



PARTICIPANT DIRECTED ADVOCATES OF GEORGIA

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**TUESDAY
AUGUST
26**

LEADING CHANGE: **The Participant Directed Advocacy Forum**

PANELISTS & BIOS



Debbie Anderson

Debbie Anderson has been working as an advocate for people with disabilities since she graduated from the Partners in Policymaking program in 2001. She has served as a Region 6 Representative on the DBHDD GAPD Advisory Board since 2017. Debbie has gained an incredible amount of knowledge from all of these experiences, but mostly she has learned from her son, Max. Max and his experiences with autism have been her best teacher for understanding how to help individuals and families create meaningful lives for their loved ones with disabilities. Debbie is grateful to have used the Participant Direct model for Max's Medicaid COMP Waiver since 2015. Debbie lives in Columbus, Georgia, and currently serves as part-time Director of Music at St. Thomas Episcopal Church and at Temple Israel. She recently retired as the Musical Director of the Springer Opera House—the State Theatre of Georgia—and as adjunct faculty at the Schwob School of Music at Columbus State University.



Meghan Burke-Abowd

Meghan Burke-Abowd is a retired mathematics professor who, with her husband Gregory, has three children in their 20s: a daughter and two sons who both have autism. Her older son has a NOW waiver that she has been self-directing for many years. Recently, the family purchased a condominium in Decatur with a plan to build a neurodiverse residential community that could eventually support an inclusion concierge.



Pam Blanton

Pam Blanton's career has spanned 30 years in special needs housing. As a housing coordinator in Seattle, Washington, she assisted 450 people with IDD with their move into housing over 5 years. She has an in-depth working knowledge of how to help people navigate SSI, SSDI, State Residential Support, Medicaid-funded personal care services, supported employment income, and Section 8 housing subsidies.

She has been called a tenacious problem-solver, and that is what drove her to start Partners4Housing in 2010. She knew there had to be a better way for families of individuals with IDD to find roommates and set up shared housing solutions. Her goal, and her company's mission, is to empower families to create housing solutions that meet the unique needs of their Loved Ones with IDD and create a real solution for the future. To date, Partners4Housing has helped families create 66 shared living homes serving 134 people with disabilities, and they have helped over 2,000 families navigate multi-siloed social service systems to access the benefits to support a person-centered housing solution. pam@partners4housing.com



Danny Bryant

Danny Bryant graduated from Tucker High School in 2012. He then participated in a four-year Advanced Leadership and Career Development Program (ALCD) at Kennesaw State University, for which he received a certificate of completion. Danny has been independently employed at Publix for the last four years and hopes to transfer to a new department with the assistance of Supported Employment Services.

COMP Waiver-funded services have enabled Danny to live independently with one of his peers in his apartment in the Dunwoody area. He is continually progressing in socialization and life management skills. Danny is very serious about his health and wellness and represents Adult Disability Medical Healthcare (ADMH) as an ambassador charged with raising funding and awareness for the program. He is a strong advocate for adults living with developmental disabilities and is a board member of the Down Syndrome Association of Atlanta. He also participates annually in the Georgia Council on Developmental Disabilities (GCDD) Advocacy Days campaign.



Bradley Carlisle

Bradley Carlisle is 34 years old and was born with Down syndrome and congenital heart defects. Bradley attended most of his school years in DeKalb County but graduated from Alcovy High School in Newton County. After graduation, Bradley applied for and received the NOW/COMP Waiver for both services and residential living. Bradley chose to move into a host home at the age of 23, where he lived for 10 years.

In August 2022, Bradley decided he wanted to live more independently and work. Bradley also decided that he wanted to live in the Dunwoody, Georgia, community where he had more opportunities to meet his needs and interests. Bradley transitioned his NOW/COMP waiver into Participant Direct to fulfill these goals. In October 2023, Bradley moved into his own apartment with his roommate, Danny Bryant, and secured a job in his community at Chupitos (a Mexican restaurant).

Bradley served three years on the Down Syndrome Association of Atlanta Board and in 2023 was voted to serve three years on the National Down Syndrome Congress Board. Bradley is very involved in a theater program called Habima at the Jewish Community and has performed in six plays.

Bradley is a strong advocate for his community and enjoys being social and spending time with friends.



Greg Corneille

Greg Corneille is a wealth advisor and founder of Choice Wealth Management, a firm that provides comprehensive financial planning and investment management with a particular focus on serving families navigating special needs planning. He is a Certified Financial Planner™ as well as a Chartered Special Needs Consultant®. Greg's insights have been featured in media outlets such as *CNBC*, *Bloomberg*, *Yahoo Finance*,

and *U.S. News & World Report*. Active in his community, he has served on the boards of several nonprofit and business organizations. Greg is also a husband and father of three, which grounds his work in a practical, family-centered perspective.
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Brian Dewey

Brian Dewey and his wife Jane have been residents of DeKalb County, Georgia, for over 30 years and the proud parents of four children and four grandchildren. Brian retired in 2024 after a career in marketing and sales, including Fortune 500 companies and startups. Brian and Jane founded Twin Magnolia Investments LLC in 2015, which provided resources to purchase a home for their 40-year-old son Evan, who has Down Syndrome.

Long-time advocates for the developmental disabilities community, Brian and Jane presently serve on the board of Peter and Paul's Place located in Tucker, Georgia.



Anita Gardner

Anita Gardner has been with the [Bobby Dodd Institute](https://www.bobbydoddinstitute.org/) since July 2014. Prior to BDI she was Chief of Staff for a State Representative in Georgia. When her daughter was diagnosed with autism, she dove into the disability community to learn everything possible to help her daughter. She has been an advocate for all individuals living with any type of disability since. anita.gardner@bobbydodd.org



Harrison Gross

Harrison Gross is an attorney, real estate broker, and owner of SPECS Developments LLC. Founded in 2021, SPECS Developments offers high-quality rentals and real estate services catered to neurodiverse adults. The company owns and manages four townhomes in East Atlanta, a four-unit apartment complex in St. Louis, and a single-family home in Dunwoody, Georgia, set to open August 2025. Having a younger brother with autism,

Harrison has combined his lived experience with his professional expertise to bring housing opportunities to adults with disabilities. harrison.gross@gmail.com



Christine Gudgin

Christine Gudgin is the Community Life Engagement Manager for the Department of Behavioral Health and Developmental Disabilities (DBHDD), Division of Intellectual/Developmental Disabilities and is responsible for program and policy oversight for community access, pre-vocational, and supported employment services. Prior to her role at DBHDD, Christine worked as a Career Specialist and Region Director at Briggs & Associates for

many years, supporting people in fulfilling their employment dreams. Also, she has been a member of the Georgia APSE Board and has served as Vice-President and President. christine.gudgin@dbhdd.ga.gov



DJ Jeyaram

Judge | Attorney | Advocate for Individuals with Special Needs

The Honorable Deepak “DJ” Jeyaram is a respected attorney and judge recognized for his deep expertise in special needs law and his unwavering commitment to protecting special needs families. With more than twenty-five years of legal experience, DJ is known for combining his professional expertise and personal compassion—especially in matters involving children and adults with disabilities.

DJ shifted his law firm’s focus to helping families with special needs in 2009 when his son was diagnosed with a rare genetic condition. DJ specializes in special needs trusts, wills, guardianship, conservatorship, and appealing Katie Beckett & NOW/COMP denials.

Prior to establishing his own legal practice, DJ was with large firms’ healthcare groups. In addition, DJ’s experience includes serving as the Deputy Director for Legal Services with the Georgia Department of Community Health and as a Georgia Administrative Law Judge with the Office of State Administrative Hearings. In his role as an Administrative Law Judge, DJ presided over Katie Beckett and NOW/COMP hearings. dj@jeylaw.com



Dana Lloyd

Dana Lloyd has been engaged in advocacy with people experiencing injustice on both a personal and professional level for over two decades. Dana currently serves as Director of Community Engagement and Outreach at the [Georgia Advocacy Office](https://www.georgiaadvocacy.org/), Georgia’s Protection and Advocacy System. This is a new role after 3 years as the Director of the Developmental Disabilities program. Dana also leads Georgia’s supported

decision-making coalition and is a state team lead for the Administration on Community Living’s Center on Youth Voice Youth Choice, a national youth-led Supported Decision-Making Project. Her career began providing direct support to people with disabilities to live full lives in their communities. dlloyd@thegao.org



Anna C. Maki

Anna Maki is the Director of Program Services at the [Bobby Dodd Institute](#) (BDI). She earned her Juris Doctorate at the University of Georgia School of Law and has a Master's in Community Counseling specializing in clinical diagnoses and addressing issues that impact individuals with developmental disabilities. Through BDI she developed the Benefits Navigation program to assist with benefits including

Social Security, Medicaid Waivers, Family Support Services, GVRA, and more.

Since the program's inception in 2016, Anna and her team have served more than 1,500 families and secured more than \$500 million in lifetime benefits for individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities. Additionally, she is a Community Partner Work Incentive Counselor with the Social Security Administration and manages BDI's Work Incentive Planning and Assistance (WIPA) program to guide Social Security beneficiaries in managing their benefits while working. Anna also oversees the Family Support programs at BDI, serving more than 750 participants. With more than twenty years of professional experience, Anna is adept at problem-solving and navigating the benefits maze. Anna is the mom of an adult son with autism, who is her greatest life teacher. anna.maki@bobbydodd.org



Olivia Nickens, Keynote Speaker

Olivia Nickens currently serves as Family Support Manager with the Georgia Department of Behavioral Health and Developmental Disabilities (DBHDD). Olivia is a licensed professional counselor with over sixteen years of experience in the intellectual and developmental disabilities field, including eleven years of dedicated experience with DBHDD.

In her current role as Family Support Manager, she manages several programs including family support, participant direction, and the aging services team. Throughout her career, she has focused on supporting individuals with developmental disabilities and their families through case management, service coordination, program development and oversight, and policy implementation. Olivia remains committed to advancing access to high quality support services and promoting positive outcomes for the individuals and families served. olivia.nickens@dbhdd.ga.gov



Mitzi Proffitt

Deputy Director, Participant Directed Advocates of Georgia

Mitzi Proffitt resides in Brooklet, Georgia, with her husband, Jack, and their son, Joshua, a Georgia Southern University graduate with a developmental disability. Over the past quarter century, Mitzi has dedicated herself to assisting families in various capacities. For the past 8 years, she has held dual roles as the VP of Support

Services and the Parent Training Initiative Director at Parent to Parent of Georgia, providing invaluable support to parents and families affected by disabilities. Before assuming these directorial positions, she served as a regional coordinator, steadily advancing through the ranks to management and leadership roles over a 7-year period. Mitzi's extensive experience spans her involvement in numerous state and national councils and boards, dating back to the past 25 years or more. Notably, she chaired the Georgia Council on Developmental Disabilities for 7 years and currently holds the position of chair on the Georgia Participant-Directed Advisory Council. mitzi@pda-ga.org



Clementine (Tina) Rivers

Tina Rivers is a lifelong advocate for individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities. She has more than 35 years of experience as a special and physical education teacher.

She is the proud mother of her 31-year-old nonverbal autistic son, Cody.

Tina serves as the co-chair of the Georgia Participant Direction (GAPD) Advisory Group and the chair of the Georgia Participant Directed Advocacy Group (PDAG).



Robert (Bob) Rosen

Robert (Bob) Rosen retired from federal service in December 2020 after 30 years with the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency. At EPA, he served as a federal on-scene coordinator for 20 years and a Brownfields project manager for 10. He is the father of two adult children with disabilities. As a parent, Bob has worked to ensure his children have received as many benefits as possible—both girls have COMP waivers, and his younger daughter began receiving a housing choice voucher 2 years ago after a year of applying to programs across the country. Bob will be speaking of this most recent experience of applying for housing choice vouchers.



Tim Sass

Tim Sass is the co-founder and president of Better Living Together, an organization whose mission is to facilitate innovative, affordable, and accessible housing solutions where people with and without disabilities live and thrive together. He recently retired from Georgia State University, where he was a Professor of Economics and the W.J. Usery Chair of the American Workplace. He was also the founder and faculty director of the Metro Atlanta Policy Lab for Education (MAPLE)—a partnership between five metro area school districts and GSU that uses data and rigorous research to improve outcomes for students. He now uses his skills in policy analysis to advocate for policies to expand the supply of affordable and inclusive housing opportunities for people with disabilities. tsass@gsu.edu



Kathy Simmons

Kathy Simmons is employed by the Dodge County Board of Education and serves as a parent mentor through the Georgia Department of Education's Parent Mentor Partnership. With 23 years of experience supporting families of children with disabilities, Kathy is a passionate advocate and trusted resource for parents navigating the special education system. She plays a vital role in bridging the gap between home and school by equipping families with knowledge about special education processes, resources, medical needs, waivers, and more. Kathy's work is rooted in both professional expertise and personal experience. She and her husband, Chris, are the proud parents of three adult sons and grandparents to two grandsons.

Their oldest son, Austin, is 29 years old and has a diagnosis of severe cerebral palsy. Austin lives at home with his parents and requires support staff to meet all daily living needs and provide enrichment. Caring for Austin has profoundly shaped Kathy's dedication to guide and support other families of children with disabilities. Kathy is especially grateful for the meaningful relationships and connections she has built with others who share similar experiences. Kathy's journey, as both a parent and professional, continues to inspire her unwavering commitment to empowering families, building community, and ensuring that no parent feels alone in the process.



Shelly Simmons

Shelly Simmons is the Executive Director of the Statewide Independent Living Council of Georgia (SILCGA), a non-profit organization, founded in 1995, with the vision of "equal participation of people with disabilities in their communities." She works closely with various agencies & organizations and the legislature to help develop effective and efficient policy directed towards Georgians with disabilities. Shelly graduated from California State University, Long Beach with a bachelor's in communications. Upon graduation, she worked for a production house, but health challenges soon directed her to the local Vocational Rehabilitation office and down a different occupational path. Seeking additional services & resources, Shelly contacted her local Center for Independent Living (CIL). With the support of both entities, she began her career working in Independent Living (IL). Shelly has worked as a Disability Navigator, Benefits Specialist, and Client Assistant Program Coordinator in California. After relocating to Georgia, she continued working in IL and reached out to the Statewide Independent Living Council, serving as a board member, vice-chair, and chair. In 2016, Shelly was appointed Executive Director of the SILCGA. ssimmons@silcga.org



Stefanie Smith

Stefanie Smith is a parent to a 28-year-old son with autism and medical conditions who has had a Medicaid waiver for more than 20 years. Using her experience in the business world and as the founder and director of a school, Stefanie has been successful in hiring and retaining quality caregivers for her son. Many of her staff have stayed working with her son for multiple years, some have even been with her for over a decade.

Stefanie is the Founder of Alexander Academy, a school for students with learning differences, located in Alpharetta, Georgia. The school is in its 18th year. She has a master's degree in special education as well as training in ABA, Floortime, and Incidental teaching methods. She has also spoken at local, statewide, and national conferences on dietary interventions for children and adults with ADHD and autism spectrum disorders. She has a 30-year-old daughter with ADHD who lives in Atlanta, and her son, Ben, a waiver participant, who lives with her in Roswell, GA.



Kevin Stringfellow

Kevin Stringfellow is a respected leader and advocate, bringing over 30 years of experience as a spinal cord injury survivor and self-advocate to his impactful work in disability rights and community building. Based in Johns Creek, Georgia, he currently serves as the Project Coordinator for the Champions Place@Home Board. He is a Board member for the Participant Directed Advocates of Georgia (PDAG), disABILITY Link (Vice Chair), and Receiving His Life Ministries.

Kevin's commitment is further demonstrated through his roles as a Shepherd Center peer support volunteer, a Christopher & Dana Reeve certified mentor, a Champions Community Foundation volunteer, and a member of the National Council on Independent Living (NCIL).

After his injury, Kevin graduated summa cum laude from Georgia State University with a BBA in Finance. He is also a licensed Georgia realtor with 15 years of experience in both residential and commercial sectors. Known for his critical thinking, resilience, and a natural drive towards continuous improvement, Kevin is adept at navigating change and passionately works towards creating more inclusive and supportive environments for all. Kevin, a participant-directed individual in the Georgia Independent Care Waiver Program (ICWP), advocates for himself and others to have more freedom of choice, independence, and access to the community.



Rick Thompson

Rick Thompson is Co-Founder and Executive Director of Champions Community Foundation (CCF), an Atlanta-based 501(c)(3) charity whose mission is to empower physically challenged young adults to reach their full potential for independence and belonging. CCF is expanding its mission in three ways: (1) through the development of Champions Place, a unique shared living environment for physically challenged young adults,

(2) creating opportunities to build friendships and community, and (3) leveraging what CCF has learned to impact more lives. Working with Google, CCF is now installing the same assistive technology residents enjoy at Champions Place with other physically challenged young adults in our community.

Rick and his wife Nancy, both graduates of Bucknell University, have been married for 43 years and blessed with three children; Rob, and Katie and Matthew who are both physically challenged due to a rare form of muscular dystrophy. Katie died at the age of 3 and Matthew, whom doctors predicted would die by age 10, is now 33 years old and going strong. In December of 2016, Rick and Nancy agreed it was time for Rick to leave a successful corporate career of 38 years to follow God's plans for his life—to leverage his life experiences and leadership skills to pursue this passion he was destined to follow.

During his corporate career, Rick held a number of general management positions with Eastman Kodak Company and Lexmark International, leading organizations including sales, operations, professional services, and technology.



Jacquelyn B. Thornton

Jacquelyn (Jacque) Thornton is an experienced healthcare and housing leader with broad gerontological and operational experience with a focus on health and wellness through the integration of long-term services and supports. Jacque has led successful population health practice operations management to achieve healthier outcomes for the populations served by the organizations she has the joy of serving during her 37-year career.

She currently serves as the President and Co-Founder of Sage Navigator. She is the President/Executive Director for Two Sparrows Village, simultaneously bridging her passion for service to older adults and those differently abled (living with disabilities and neurodivergent).

Her career and volunteer activities have been devoted primarily to working with governmental and nonprofit organizations such as LeadingAge National's Professional Development Network, Co-founder of Sage Navigator, former Christian City Trustee, former Board Member of [Two Sparrows Village](#), advocate at the Center for Positive Aging, Atlanta Regional Commission's Advisory Committee on Aging, AARP Georgia Age Friendly Collaborative Community Partner, Clark Atlanta University Guild Member & Immediate Past Chair, Bridgebuilders of DeKalb & East Point, Atlanta Healthy Start Initiative, Children 1st, NCNW Life Member, Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority, Inc. Silver Member, Hands-On-Atlanta, and others.

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Lawrence (LJ) Young

Lawrence Young (LJ) lives in Riverdale, Georgia, and is a member of the Uniting for Change Leadership Collective. He is a contributing member of the DBHDD workgroup supporting waivers for folks on the planning list. LJ is passionate about being a presenter and an advocate for people with disabilities. He has an interest in audio-video production and would like to get a job in either the TV or radio industry to make content that

promotes advocacy for people with disabilities.



Rita Young

Executive Director Participant Directed Advocates of Georgia

For 20 years, Rita has held various roles, including corporate trainer, public policy director, and coalition builder within nonprofit organizations dedicated to helping individuals with developmental disabilities. She managed the Partners in Policymaking program in Georgia, worked as a grassroots organizer for the Unlock the Waiting List Campaign, and led training and awareness programs for law enforcement, judges, and attorneys on the specific needs of people with developmental disabilities. Rita, a parent of two autistic adult sons, has also worked as a freelance project consultant for the past decade, collaborating with a diverse range of clients, such as state agencies, nonprofits, and individuals. She is based in North Fulton. Her sons have profoundly shaped who she is both personally and professionally.

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