



NATIONAL CENTER FOR EASE OF USE  
OF COMMUNITY-BASED SERVICES

# Case Studies

## Exemplary Programs Making Services Easier to Use

### Statewide Parent Advocacy Network, Inc. (SPAN)

The Statewide Parent Advocacy Network (SPAN) is an independent nonprofit organization that serves as a “one stop” center for families, parents, and professionals in New Jersey seeking information on and access to family support, health/mental health and education services.

#### Description

Under the leadership of Co-Executive Directors Diana Autin and Debra Jennings, the Statewide Parent Advocacy Network (SPAN) provides information, resources, trainings, technical assistance, family support, and leadership development that ease the frustrations many New Jersey families face when navigating state and federal service systems. For families of infants, toddlers, children and young adults with disabilities and special health care needs, accessing services presents an extra challenge that SPAN seeks to remedy by connecting these families to its impressive network of experienced and knowledgeable parents and professionals. SPAN got its start over 25 years ago when a small group of New Jersey women realized that there was a need for an organization that could bring together parents raising children with special needs who were in search of advice from other parents. With the support of several state, federal, and private grants, SPAN has evolved into an indispensable resource and advocate for New Jersey families both with and without children with special health care needs.

#### Highlights

- Hosts trainings, workshops, teleconferences, and webinars for parents and professionals interested in learning more about topics such as education, special education, health care, mental health, parent leadership and youth self-advocacy
  - Offers an opportunity for networking and making connections with other parents
  - Archives of trainings are available to the public on their website
  - Empowers families through increasing knowledge and understanding of local, state, and federal systems, programs and laws
- First organization to bring together and house the state affiliates of three key national programs: the Parent Training & Information Center (education), Family Voices/Family-to-Family Health Information Center (health)/, and Parent-to-Parent (support); also NJ Chapter of Federation of Families for Children’s Mental Health
- Received funding from the New Jersey Department of Health to create Family WRAP (Wisdom, Resources, Advocacy, and Parent to Parent Support)
  - Connects parents of children with special health care needs to other trained parents housed at county Special Child Health Services Case Management Units
  - Connects parents of children with disabilities to other trained veteran support parents for emotional support, information and resources
  - Assists parents in preparing for and resolving conflicts at appointments with health care providers, early intervention, and school and special education meetings
- Committed to diversity and remaining accessible to ALL families with children and young adults 0-26
  - Most workshops are offered in Spanish as well as English

“We’re a one-stop for families,  
no matter what the issue is.”

-- Diana Autin, SPAN  
Executive Co-Director for  
Health and Family Support

- Has staff members with a range of experiences and ethnicities
  - Can provide assistance in 8 different languages by staff and parent volunteers, and Language Line for other languages
- Staffs a Family Resource Specialist in every New Jersey county
- Pays particular attention to families who face extra challenges because of poverty, immigrant status, involvement in the juvenile justice system, involvement in multiple systems, geographic location, and special health and mental health care needs
- Solicits the active leadership of youth through NJ YELL (Youth Excelling to Lead and Learn), a Statewide Youth Council of youth and young adults with and without special needs
- Advocates for New Jersey families by serving on a variety of councils and committees dedicated to systemic changes in education, health, mental health and child welfare
  - SPAN website provides up-to-date coverage of news and events of interest to families, particularly changes in legislation and policy
  - Participated in a class action suit regarding New Jersey's laws for special education inclusion
  - Active with the Family Support Coalition and their efforts to address waiting lists for resources for families with children with developmental disabilities
  - Successfully engaged families in advocacy to pass insurance mandate for autism and other developmental disabilities, and family leave insurance (paid family leave).

## How SPAN is Making Services Easier to Use

With its leadership on a myriad of projects dedicated to increasing ease of access, systemic changes, and information-sharing, SPAN is making services easier to use for all New Jersey families. SPAN focuses on connecting families to one another and to its staff who are knowledgeable and cross-trained to provide guidance and technical assistance across systems. Rather than having to shop around and contact multiple sources, families can rely on SPAN to be a one-stop shop that will connect them to the appropriate resources. Through its network, SPAN has helped families understand their eligibility for public and private insurance, appeal denied claims or cuts in service, obtain appointments and services at qualified health centers, and secure appropriate early intervention, special education, and transition to adult life services.

Perhaps most importantly, SPAN empowers parents and families to create a medical home for their children with special health care needs by helping them to understand the language, the system, and the resources that they must navigate. SPAN also trains medical professionals on screening, medical home, family-centered care, healthcare financing, transition, and community resources. SPAN disseminates information to families and professionals through its hotline, email, newsletters, social media, and online and in-person trainings. One of the keys to SPAN's success has been the involvement of its Family Resource Specialists, who are trained parents in every county who are able to provide local support to families, as well as its network of cross-trained volunteer SPAN Resource Parents. SPAN is also making services easier to use by advocating for systemic changes and improvements, such as network adequacy and decreased waiting list time for medical appointments. By assisting families at both the individual and systemic level, SPAN is a reliable and effective ally for families with children with special health care needs.

**SPAN's Motto:**

**"Empowered Parents: Educated!  
Engaged! Effective!"**