



2024 ANNUAL REPORT

OCTOBER 2023 -
SEPTEMBER 2024



A Message from Leadership



The Council is proud of the big steps we've taken to improve life for people with intellectual and developmental disabilities (I/DD). These steps are part of our 5-Year State Plan (2022–2026), which helps guide our work.

We work with people with I/DD, their families, and many others across Louisiana. Together, we find ways to make sure people with I/DD can live the lives they choose, with the support they need.

In 2024, we focused on:

- Helping people with I/DD speak up for themselves and become leaders
- Making sure they have the services they need to live in their communities
- Supporting inclusive education and fair job opportunities

We finished two big projects in 2024:

- First Responder Training – We trained over **650** first responders, self-advocates, and families on how to interact with each other in safe and respectful ways.
- Emergency Preparedness Training – Over **550** emergency workers and disability advocates learned what to do before, during, and after natural disasters.



Looking ahead to 2025, we'll keep working on our goals. We'll continue to support families, educate decision-makers, and help people stay healthy and safe. By involving more people and helping them become strong advocates, we're building a Louisiana where everyone — with or without disabilities — can live full, meaningful lives.

EBONY HAVEN

Executive Director

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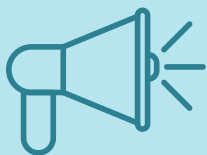
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About the Council



The Louisiana Developmental Disabilities Council was created in 1971 to help people with developmental disabilities live full and meaningful lives. The Council works to make sure people with disabilities can go to school, get jobs, and live in their communities with the supports they need.

3 MAIN GOALS



ADVOCACY



**CAPACITY
BUILDING**



**SYSTEMS
CHANGE**

OUR MISSION

The Council's mission is to increase independence, self-determination, productivity, integration, and inclusion for Louisianans with developmental disabilities by engaging in advocacy, capacity building, and systems change.

2024

Council Membership



Self-Advocates

Mary Frances Avera
Jill Hano
Roslyn Hymel
Tony Piontek
Erick Taylor
Vivienne Webb
Lauren Womack

Parents/Family

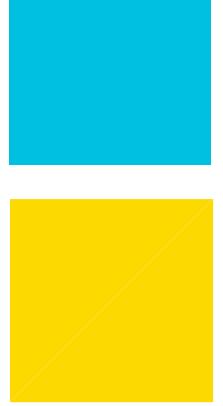
Nicole Banks
Kim Basile
Mike Billings
Christi Gonzales
Angela Harmon
Hyacinth McKee
Missey Moore
Pasqueal Nguyen
Melinda Perrodin
Samantha Singletary
Brooke Stewart
Mary Tarver
Renoda Washington

Agency Reps

Patti Barovechio (OPH)
Melissa Bayham (LRS)
Brian Bennett (BHSF)
Cheri Crain (GOEA)
Jamar Ennis (GODA)
Julie Foster Hagan (OCDD)
Meredith Jordan (LDOE)
Cherie Kelly-Aduli
Melinda Richard (OAAS)
Tory Rocca (DRLA)
Phil Wilson (LSU-HDC)



In Memory of Lauren Womack



NOVEMBER 20, 1985 - OCTOBER 25, 2024

Lauren Womack cared a lot about helping people with disabilities. She went to school at Southern University and got a master's degree in Rehabilitation Counseling. She worked as a Vocational Rehabilitation Counselor in Lafayette, helping people find jobs and reach their career goals. Lauren was a leader in many groups, such as the Louisiana Rehabilitation Council (LRC) and the National Employment Networks Association (NENA). She was also the Chair of Louisiana's State as a Model Employer (SAME) Task Force.



In 2023, Governor John Bel Edwards picked Lauren to be a member of the Louisiana Developmental Disabilities Council. She quickly became a strong voice on the Council. She led the 2024 Legislative Advocacy Committee and worked on several other committees to make life better for people with disabilities.



Lauren was also a big part of LaCAN, where she spoke at the Capitol and shared her personal story to help change laws. She helped get over \$10 million to improve services for people with developmental disabilities. Lauren's passion and hard work made a big impact. Her efforts will keep inspiring people to make Louisiana a more inclusive place for everyone.

Gone – Never Forgotten



LACAN

Louisiana Council's Advocacy Network



LaCAN furthers the Council's mission by advocating for policies and systems that support inclusion everywhere people learn, work, live, and play.



LaCAN provides information and support to individuals wishing to effectively advocate for systems change in the areas of home and community-based services, education, and employment.

LACAN

Advocacy Activities



Legislative Roundtables

Roundtables give members a chance to meet local lawmakers, learn about important state issues, become a better advocate, and find ways to tell personal stories to help make positive changes. In 2024, **9** hybrid (virtual and in-person) roundtables were held with **389** LaCAN members attending.

Legislative Visits

LaCAN Leaders help members in their area meet with lawmakers by giving them talking points and helping them share their personal stories and messages. In 2024, LaCAN members participated in **55** formal and **239** informal visits

Yellow Shirt Days

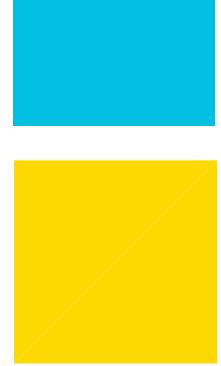
LaCAN members attend important committee meetings when big decisions are being made. It's important to tell lawmakers how these bills and policies might affect people with intellectual and developmental disabilities (I/DD) and their families. In 2024, **168** members joined these events.

Information & Action Alert

Alerts keep LaCAN members informed about possible policy changes that could impact people with disabilities and the services they get. They also let members know what actions they can take to speak up about these changes. In 2024, there were **22** action alerts and **1,903** advocacy actions taken.



LACAN



Louisiana Council's Advocacy Network

MEMBER TESTIMONY

"The one thing I learned from **LaCAN** that has made the biggest difference is how to be an effective advocate for my son and the community. Before I learned how to be an effective advocate it literally felt like I was at war with everyone for basic human rights and needs, or at least that's how it felt. It was a fight for survival and I was on the front line. Then I found **LaCAN** and realized I had been doing it so wrong for so long. Now I am equipped to effectively advocate and teach my son how to be a self advocate...

2024



SENATOR BETH MIZELL & LACAN ADVOCATES

LaCAN has taught me the importance of advocacy and the things my family needs to keep our loved one in the home. It's been a life line for our family. The biggest impact that I took away from what I've learned is what life was like for children like mine before home and community based services existed. Since I have been given the tools for success, it helps our family dynamic succeed in ways we would have not been able to without that support"

YOUR VOICE MADE A DIFFERENCE



LaCAN members made great progress this session. The fiscal year 2025 state budget kept services for people with disabilities safe, and added **\$10.6 million** for home and community based services to continue supporting families across the state.

Partners in Policymaking



Class of 2024

Partners in Policymaking (PIP) is a national leadership training program for people with intellectual and developmental disabilities (I/DD) and parents of young children with I/DD.

It gives people the latest information about disability issues and teaches them how to speak up and make changes at all levels of government.

Partners offers six weekend sessions in Baton Rouge over a six-month period for leadership development. Some of the topics include: History, Inclusive Education, The Legislative Process, Supported Employment, Supported Living, Community Building, and Systems Change Advocacy.

Partners Graduates



Class of 2024

The Class of 2024 finished with **18** graduates, including **3** people with disabilities. Many of the graduates were involved in making positive changes in the community—**13** of them took part in advocacy activities like Legislative Roundtables, Yellow Shirt Days, visiting lawmakers, and responding to Action Alerts.

Alumni

As of 2024:

6 graduates serve on the DD Council.

6 graduates serve as LaCAN Leaders.

2 graduates serve as Families Helping Families Directors.

33 graduates sit on other Boards and Committees.



Partners Testimonies



"I'm honored to share my experience as a parent of four children, three with ADHD and our youngest, Ryland, who has Down Syndrome. After Ryland's diagnosis, my wife Amy and I began seeking resources and support, which led me to the Partners in Policymaking program through a friend and fellow parent. This program has been incredibly valuable in helping us understand disability as a part of the human experience and how far we've come in terms of inclusion—though there's still much progress to be made. We've been fortunate in our positive experiences with IEPs for our children, but hearing the challenges faced by other families in the program made me realize how inconsistent the system can be. I'm grateful for this opportunity to learn, grow, and advocate for a more inclusive future for all families like ours."



Robbie Smith

"Being a part of Partners in Policymaking 2024 has truly changed my life. As a single mom of three, including my 13-year-old son Karter—who has MELAS, autism, and developmental delays—this program has empowered me with the tools, confidence, and support I didn't know I needed. Before joining, I had no outside services beyond Medicaid due to a lack of knowledge in my rural Louisiana community. But over these past six months, Karter has received a

waiver, I've learned about countless resources, attended committee meetings at the Capitol, and most importantly, found a tribe of people who truly understand what I face every day. I'm especially grateful for the relationships formed and the strength I've gained by finally feeling seen, heard, and not alone. A heartfelt thank you to the DDC for funding this life-changing program."



Jericha Sweetser

Voting Rights Awareness

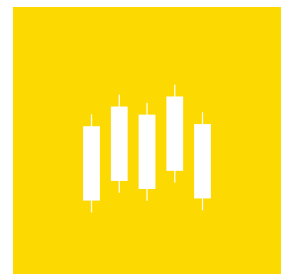
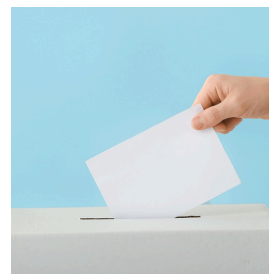


The Council also helped people learn more about their rights and how to speak up. One big success was the Voting Rights initiative. More than **300** people took part in these trainings, including self-advocates, family members, and professionals.

The training covered:

- Why voting is important
- How elections work
- What supports and accommodations are available
- What constitutional amendments mean

People also got a chance to practice using real voting machines, thanks to help from the Secretary of State's office.



This hands-on experience helped make sure everyone left feeling more confident about voting.

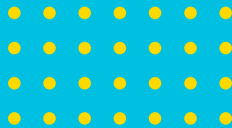


Youth Leadership Forum

The Louisiana Youth Leadership Forum (LAYLF) is a summer camp for 10th–12th grade students with disabilities. The camp helps students grow in confidence, become more independent, and feel proud of their disability. It's held on a college campus so students can experience what it's like to live away from home. All the guest speakers are successful adults with disabilities who share their stories and help guide the students.

100%

OF DELEGATES AND
GUEST SPEAKERS
ARE PERSONS WITH
DISABILITIES



50%

OF STAFF ARE
PERSONS WITH
DISABILITIES

Topics Include

- Disability History
- Self-Advocacy
- Leadership
- Your Good Life
- Legislative Process
- Legislative Advocacy
- Dating & Relationships
- Mock Bill Prep
- Mock Debate



Youth Leadership Forum



2024 Participants

12 LAYLF participants learned how to become confident community leaders, get ready for future jobs and independent living, and understand the history and culture of the disability community.



DELEGATE TESTIMONY

“One of my favorite things was the trip to the State Capitol in Baton Rouge. We practiced debating, viewed some exhibits, and toured the Capitol. We went to every floor, and my favorite was the top floor and its view. The workshops and small groups taught me many things. I learned about spending and saving money, career options, and respecting yourself and relationships. A statement that stood out to me the most is: ‘People may look at you differently but your disability does not define you.’”

Disability Pride Campaign

July
2024



“

I'm proud of my disability because it gives me a different perspective that no one else has. I'm autistic, so the way I experience the world is different than neurotypicals. We are all human no matter what neurotype we have, so there's nothing wrong with having a disability.

Tiffany Richard

“

Everyone has a purpose in life. I'm proud of the disability community because we're always a pivotal group that will assist anyone with or without a disability, no matter what a person is going through. If I could give one piece of advice about accepting a person's disability, I would say to accept their ability. Never ever give up on your faith and be driven to have success in your life.



Tony Piontek

“

We only had Carter to grace our lives for 7.5 years. He made us the most proud parents, seeing all he pushed himself to accomplish. No one chooses to be disabled. This is part of Carter's identity, but it does not define who he is as a person. Carter was nonverbal, but talkative, headstrong, joyful and always caused the BEST ruckus. He's no different than you and I, he just does things a little differently than we do.



Lauren Williams

“ I’m proud of my disability because it makes me stronger, empathetic, independent person. It challenges me and makes me think outside of the box daily. A piece of advice I would give someone would be to see the person and NOT their disABILITY. See them for the great person they are. See their strengths and talents.

Nicole Williams



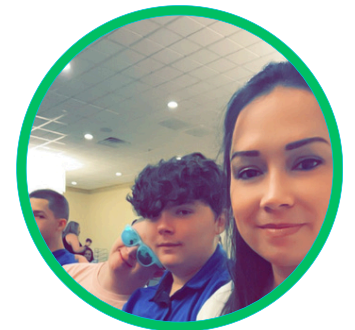
“ I’m proud of my disability because it has molded me into the person that I am today. I am empathic, kind, loyal and strong-willed. If I could give one piece of advice about accepting a person’s disability, I would say to remember that disability stretches across all walks of life and are both visible and invisible. People with disabilities are your loved ones, neighbors, colleagues, and patrons of your local business. Choose to be kind, always.

Steven Nguyen



“ I am proud of my disability because it has allowed me to give myself grace and space to stop masking and just be myself. Being unique is the best quality you can have, it makes a great individual and leader! Live life authentically! Be yourself and enjoy every minute of it! We can learn a lot from one another, whether you are accepting a strangers disability, your child’s disability, or your own, you will be a better person for it!

Kristie Curtis



“ I’m proud of my disability because I can use it as my purpose and because my disability didn’t stop me from having the life I have today. My story continues. If I could give one piece of advice about accepting a person’s disability, I would say to never limit yourself. You are capable of doing anything in this world. You must have the confidence that you can make a difference in this world and always remember to be an inspiration to others.

Wilbert Johnson



Emergency Preparedness & Response



In 2024

- **74** people joined a special online refresher training held for five states
- Louisiana had the highest number of participants with **28** people attending
- A total of **58** people completed the full training program

The training helped:

- Emergency workers understand how to support people with disabilities
- Disability advocates and families know what to expect and how to plan for emergencies

The training included four main topics:

Disability Awareness – Understanding different disabilities

The ADA and Emergency Management – Knowing the law and what it requires

Emergency Planning – What should be included in an emergency plan

Inclusive Planning – Making sure people with disabilities are part of the planning process



“Incredibly thorough and well-thought out training! I am very appreciative for the generous abundance of planning resources and guides which I will use in my role as a support coordinator to assist my clients with I/DD and their families/support teams with developing a more comprehensive emergency plan and which I will share with my coworkers so that they can do the same.”

Trainee Testimony

Council Staff



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DEPUTY DIRECTOR



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PROGRAM MANAGER



STEPHANIE CARMONA
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