



PARTICIPANT DIRECTED
ADVOCATES OF GEORGIA

www.pda-ga.org

LEADING CHANGE:

The Participant Directed Advocacy Forum
August 26, 2025 | The Carter Center, Atlanta, GA



On August 26, 2025, Participant Directed Advocates of Georgia (PDAG) hosted *Leading Change: The Participant Directed Advocacy Forum* at The Carter Center in Atlanta. The forum was a milestone event for Georgia's disability community, **drawing 237 in-person and 54 virtual participants**—made up of individuals with disabilities, families, advocates, policymakers, and service providers—who came together to share knowledge, strengthen networks, and build momentum for expanding participant-directed services.

The day began with **coffee and networking for families new to self-direction**, creating a welcoming space for those just starting their journeys. After opening remarks from **Robert Bell**, Director of Community Services for the Division of Developmental Disabilities, **Olivia Nickens**, Family Support Manager with the Division of Developmental Disabilities, delivered an inspiring keynote highlighting the role of family support in advancing choice and inclusion.

Participants engaged in four substantive panel discussions with 23 panelists

Homes that Empower featured grassroots voices and housing innovators who shared creative models to expand accessible, affordable housing.

Best Practices in Self-Direction offered practical strategies for budgeting, hiring, goal writing, and organization, ensuring families have the tools they need to succeed.

From Worries to Action provided legal, financial, and advocacy perspectives on long-term planning, giving families clear pathways for securing the future.

Living Fully celebrated self-determination, independence, and employment through the voices of self-advocates and leaders in independent living and workforce development.



The forum concluded with closing remarks from PDAG Executive Director Rita Young, who challenged participants to turn insights into action and continue building momentum for systemic change.

Outcomes and Impact

Post-conference survey feedback from attendees underscored the event's importance as both a source of practical tools and a catalyst for advocacy.

Families reported leaving with **new strategies they could apply immediately** to improve their administration of the self-direct model.

Lastly, the forum strengthened networks between families, providers, and policymakers, laying the groundwork for future partnerships.



What Attendees Are Saying

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Congratulations on the tremendous success of the PDAG Conference. I left inspired and empowered as did others. I know you put in an inordinate amount of energy to pull this event together, and your efforts paid off. Everything was perfect! I look forward to round 2 next year.

“

“Conference far exceeded our expectations. Do it again!

“

It was a great event and well done. I learned so much. Thank you!

“

Conference far exceeded our expectations. Thank you!

“

It was great to hear Bradley and his roommate's personal experiences about living on their own and working. (Living Fully panel)

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Thank you for bringing the problem of who will self-direct when I am gone. Also bringing stakeholders together.

“

Really helpful to hear the variety of paths folks have taken, so much creativity.

“

Congratulations to Rita and Mitzi, the PDAG board, and Olivia and Robert for an outstanding effort and execution at this first annual PDAG conference. The feedback I heard from the participants was overwhelmingly positive. We all experienced the tone in the room — a mix of appreciation, excitement, warmth, humor, and belonging...it was very special. Excited about what is to come.



“

It was enlightening to see that other families in our community see the deficits in serving our community and have done something to resolve - or help resolve - the issue. The information shared was priceless and inspiring. It renewed my hope.



“

I think PDAG is doing an amazing job! I am so excited about the future. I have self-directed for 12 years and feel like I know a lot, yet still have so much to learn. Thank you so much for all you are doing. Overall the day was phenomenal!.



“

It was awesome!

“

I really enjoyed it. Well done!

“

The entire Housing Panel provided valuable information and offered choices. Keynote speaker is committed to serving our community.

“

Thank you for the work you are doing. I would like to volunteer to support future events.

“

Olivia gave a powerful keynote. She did an amazing job to start off the conference.



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Thanks to the support of our funders and partners.
Together, we are advancing a vision in Georgia where every person with a disability can direct their own services and live with dignity, independence, and choice.



Georgia Department of
Behavioral Health and
Developmental Disabilities

