DISABILITY TASK FORCE MEETING—OCTOBER 28, 2021

SUMMARY

The October 28th the DTF met to discuss the disparate impact of COVID-19 on individuals with disabilities of color. Panel members shared their expertise and perspective about this important topic, and discussed recommendations for providers, advocates, and policy makers to address the growing inequities.

Panel Members include:

* Finn Gardiner, Communications Specialist at the Lurie Institute for Disability Policy, Brandeis University. Finn framed the discussion to start looking at issues and discussed disparities for people of Color before the pandemic that have been made worse due to COVID. Barriers discusses were access to health care, Mass Health, access to internet and the ability of the families to stay home with their children during covid as most families were and are essential workers.
* Roxann Harvey, MA, BCBA, LABA, Chair, Boston Special Education Parent Advisory Council , talked about how providers need to reach out to families although pre covid schools did not listen to parents or value their opinions this has worsened during COVID, not improved. Ms. Harvey discussed concerns for Families that have 6 foot 2 young person with autism – nonverbal and they are in danger because of lost skills and the immediate need for new services on their IEP’s to address the mental health concerns that have arisen due to this young person not getting all his IEP services. One Haitian American Teacher reached out to Ms. Harvey and spoke about the 10 kids in her classroom that need help they are just sitting there getting nothing from her class. Concerns with DCF being called on the Black and Brown students, when the reason they cannot get their kids to school is the bussing issues happening and these same families losing their jobs since the bus didn’t show up, so they were late or missed work completely. Ms. Harvey talked about training issues and the need for schools to understand not only Racial issues but cultural issues as well. She also talked about one silver lining being that the SEPAC is able to reach more families through zoom during this time, and how they have the ability to have 9 interpreters at each of their meetings.
* Yahaira Lopez, Founder, Autism Sprinter- Ms Lopez spoke about her agency being established in 2014 which focuses on empowering the parents and helping them to understand they are the most powerful voice in this space, as they know their child the best. Autism Sprinter also provides workshops and introductions to agencies that may be able to help the families if they are not able to do so. They helped many families during the pandemic with help navigating the systems, helped provide food or gift cards for those experiencing food insecurity, provided iPads for some, helped families to get on wait lists for Mental health providers. The needs for families were great and they helped whenever they could so families felt heard, helped and validated.
* Pam McKillop, Executive Co-Director of the Autism Alliance, a program of Advocates that was established 1993, very grassroots by 6 families now they support over 2000 families. They serve a large amount of Portuguese families and learned how to work with them by learning their culture, needs and concerns. They have now formed a community and when COVID hit they were right there to help the families as stress levels increased and language barriers became more difficult to navigate with everything online. They hired a part time Portuguese autism specialist was hired- called each family to check in with them. Continues with support group online and they were able to pass on Special education updates thanks to MAC Chats. They helped the families by providing computers, food, gift cards, they had a BCBA come and do ABA in there building since the kids were not getting it through the schools and most families could not afford to have private BCBA’s come to their homes.
* A question-and-answer period followed the speakers