



PARTICIPANT DIRECTED
ADVOCATES OF GEORGIA
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LEADING CHANGE:

The Participant Directed Advocacy Forum August 25, 2026 | The Carter Center, Atlanta, GA



391 participants — 320 in person and 71 virtual — joined Participant Directed Advocates of Georgia (PDAG) for its second annual Leading Change forum. Individuals with disabilities, families, Employer/Designated Representatives, advocates, professionals, state leaders, and community partners came together to strengthen participant direction and shape the future of home- and community-based services in Georgia.

The 2026 attendance grew by 100 participants, or 34%, over 2025. That growth, together with 63 post-conference survey responses, reflects both strong demand for practical guidance and a growing statewide community ready to advocate for sustainable participant-directed services.

CONFERENCE HIGHLIGHTS

State Leadership and a Call to Action

GA DBHDD Commissioner Kevin Tanner offered a special welcome, followed by a keynote from **Ron Wakefield, Executive Director of the GA DBHDD Division of Developmental Disabilities**. Wakefield shared a view of the present and future of Georgia's developmental disability system. PDAG Board Chair Karen Addams then honored him for his leadership, service, and lasting commitment to people with intellectual and developmental disabilities and their families.

Support Brokers: The Missing Link

Marian Frattarola-Saulino of Values Into Action and **Caitlin Kendrick** of Learning Opportunities Quality Works brought national, real-world experience to a discussion of support brokerage. They demonstrated how support brokers can help people and families recruit and manage workers, understand program roles, maintain documentation and budgets, solve problems, build circles of support, and sustain self-direction over a lifetime.

Beyond Access: Healthcare in Real Life

Dr. Jonathan Smith, Director of the Mercer Center for Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities Care; **Dr. Julie Eshleman**, a researcher in disability, artificial intelligence, and assistive technology; and **Janelle Adams** of the Georgia Dental Association addressed healthcare access, communication, technology, dignity, and practical solutions. Survey comments showed especially strong interest in IDD-competent medical care, dental access, crisis care, and tools that help families navigate complex systems.

The Community's Voice

The Participant Direction Community Forum invited facilitated discussion around workforce stability, family caregivers, education, lifelong sustainability, flexibility with accountability, and the single most important change Georgia should make in the next two years. Participants valued the opportunity to compare experiences, identify shared problems, and learn directly from one another.

Where Do We Go From Here?

Senator Sally Harrell and Representatives Katie Dempsey, Mary Margaret Oliver, and Scott Hilton closed the substantive program with a bipartisan legislative conversation about HCBS sustainability, workforce challenges, family engagement, healthcare, and policy action. Many respondents left intending to contact their own legislators, share their family stories, and become more active advocates.

Rita Young concluded the forum with a call to turn shared knowledge into action. PDAG also recognized Deputy Director Mitzi Proffitt with gratitude for helping build the organization and advance its early work.



Survey analysis reflects 63 responses received through August 28, 2026.

Measure	Result	What it indicates
Overall experience rated Excellent or Good	59 of 63 94%	Strong overall value
Knowledge/confidence increased	55 of 63 89%	Clear learning impact
Better prepared to navigate or advocate	48 of 63 77%	Readiness to act
Event coordination rated Excellent or Good	60 of 63 95%	High operational quality
Speakers/panelists rated Excellent or Good	56 of 63 89%	Strong speaker relevance
Session content rated Excellent or Good	56 of 63 89%	Content met needs

Topics Participants Valued Most

Legislative Panel: selected by 39 respondents (62%).

Support Brokerage: selected by 38 respondents (60%).

Participant Direction Community Forum: selected by 35 respondents (56%).

Healthcare Access Panel: selected by 29 respondents (46%).

PDAG Impact and Updates: selected by 28 respondents (44%).

What Participants Plan to Do

- Contact state legislators, tell their family stories, and advocate for waiver funding, support brokerage, dental access, and workforce solutions.
- Strengthen documentation and compliance practices, including service notes, record organization, and preparation for reviews or emergencies.
- Build connections with other families, join PDAG communications and training, and share conference information with others.
- Plan for succession by identifying future representatives and learning more about supports that can make self-direction sustainable when aging caregivers can no longer lead it.
- Seek practical healthcare and service resources, including Medicaid dental providers, environmental adaptations, and options for people with intensive support needs.

What the Feedback Tells Us

The central message was clear: participants want both system-level change and practical help they can use now. Support brokerage resonated because families see a need for trusted, hands-on guidance. The legislative panel translated policy into personal action. The healthcare panel validated longstanding barriers, particularly in dental, crisis, and IDD-competent care. The community forum reinforced that peer learning is itself an essential support.

“

I felt so important, so empowered, my family mattered.

“

Very well organized, even virtual was super easy to navigate and well thought out.

“

PDAG is needed by so many.

“

The support brokerage speakers were extremely helpful and could be a game changer for families managing participant direction.

“

This conference was an incredible inspiration to see so many people gathered in one room for an incredible mission. It was empowering and gave me hope for the future.

“

The Legislative Panel helped me realize how many politicians are aware and fighting for our case.



LEADING CHANGE



GRATITUDE & PARTNERSHIP

The forum was made possible by PDAG's board, staff, volunteers, speakers, exhibitors, and community partners, and by the support of its sponsors:

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Karen Addams
Rita Young

