Project Bridge is the periodic newsletter of the Center for Disabilities Studies (CDS) within the University of Delaware’s College of Education and Human Development. This issue includes updates from the past few months and a look forward to upcoming events.

Please send news and items for the next issue to Ben Szmidt at bszmidt@udel.edu by March 15.

IN THE NEWS

Family SHADE on WITN’s Window on Wilmington

On Feb. 11, WITN Channel 22’s Shannan Harris interviewed CDS’s Annalisa Ekbladh and Karen Zalewski about Family SHADE, the Delaware alliance that connects families to supports and services for their youngsters with special health care needs. Annalisa and Karen drew special attention to familyshade.org’s new Roadmap to Services and the website’s listing of events that serve people with disabilities and chronic health conditions. They also noted that Family SHADE’s staff is available by phone to help people talk through problems they might have connecting to services and supports. View the interview at UD’s YouTube page.

News Journal interviews CDS director on CMS plan

In a story that ran Feb. 24, Beth Mineo talks with The News Journal’s Jen Rini about the shifting winds that have compelled Delaware and all other states to draft plans that comply with a new federal rule that promotes community integration for people with disabilities. The article highlighted a Feb. 23 public comment session in Newark, where community members voiced their opinions on Delaware’s proposed compliance plan, and the challenges that may accompany it. In her interview with Rini, Beth noted there will need to
be systemic change in Delaware for the state to comply with the rule from the U.S. Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services. To bring about that change, “We need to know clearly where it is we want to go,” she said. To read the full article, visit the News Journal’s website.

PROJECT UPDATES

Assistive technology solutions in minutes

Educators, service providers and families of children with disabilities learned how to create assistive technology out of everyday items such as Velcro and corrugated plastic at a workshop hosted by CDS on Feb. 27. Renowned assistive technology professional Therese Willkomm from the University of New Hampshire demonstrated to the crowd dozens of ways that they quickly and cheaply can devise solutions that benefit people with disabilities. Many took the AT solutions they crafted at the workshop home with them, while others began planning how they’ll modify various items at home and elsewhere into innovative AT applications. Watch for the Center’s upcoming multimedia captures of Willkomm’s event on CDS’s website, Facebook and Twitter.

Better together

UD’s Mentoring Students with Disabilities course is more inclusive than ever. For the first time, students from UD’s Career & Life Studies Certificate (CLSC) program, a two-year non-residential track available to people with intellectual disabilities, will take the course with their undergraduate student mentors. CDS’s Debbie Bain and Wendy Claiser will teach the students about mentoring relationships, and strategies that support mentees. Mentors will also help their mentees achieve non-academic goals, such as participating in student-run activities.
Conor Rifon, a second year CLSC student, notes how the class also helps mentors: They gain a better understanding of people with disabilities, he says.

**School climate survey**

The home and student versions of the Delaware School Climate Survey have been distributed to 153 schools across the state. The survey, which is funded by the Delaware Department of Education, asks students and parents questions on topics such as school rules, safety and bullying to give educators and administrators a better picture of how students and parents perceive a school’s environment. That picture can then help administrators and educators develop a plan to improve a school’s climate, which studies have linked to a variety of outcomes for students, such as attendance records and academic achievement. More than 26,000 students have already completed the survey. Students and parents can complete the survey through March 6.

**AT open houses**

The Delaware Assistive Technology Initiative (DATI) gave visitors the chance to sample new devices in its inventory that are designed for children on Jan. 23 and Feb. 13. Therapists, educators, caregivers and young children were among those who tried out the new AT, purchased with Delaware Early Childhood Assistive Technology Demonstration funding, at the open house events. Most of the guests ended up borrowing one or more pieces of assistive technology, taking them home or to work to use with a young child with a disability.

**Registration for CLSC 2015-2016 school year still open**

UD’s Career and Life Studies Certificate (CLSC) program is still accepting applications for the 2015-2016 school year. The two-year college certificate program for students with intellectual disabilities has 12 available spots and will continue accepting applications until those slots are filled. Final decisions on all applications are expected to be made by May 1. For more information on CLSC and details on how to apply, visit the program’s website or contact CLSC-info@udel.edu.
STAFF UPDATES

An arrival

Rebecca Vitelli has joined the Center’s Communications and Advocacy unit as a graduate assistant. Rebecca got her B.S. from UD in Early Childhood Education, and minored in Disabilities Studies and Human Development and Family Studies. She’s currently in the 4+1 program for Autism/Severe Disabilities, working towards her M.Ed. in Exceptional Children and Youth. Rebecca says she’s excited about contributing to the Center’s communications and advocacy efforts. She’s also looking forward to learning from colleagues, applying her passions, and being actively involved in this community.

CDS member appointed to federal committee

CDS’s Phyllis Guinivan, representing the Association of University Centers on Disabilities, has been appointed as an alternate member of the Federal Communications Commission’s Disability Advisory Committee. Phyllis would fill in as necessary for Tafaimamao Tua-Tupuola from the University Center for Excellence on Developmental Disabilities at American Samoa Community College during her two-year term. In addition, Phyllis will participate on the subcommittee that addresses communication with people with disabilities during emergencies and disasters.

SOCIAL MEDIA

CDS on Facebook

If you’re among the growing numbers of people who like CDS on Facebook, you heard about UD’s new FUNctional Design course that focuses on creating clothes for kids with special needs; you read about a Delaware family that got to celebrate the passage of the ABLE act with Vice President Joe Biden; you learned that Harvard and M.I.T. are being sued for failing to properly caption online courses; and you discovered that this year’s Polar Bear Plunge in Lewes raised a record $780,000 for Special Olympics Delaware.
If you haven’t yet liked CDS on Facebook, what’s keeping you? Connect with us now!

CDS on Twitter

In February, followers of CDS on Twitter read about the first model with Down Syndrome to walk the runway at New York Fashion Week; heard about public comment sessions on the state’s CMS rule transition plan; and learned about how one man is creating free solutions that make video game controllers more accessible.

Get social, and follow CDS on Twitter!

RESOURCES

Award-winning website makes Twitter more accessible

Be My Eyes is a new app that assists individuals with vision loss by connecting them with sighted helpers through iOS devices. How does it work? Individuals with vision loss use the app to make a video call to a Be My Eyes volunteer. The sighted helper then provides immediate assistance by “lending his or her eyes” to answer the callers’ questions, assist with navigation, or read a sign over the video chat. The app’s founder, Hans Jorgen Wiberg, a person with a vision disability, said he hopes that by “helping each other as an online community, Be My Eyes will make a big difference in the everyday lives of people who are blind all over the world.” The app, which launched in mid-January, reports that more than 150,000 people have signed up to volunteer to help nearly 15,000 users with vision impairments. More than 48,000 video calls for help have been made using the app. Visit the “Be My Eyes” website for more information.

ADVOCACY CORNER

This section is dedicated to informing you about advocacy efforts and new or pending legislation or policies that relate to individuals with disabilities.

CDS director comments on Delaware’s plan to comply with CMS rule

At a public hearing convened by Delaware’s Division of Medicaid and Medical Assistance in Newark on Feb. 23, Beth Mineo commented regarding the state’s proposed plan to comply with new rule promoting authentic community integration from the U.S. Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services.

“Delaware’s transition plan is, of necessity, about compliance, but it could be so much more,” said Beth. “Currently, our plan is reactive. It talks about how we will evaluate and
remediate services and supports that do not conform to the CMS requirements. It would be so much more powerful if it included a proactive component that could serve as a blueprint for how the services and supports system will look five years from now. Given the timeframe for submission of our plan, development of such a blueprint in the next few weeks isn’t feasible. I would like to suggest, however, that our plan announce the state’s intent to create such a blueprint and specify the timeframe within which it will be completed. As Lewis Carroll said, ‘If you don’t know where you are going, any road will get you there.’ People with disabilities, their families, and our provider networks can be much more effective partners in this endeavor when the road ahead is more well-defined.” Read Beth’s full testimony here.

President’s Committee for People with Intellectual Disabilities

The President’s Committee for People with Intellectual Disabilities (PCPID) held its first meeting of 2015 this month and expects to release its 2015 PCPID Report to the President in May. It will focus on technology. Liz Weintraub, a member of both the committee and the Association of University Centers on Disabilities, of which CDS is a member, interviewed the committee chair Julie Petty for her Tuesdays with Liz video series. Petty is the first person with an intellectual disability to chair the President’s Committee for People with Intellectual Disabilities. The video runs four minutes. Watch it here.

EVENTS

March 9

2015 Inclusion Conference – Delaware’s 21st annual Inclusion Conference will be held at the Dover Downs Conference Center in Dover, from 8 a.m. to 3:15 p.m., and will showcase best practices involving inclusive education. Workshops will include teaching strategies, positive behavior supports, accessible instructional materials, access to the general education curriculum, English language learners and early childhood. To register, click here.

March 11-12

Brain Injury Association of Delaware Conference – Dover Downs Conference Center in Dover. The event will start on March 11 with a 7 p.m. pre-conference reception. The conference begins March 12 at 8 a.m., featuring sessions on focus brain injury prevention, education, advocacy and support. For more information, visit the conference’s website.
March 25

Disability Day at Legislative Hall – The Delaware Developmental Disabilities Council will host Disability Day at 411 Legislative Ave. in Dover from 11:00 a.m. to 3:30 p.m. The council encourages Delawareans to schedule meetings with their state senator and representative on Disability Day to discuss disability topics important to them. For more information, check out the event flyer, look up your legislators and review the Disability Day preparation checklist.

April 29

Transition to Adult Life Fair – Christiana School District’s Fifth Annual Transition to Adult Life Fair will showcase possible resources and supports for children exiting high school. Service providers and community member will be on hand to answer questions about employment, training, guardianship, special needs trust funds and more. 5 p.m. – 8 p.m. at the Christiana High School, 190 Salem Church Rd. in Newark. Visit the fair’s website for more information.

Visit the CDS calendar for more upcoming events.

CONTACT US

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