual disAbility Services