

Delaware Network for Excellence in Autism
Legislative Report
FY2022

Delaware Network for Excellence in Autism Providers

University of Delaware Center for Disabilities Studies (CDS), DNEA Partner

Autism Delaware (AD), DNEA Partner

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A note on wording. In this report, we use the term autism spectrum disorder (ASD) and autism interchangeably. You will also see the use of “person-first language” (a person with ASD) and “identify-first language” (an autistic person).

Who We Are

The Blueprint for Collective Action

In 2013, Delaware published its Strategic Plan to Improve Services and Supports for Individuals with Autism Spectrum Disorder, referred to as the *Blueprint for Collective Action* (“the Blueprint”). The Blueprint is the result of a two-year comprehensive community needs assessment and planning process, with information gathered from and discussed among family members, people with autism spectrum disorder (ASD), providers and professionals, and other community members.

The Blueprint outlines important recommendations for the state categorized into seven Improvement Areas. These recommendations are designed to address the ongoing needs of infants, children, youth, and adults with autism and their families living in Delaware.

As a means to accomplish these recommendations, stakeholders collectively endorsed two systemic activities: (1) an autism resource center; and (2) an executive group of state-decision makers and parents.

In 2016, under the leadership of Senator Margaret Rose Henry and Representative Earl Jaques Jr., Delaware Senate Bill 93 (SB93) was passed. It resulted in the creation of the Delaware Network for Excellence in Autism (DNEA) and Interagency Committee on Autism (ICA).

The Delaware Network for Excellence in Autism

The DNEA is the state’s autism training and technical assistance center and is led by the University of Delaware Center for Disabilities Studies (CDS) in partnership with Autism Delaware. The DNEA provides training and support to professionals and organizations, as well as children and adults with autism and their families.

The DNEA leverages interdisciplinary expertise to ensure all Delawareans with autism and their families have access to high-quality education, services, and evidence-based care across the lifespan. The DNEA offers training and support to professionals and families in a variety of ways. For example, the DNEA offers large-scale statewide trainings; tailored workshops and technical assistance to meet specific organizational needs; and targeted support provided through webinars or onsite coaching. CDS mainly oversees the provision of professional training while Autism Delaware addresses family needs through family navigation and parent training. The DNEA subcontracts with other experts and organizations, as needed.

By establishing a network, the DNEA utilizes additional expertise and resources from ICA members and local, regional, and national experts in order to offer far-reaching, more impactful support for all community members.

The Interagency Committee on Autism

The ICA is composed of key stakeholders within the Delaware autism community. It includes 14 different state agencies and community organizations, a parent/caregiver from each county, and a person with autism. The DNEA Principal Investigator - Sarah Mallory - serves as the Administrative Chair of the ICA and facilitates the coordination of ICA meetings, reporting, and activities.

The ICA leverages resources across member organizations and agencies to develop coordinated approaches to implementing improvements outlined in the Blueprint. The ICA identifies gaps or overlaps in services, advises the Delaware General Assembly on recommendations for legislation, and oversees the development of goals and priorities for the DNEA.

Why We Matter

The Centers for Disease Control report 1 in 44 children is diagnosed with autism spectrum disorder (ASD; Maenner et al., 2021). ASD rates in Delaware mirror those reported nationally, with students with ASD representing between 9.41% (6 - 21-year-olds) and 16.15% (3 - 5-year-olds) of all students receiving special education services (Delaware Department of Education, 2020); this represents a more than *three-fold* increase since 2004.

Individuals with autism may face difficulties learning, communicating, and managing stress. However, the greater challenge is often living in a world that lacks the awareness and tools to effectively support autistic people and their families. People with autism are more likely to experience additional health and mental health concerns than the general population and often face barriers to accessing employment, transportation, community activities, health care services, and other services that support their day-to-day living needs (Roux, et al., 2017).

The Interagency Committee on Autism (ICA) and the Delaware Network for Excellence in Autism (DNEA) are the only entities of their kind in the state that are working to address roadblocks in providing high-quality care to all Delawareans with autism in an efficient, coordinated, and person-directed manner.

With an increasing prevalence of autism and a clear demonstration of the need for continued support, the DNEA has become a critical provider of large-scale and wide-spread training, technical assistance, coaching, and support for families and professionals in the state of Delaware. The DNEA's work ensures the state is equipped to provide high quality education, services, and evidence-based care to autistic people and their families by empowering professionals to work with and support children and adults on the spectrum.

Delaware Network for Excellence in Autism (DNEA) Activities

The following section reports on the activities of the Delaware Network for Excellence in Autism (DNEA) between October 1, 2021 and September 30, 2022. These initiatives are organized into five sections: (1) Statewide Trainings; (2) Recorded Trainings and Tutorials; (3) Capacity Building Initiatives; (4) Information Dissemination and Community Outreach; and (5) Family Supports and Services. Each section includes a summary of FY2022 DNEA activities by describing the scope and impact of the initiatives. Associated *Blueprint for Collective Action* improvement area(s), and DNEA network partner(s) and subcontractor(s) associated with the work will also be shared.

Initiative 1: Statewide Trainings

Statewide trainings are large-scale trainings for professionals and family members who support individuals with autism. They are designed to be inclusive of individuals who work in a wide-range of settings and focus on evidence-based practices that can be implemented across the lifespan. DNEA statewide trainings address *Blueprint for Collective Action* Improvement Area 2 (Training and Technical Assistance) and are developed and led by University of Delaware Center for Disabilities Studies (CDS) DNEA staff.

The DNEA demonstrated significant growth upon its funding being reestablished in October 2022. It has offered between two to four statewide trainings a month focused on general topics such as the characteristics of individuals with autism, evidence-based practices, visual supports, and mental health. Due to continued COVID-19 concerns, the DNEA offered all of its statewide training in a synchronous virtual training format (e.g., via Zoom). Additionally, DNEA staff made significant updates to its statewide trainings by releasing new content and updating existing content.

New statewide training content. Two new trainings were developed and released in FY2022.

Autism and Mental Health. This training provides participants with an introductory understanding of autism spectrum disorder and commonly-occurring mental health diagnoses. Participants learn about prevalence and presentation, and are introduced to evidence-based resources that can be used to support autistic individuals with mental health needs.

Social Skills Instruction for ASD. This social skills instruction training discusses how social skills are developed and how that development can look different for youth with autism. The training considers ways of assessing social skills, skills to target, and explores evidence-based strategies that can support autistic individuals.

Updated statewide training content. Existing statewide trainings were also updated to reflect current best practice and advancements in the field. All training content was moved to universal templates (e.g., PowerPoints, handouts, resource guides) that include accessibility features consistent with Section 508 guidance, and structural components that align with best practice, such as universal design for learning.

Introduction to Autism Spectrum Disorder. This introductory training provides a basic overview of autism. It includes content about disability-friendly language, the history of autism, core characteristics of autism, and general tips and considerations when supporting people with autism across a variety of settings. Delaware resources are also reviewed.

Introduction to Evidence Based Practices for Autism Spectrum Disorder. Designed as a follow-up training to Introduction to Autism Spectrum Disorder, this training provides an overview of the evidence-based practices that are most effective when supporting individuals with autism of all ages. The training reviews the core characteristics of autism and introduces three evidence-based practices: visual supports, prompting, and reinforcement.

Visual Supports and Autism. This introductory training provides participants with an overview of the importance of the evidence-based practice of visual supports for students with autism. Participants learn the process for implementing visual schedules, cues, boundaries, and timers within an educational setting.

Statewide training evaluations. A wide range of participants engaged in statewide training opportunities including family members, service providers, and people with disabilities. Generally, trainings are highly evaluated by participants. A summary of our training evaluations can be found in Table 1.

Table 1*DNEA Statewide Trainings Offered in FY2022*

Training title	Mean Satisfaction
Existing training content	
Introduction to autism spectrum disorder	9.80
Introduction to evidence-based practices for autism spectrum disorder	9.73
Visual supports and autism	9.61
New training content	
Autism and mental health	9.33
Social skills instruction for ASD	9.35

Degree of satisfaction: 10 = Highly Satisfied; 0 = Highly Dissatisfied

Initiative 2: Recorded Training Videos and Tutorials

After conducting stakeholder meetings, consulting with the ICA, and using data from our community needs survey, the DNEA learned that the community was eager for recorded videos and online training tutorials. In response to changing training needs in Delaware, the DNEA created brief evidence-based practice tutorials and longer training videos that can be viewed on demand through the DNEA website and stakeholder partner websites. DNEA recorded training videos address *Blueprint for Collective Action* Improvement Area 2 (Training and Technical Assistance) and are developed and led by University of Delaware Center for Disabilities Studies (CDS) DNEA staff.

A total of eight recorded trainings were created in FY22. Recorded trainings and tutorials are designed to be inclusive of individuals who work in a wide range of settings and focus on evidence-based practices that can be implemented across the lifespan. These recordings include topics such as instructional practices, ableism, and supports for specific providers like mental health providers, dentists, medical staff, and educators.

The DNEA also created two recorded trainings for the Delaware Office of Statewide Autism Programs (DOSAP) related to classroom management and social skills. These recordings

are integrated into the state's professional developmental website and are offered to teachers to meet continued professional requirements.

DNEA training videos and tutorials have been disseminated to over 850 Delaware professionals. An abstract of these trainings can be found below.

New recorded trainings. Three new recorded trainings were developed in FY2022 and posted to the DNEA website for on-demand access.

Classroom Management for Students with Autism (*70 mins*) This training discusses the challenges of traditional classroom management practices among students with autism. It explores evidence-based strategies that can support autistic students' success in inclusive learning environments.

Social Skills Instruction (*70 mins*) This training discusses social skills development and how it can look different for children with autism. The training considers ways of assessing social skills, strategies for identifying skills to target, and the use of evidence-based strategies in multiple settings.

Disrupting Ableism (*60 minutes*) This webinar hosts Dr. Priya Lalvani as she discusses ableism. Dr. Lalvani discusses what it means to disrupt ableism, how discrimination against people with disabilities is embedded in our language and culture, and how professionals and families can become allies for disability justice.

New recorded tutorials. In addition to full-length trainings, five evidence-based practice tutorials were created to explain how to plan and implement an evidence-based practice.

Introduction to Prompting (*11 mins*) This practice tutorial reviews how to support teaching a person with autism a new skill or task. It has been designed to support professionals and family members who wish to use the evidence-based practice of prompting.

Task Analysis Tutorial (*7 mins*) This practice tutorial reviews how to support teaching a person with autism a new multi-step skill. It has been designed to support professionals and family members who wish to use the evidence-based practice of chaining.

Least-to-Most Prompting (*7 mins*) This practice tutorial reviews how to support teaching a person with autism a new skill or task. This tutorial has been designed to support professionals and family members using the evidence-based practice of least-to-most prompting. Least-to-most prompting can be used to teach both discrete and chained

skills. When using least-to-most prompting, prompts are systematically provided from the least intrusive to the most intrusive.

Most-to-Least Prompting (7 mins) This prompting tutorial reviews how to support teaching a person with autism a new skill or task. This tutorial has been designed to support professionals and family members using the evidence-based practice of most-to-least prompting. Most-to-least prompting can be used to teach both discrete and chained skills. When using most-to-least prompting, prompts are systematically provided from the most intrusive to the least intrusive.

Visual Supports in Medical Settings (3 mins) This video discusses the importance of using visual supports in medical settings for individuals with autism. Visual supports help clarify expectations in medical settings by making foreign concepts like medical procedures more predictable and understandable.

Initiative 3: Capacity Building Initiatives

In FY2022, the DNEA expanded its training and technical assistance to include intensive supports designed to build the internal capacity of organizations, communities, and local education agencies. Capacity-building initiatives addressed *Blueprint for Collective Action* Improvement Area 1 (Training and Technical Assistance), and Area 7 (Systems Coordination) and were executed by CDS DNEA staff.

Division of Prevention and Behavioral Health. In FY2022 the DNEA worked with the Division of Prevention and Behavioral Health (PBH) to implement a comprehensive training and technical assistance program designed to systematically improve the internal capacity of identified units within PBH to support individuals with ASD with co-occurring mental health needs. Family Crisis Therapists (FCTs) and Mobile Response and Stabilization Services (MRSS), Delaware's youth mobile crisis unit, were units identified to receive the training and technical assistance package.

These initiatives focused on providing ongoing training, coaching, and technical assistance to a core set of staff members (Unit Leads) who frequently work with individuals with autism and are uniquely positioned in their organization to become a trusted resource of information about autism to their colleagues.

Within both units (MRSS and FCT), Unit Leads engaged in a 12-week intensive training series. The series began with a comprehensive needs assessment, which included a staff survey and focus group discussions. Data collected during this process were used to tailor the training content to meet the needs of each of the identified units.

Once the needs assessment was concluded, Unit Leads participated in a training series that was tailored to meet their unique roles in the community. The training series included four didactic sessions and four case consultation sessions. Didactic sessions addressed topics such as the core characteristics of autism, co-occurring mental health needs, and evidence-based supports. Case consultation sessions supported staff in applying these concepts to their caseload.

Once these professionals completed the intensive training series, DNEA supported the unit in building their capacity to support children and young adults with autism and co-occurring mental health needs across Delaware. DNEA staff worked with Unit Leads and their supervisors to organize staff-wide case consultation sessions that incorporated the concepts taught during the 12-week training series.

Table 2 summarizes the training and technical assistance provided to the *Division of Prevention and Behavioral Health* in FY2022. Table 3 summarizes pre and post training knowledge assessments. All participants demonstrated significant growth in their knowledge and understanding of autism and the evidence-based supports that could be used to support this population of Delawareans in a mental health setting.

Table 2

DNEA Training and Technical Assistance Activities for the Division of Prevention and Behavioral Health (n=7)

PBH Unit	Activity	Number of sessions
FCTs	Didactics	4
	Coaching and technical assistance	2
MRSS	Didactics	8
	Coaching and technical assistance	7
CFCC	Didactics	4
PBH-wide	Leadership coaching and technical assistance	2

Table 3

MC, CFCC, and FCT Cohort Pre- and Post-Knowledge Assessments: Percent of Participants Who Accurately Responded to Knowledge Assessment Questions

Question topic	Pre-test	Post-test	Difference
Occurrence in males and females	50%	100%	+50%
Current CDC autism rate	50%	80%	+30%
Prompting as an antecedent strategy	25%	80%	+55%
Comorbidity of ASD with MH concerns	0%	80%	+80%
Identification of “task analysis” visual aid	50%	100%	+50%
Social autopsy as a debriefing tool	0%	40%	+40%
Concept of negative reinforcement	0%	60%	+60%
Anxiety presentation with autism	75%	100%	+25%
Most common coexisting mental health diagnosis	33%	60%	+27%

ADOS-2 Professional Training. Parents in Delaware often face long waitlists to receive an autism diagnosis. To enhance the number of practices that offer evaluations, the DNEA hosted a three-day training attended by 40 clinicians on best practices for administering the Autism Diagnostic Observation Schedule (ADOS-2) in June. The ADOS-2 training address *Blueprint for Collective Action* Improvement Area 1(Identification, Diagnosis and Classification).

The ADOS-2 is an evidence-based tool that clinicians use to diagnose children with autism. In addition to this training, the DNEA is leading ongoing technical assistance focused on supporting attendees in using the training content to conduct evaluations across the state. Table 4

summarizes participants’ training satisfaction and Table 5 summarizes the topics related to ways participants will receive supervision and support in utilizing the ADOS-2 assessment within their respective agencies. The DNEA has plans to continue to offer this training in FY23.

Table 4

Training satisfaction data from DNEA June 2022 ADOS-2 Training

Percentage of participants that “strongly agreed” or “agreed” with the following statements:	Percent
The training enhanced my understanding of the ADOS-2	94%
The general information presented by way of introduction to the ADOS-2 will be useful to me.	91%
The technical information presented on how to administer the modules will be useful to me.	94%
Overall, the training will have a positive impact on my work	94%
Overall training satisfaction	100%

0= Strongly Disagree < — > 100= Strongly Agree

Table 5

ADOS-2 June 2022 Participant Capacity Building Data

Post Training Capacity Building Questions	Percentage answer “yes”
Will have access to the ADOS-2 kit (toys & materials)	69%
Will work as part of an ADOS-2 team	74%
Will have the opportunity to be mentored by another professional who has experience administering the ADOS-2	91%

Communicating Visually in Pediatrics. In the latter part of FY22, the DNEA began a capacity-building project to integrate an evidence-based communication tool, *Communicating Visually in Pediatrics*, into medical settings. Published by the American Academy of Pediatrics, this evidence-based tool explains standard medical procedures to children and young adults with autism who may have complex communication needs. The DNEA has created accompanying trainings, videos, and resources guides to support residents, medical professionals, and dental providers in using this tool. Work to disseminate this visual communication tool to healthcare and dental professionals across the state will continue in FY23. Increased coordination and training with medical and dental professionals addresses *Blueprint for Collective Action* Improvement Area 7 (Systems Coordination).

Disrupting Ableism. In June 2022, the DNEA hosted Dr. Priya Lalvani, who led a workshop that discussed ableism, disability oppression, and how families and professionals can become allies for people with ASD. Hosting a guest speaker to talk about ableism addresses *Blueprint for Collective Action* Improvement Area 4 (Self-Determination, Self-advocacy and Social Network Development). Over 100 professionals, self-advocates, and family members attended the one-hour lunchtime learning event. Feedback surveys indicated that:

85% of participants reported that they will be able to use or apply some of the information presented in the webinar

96% of participants were satisfied with the presenter’s knowledge and effectiveness in communicating with the audience

100% of participants were satisfied with webinar

Anecdotal feedback from this event also indicated a high degree of trainee satisfaction:

"I appreciate the opportunity to learn what Ableism is. I have never heard of this term before this seminar. I learned how it impacts our culture, what it sounds/looks like, and ideas about how to get involved to be supportive advocates and "Change Agents" for this cause. Thank you for this very educational opportunity."

"It was an honor to be a part of this webinar. It has really made me think about and challenge my own and societies assumptions about disability."

"I always thought that the term ableism, referred to something that was benefitting the abilities of someone or "ableing" as it were for something.... I see now that it is a term that can cause subtle or overt caution for those who may appear to have less abilities as society would prefer... it is quite a term and I would certainly like to have more conversation about this topic!!"

"I have not heard such a relatable presentation in the past five years. Kudos to this amazing presenter. I appreciate being able to participate in this webinar."

First Responder Autism Training. Before the COVID-19 pandemic, the DNEA held an Autism and Law Enforcement Education Coalition (ALEC) first responder training. ALEC is a first responder autism training program targeted to equip first responders with the knowledge and strategies to best serve individuals with ASD in a crisis situation. The training covered the core characteristics of ASD and suggested responses in emergency situations. First responders in Delaware were trained as trainers to build capacity within the state to provide the training to other first responders. As a result of not receiving state funding in FY21, all training and technical assistance related to training other first responders ended. Upon re-establishing the DNEA in FY22, the DNEA partnered with Charles "Chuck" Sawchenko - a retired Delaware State Trooper, social worker, and parent of a child with autism who participated in the 2019 ALEC training. Mr. Sawchenko has partnered with the DNEA to expand the training and technical assistance opportunities available to state troopers and other first responders and will be delivering regular training across the state. The training content has been developed with in-person training starting in early FY23. The DNEA anticipates offering the training 5-7 times a year, training 30 responders per training.

Initiative 4: Information Dissemination and Community Outreach

In FY2022 DNEA staff continued to conduct outreach to community organizations and leaders in order to increase awareness of the DNEA; gather information about the needs of individuals with autism, their families, and providers; and share available resources and training opportunities. Over the course of the year, presentations about the DNEA were conducted at

meetings held by the Center for Disabilities Studies’ Community Advisory Council (CAC), Delaware Department of Education (DDOE) Special Education Directors, and Leadership Education in Neurodevelopmental and Related Disabilities (LEND) Program. The DNEA’s outreach work address *Blueprint for Collective Action Improvement* Area 6 (Family Support and Stakeholder engagement) and Area 2 (Training and Technical Assistance).

Community trainings, events and technical assistance requests. The DNEA responds to training and technical assistance requests from Delaware organizations and community members. Unlike DNEA statewide trainings, these requests allow the DNEA to train a specific agency or organization on a training topic of their choice. The training can be part of a larger didactic series or in response to a single training or technical assistance request. These activities address *Blueprint for Collective Action Improvement* Area 1 (Training and Technical Assistance).

Table 6 summarizes the training and technical assistance requests provided in FY2022.

Table 6
DNEA Community Agency and Organization Trainings and Technical Assistance Requests

Agency	Times offered	Total attendees
Head Start	1	140
Spectrum Scholars	1	10
Division of Vocational Rehab	2	15
Focus on the Family Conference	1	100
Easterseals	1	15
FY2022 Total	6	280

Milford Wellness Village: Village Fest. The DNEA participated in the Village Fest that was hosted by the Milford Wellness Village. The festival showcased the services and organizations on campus at the Milford Wellness Village. The DNEA hosted a table with autism-related information allowing visitors to order resource guides and find out about upcoming training opportunities. An estimated 250 people attended the event.

Family SHADE Annual Summit. The DNEA participated as a vendor at the event educating participants about ASD, training opportunities and available resources. Family SHADE reported between 50 and 75 families responded to the event.

DNEA digital community outreach. The DNEA maintains a website and an email listserv. The DNEA email list has over 850 subscribers. These digital resources serve as another means to increase awareness about DNEA initiatives and disseminate evidence-based information about autism.

The website highlights DNEA activities; offers information on autism and Delaware-specific processes and resources; and includes resources on evidence-based practices. Visitors can use the website to request training or technical assistance and register for upcoming DNEA events. Because the DNEA supports ICA operations, the website also provides information about the *Blueprint for Collective Action*, ICA meetings, and contact information for other ICA agencies and organizations.

Similar to the website, the DNEA email listserv serves as a mechanism to highlight DNEA activities and provides recipients with a means for signing up for DNEA training initiatives. Each month, the DNEA sends a community newsletter that highlights upcoming training opportunities and new resources.

Evidence-based practice resource guides. The DNEA continues to develop and revise evidence-based practice (EBP) resource guides to support professionals who work with individuals with autism. Guides are aligned with training topics covered during remote, live, and recorded trainings. Some guides are more general and provide strategies that most families and professionals may find helpful, while others are more technical and target specific groups of professionals. All resource guides were professionally developed by a graphic designer and fully accessible (i.e., 508 compliant) in their digital and paper formats.

Resource guides are housed on the DNEA website and can be searched by topic. Delaware residents and professionals can also order paper copies of the guides, free of charge, through the DNEA website. An abstract of each resource guides can be found below.

Most-to-Least Prompting addresses the evidence-based prompting strategy that systematically provides predetermined prompts from most to least intrusive. It can be used to teach discrete or chained behaviors/skills.

Least-to-Most Prompting addresses the evidence-based prompting strategy that systematically provides predetermined prompts from least to most intrusive. It can be used to teach discrete or chained behaviors/skills.

Prompting and Task Analysis Glossary is a research recap of the highly respected Wong, et al. (2015) study, which is a comprehensive review of research about focused intervention practices used to support individuals with autism. This accompanying glossary is designed to support the community in understanding terms commonly associated with these practices.

Evidence-Based Practices for Teaching a New Skill is designed to provide guidance about how to use introductory and advanced resource guides and recorded videos to teach a person with autism a new skill or task.

Avoiding Ableist Language is a research recap that briefly reviews discrimination and social prejudice against people with disabilities and people perceived as disabled. Ableism characterizes people as defined by their disabilities as inferior to people without an identified disability.

Parent/Caregiver Training describes parent/caregiver training as a wide range of interventions, including care coordination, psychoeducation, language or social development treatments, and strategies designed to address maladaptive behaviors. These manualized programs emphasize a caregiver's role as the agent of change using time-limited, evidence-based approaches. Parent/Caregiver training models use step-by-step techniques to improve behaviors during daily routines such as video clips, discussion activities, role-play, and homework assignments

Creative CBT: Adapting Cognitive Behavioral Therapy for Autism describes Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT) as an evidence-based psychotherapy that can help youth manage anxiety by changing the way they think and behave. The treatment helps youth recognize and understand how their behaviors, thoughts, and emotions affect each other.

Holiday Resource Guide for Families: Strategies for Holidays and Special Events discusses how holidays can be both joyous and difficult for youth with autism spectrum disorder. During the holiday season, thoughtful planning can assist in reducing holiday-

related stress and challenging behaviors related to the uniqueness of different holiday events and activities. The purpose of this guide is to provide strategies to help de-stress during the busy holiday season.

Trauma and Youth with Autism was developed in collaboration with Trauma Matters Delaware and provides information about the assessment of trauma in youth with autism while discussing potential adaptations of Trauma Focused Cognitive Behavioral Therapy and Delaware resources.

Social Skills Instruction discusses the importance of teaching social skills as they are required for interacting with others. Developing and maintaining connections can be challenging for individuals with autism, affecting their academic performance, mental health, and overall behavior.

Initiative 5: Family Supports and Services

Autism Delaware serves as the advocacy arm of the DNEA, supporting families of individuals with autism through multiple programs. One such program is its Family Navigation program. Family Navigators respond to requests for information about autism, Delaware supports, and available services.

Approximately 20% of DNEA funds were directed toward Family Navigation services at Autism Delaware. This allotment helps fund the work of Family Navigators, who support families throughout the state. One navigator is bilingual (Spanish/English). In 2022, the workload of the Family Navigators was helped by the addition of a part-time intake coordinator to the Family Support team.

Family Navigators support families in assessing needs and designing next steps for individuals diagnosed with autism. Autism Delaware offers Family Navigation services to families who have a specific question or challenge navigating systems. The Family Navigation program addresses *Blueprint for Collective Action Improvement Area 6* (Family Support and Stakeholder engagement).

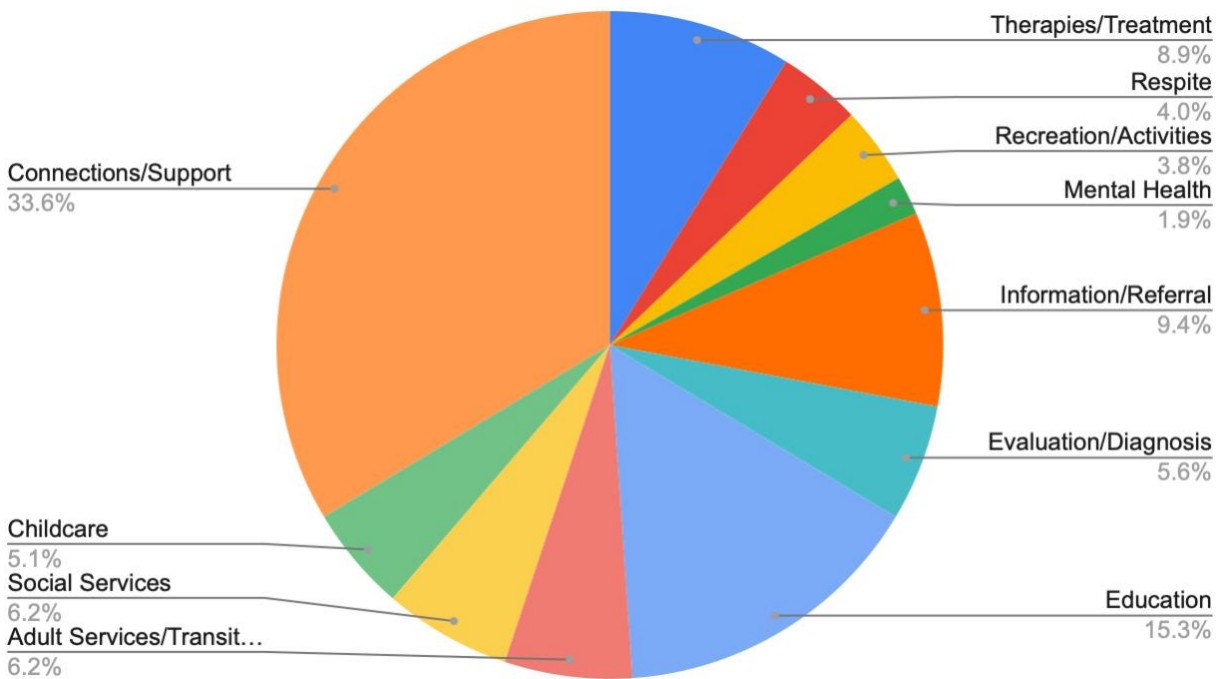
Autism Delaware Family Navigators made 3,168 contacts from October 21, 2021 - September 30, 2022, which is consistent with usage in FY 2019 and a significant decrease from a pandemic high of 5,418 contacts in FY2020.

The top 3 needs from families seeking services through the Family Navigator program in FY2022 were:

- 1- Support & Connection
- 2- Educational Issues
- 3- Information & Referral.

Support and Connection was the largest category of need, making up more than a third of calls from families seeking services in FY2022, anecdotally reflecting a desire on the part of families to resume their typical level of community activity as the pandemic waned. Figure 1 summarizes the different areas of family need represented in family calls.

Figure 1. Areas of Family Need in FY22



Family Navigation remains an integral part of the supports and services provided by Autism Delaware. Their ongoing commitment to families in direct response to the COVID-19 crisis and, now, as families attempt to resume a normal level of activity, underscores Autism Delaware’s role in the autism community as a trusted source of support for families.

Delaware Network for Excellence in Autism Operations

In re-establishing its funding in FY22, the DNEA was able to re-staff all major positions; relaunch and update its website; re-establish its listserv; and establish a second office location so DNEA had a presence upstate (Newark) and downstate (Milford). The following section will provide an overview of DNEA staffing and program expenses.

DNEA Staffing

Dr. Sarah Mallory (26%) served as the DNEA's principal investigator and provided conceptual leadership to DNEA activities. As a special education faculty member at the University of Delaware, Dr. Mallory also served as the lead on all education-related work. Dr. Mallory previously served as the DNEA interim director, allowing her to leverage her historical expertise of DNEA operations to relaunch DNEA activities efficiently and effectively.

Ms. Alisha Fletcher (FTE 100%) served as Director of the DNEA. Ms. Fletcher is a clinical social worker by training and provided general, day-to-day leadership on DNEA activities. In collaboration with Dr. Mallory, Ms. Fletcher provided supervision to all DNEA staff, prioritized work plan activities, and served as lead on activities related to healthcare and social services.

Ms. Karen Oosterhous (FTE 100%) served as coordinator for the DNEA while Ms. Tracy Beird (FTE 20%) provided administrative support to the DNEA and its training activities. DNEA training and technical assistance activities were also supported by several part-time trainers and coaches. Mr. Charles Sawchenko - a retired state trooper, social worker, and parent of an autistic daughter - supported the development of first responder training initiatives. Ms. Nicole Garrity, a school psychologist, supported statewide training activities and early childhood initiatives. Additionally, Ms. Angel Tucker, a graphic designer, supported the professional and accessible development of training resources and online training content.

The DNEA also strategically partners with subcontractors to broaden its collective expertise. As described in the original legislation creating the DNEA, Autism Delaware has a subcontract for offering family services.

DNEA Financial Report FY2022

In FY2022, the DNEA was awarded \$500,000 via a contract that began on October 1, 2022. Those funds were exhausted on September 30, 2022. A summary of the FY2022 financial report can be found in Table 7.

Table 7*DNEA Financial Report (FY2022)*

Account Category	Expenses
Personnel	\$ 209,232
Travel & Conferences	\$ 2,674
Training Supplies & Expenses	\$ 21,225
Advertising	\$ 380
Printing	\$ 51,699
Professional Speaker fees	\$ 402
Other material & supplies	\$ 42,667
Sub-Awards	\$ 101,459
Overhead	\$ 70,261
Total	\$ 500,000

Summary and Next Steps

Autism spectrum disorder remains a critical public health issue, with the CDC recently reporting an increased prevalence rate of 1 in 44. Years of stakeholder discussions in Delaware identified a lack of expertise in autism among almost all professional groups. In response, Senate Bill 93 established the DNEA to enhance Delaware’s state- and system-wide capacity to improve outcomes across the lifespan for individuals with autism through high quality, evidence-based technical assistance and training for professionals and families. In FY2022, the DNEA relaunched its work after not being funded for a year. In this short period of time, the DNEA was able to significantly expand the breadth and depth of its training, technical assistance, and supports available to the community.

Led by the University of Delaware Center for Disabilities Studies, the DNEA produced over 20 online training tutorials and resource guides, allowing professionals on-demand access to evidence-based resources and supports. The DNEA also led multiple capacity-building initiatives, such the partnership with DPBHS, laying the foundation for systems change across multiple stakeholder groups. The DNEA also leveraged its interdisciplinary partnerships to highlight the expertise of professionals such as Dr. Normal Geller and Dr. Priya Lalvani, to provide free community trainings on topics of critical importance.

Now more than ever, our state needs professionals who understand autism and who can confidently implement scientifically-based interventions. There is more work to be done. The DNEA was refunded in FY2023 and has resubmitted an application to the Health Fund Advisory Council (HFAC) for funding in FY2024. We are eager to continue this important work

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