

# FAMILY CONNECTIONS

*News for Families from the West Virginia Department of Health and Human Resources, Bureau for Behavioral Health's Office of Children, Youth and Families*

*Family Connections  
Issue II*

*Issue II is the first newsletter of the new year. Have a safe and happy new year.*

*Virtual learning has been a challenge this school year. For some students, there have been technical issues, difficulty accessing the internet, and missing their friends. Parents have also had challenges keeping their children engaged in their virtual learning. Our hope is the articles in this newsletter will help you finish the school year strong.*



## **SUPPORT FOR FAMILIES AND CHILDREN WITH THEIR EDUCATION**

Legal Aid of West Virginia's Family Advocacy, Support and Training (FAST) program has been serving children and families since 2007. While over the years, the focus of services has changed, the targeted population has remained the same; children or families of children who have emotional, behavioral, or mental health challenges. Today, the purpose of FAST is to enhance educational opportunities and student achievement for youth and empower families to participate in the planning, management, and evaluation of their child's educational services.

(Continued on next page)

**“My co-workers and I are very passionate about the work we do.”**

By Deanna Cummings, FAST Family Advocate



**SUPPORT FOR FAMILIES AND CHILDREN WITH THEIR EDUCATION** (Continued from previous page)

To accomplish this purpose, FAST is staffed with four Family Advocates, one Family Resource Specialist, and an attorney who work together to help families by:



- Assessing educational needs and goals.
- Reviewing educational records.
- Assisting with school enrollment.
- Providing guidance on educational rights and options.
- Prepping families for school meetings or acting as an advocate at meetings, including disciplinary hearings, special education meetings and behavior plan meetings.
- Representing families in legal proceedings among other things.

For families seeking basic information, FAST’s Family Support Specialist maintains a vast array of resource options to connect and link individuals with. (Continued on next page)

**SELF CARE CORNER**

Self-care edition **This or That?**

Saying yes to something that lights you up.	Saying no to something you know will drain you.
Waking up early to get things done.	Sleeping in and enjoying extra time to rest.
Slowly moving your body with deep stretches, yoga, or slow walks.	High energy movement with loud music and sweat.
Time alone spending time with your favorite hobby or activity.	Spending one-on-one time connecting with your favorite person.
Cuddling up with a book and a blanket.	Popcorn, snacks, and your favorite show.
Taking a break from social media.	Scrolling through your favorite accounts.
Finishing your to-do list.	Taking a break.

BlessingManifesting

## **SUPPORT FOR FAMILIES AND CHILDREN WITH THEIR EDUCATION** (Continued from previous page)

From programs offered by DHHR or community mental health providers, to peer support groups, or helpful information about a specific diagnosis, the Family Resource Specialist can offer their expertise to a person in need. To further reach families seeking basic information about education services, FAST staff lead Legal Aid's effort to operate an Education Helpline, which is available to the public every Wednesday from 12:00-2:00 p.m. The Education Helpline number is 1-301-715-8592.

For families in need of more in-depth help, Family Advocates, who are knowledgeable in special education and the applicable federal and state laws within the bounds of the education system, are called upon to provide assistance. Using this knowledge, they empower families by offering education and information about special education, which enables others to navigate the complex special education system. In addition, Family Advocates provide direct services to families and assist them in negotiating and resolving disputes with school districts. Family Advocates often promote collaboration between families and schools with the student's best interest in mind. This non-adversarial approach has resulted in great success across West Virginia as evidenced by satisfied families. For example, one mother stated, "The advocate was amazing and made herself available for every question, concern and meeting." Another commented, "The advocate was amazing, prompt response, sound advice, and was able to advocate for us." There are times when a family's case requires more in-depth legal mediation or due process. At this point, the Family Advocate connects them with FAST's education attorney, who can offer legal representation on education issues or any legal issue that directly impacts a child's academic stability and success. This includes child custody or visitation issues, adoptions, and housing/evictions matters, among others.

In addition to the services described above, FAST provides free training opportunities on several special education related topics, including WV Policy 2419 (Regulations for the Education of Students with Exceptionalities), 504 plans, truancy, bullying, suspension and expulsion, discipline, and discrimination. Staff are also certified trainers of Youth Mental Health First Aid. Youth Mental Health First Aid is primarily designed for adults who regularly interact with young people. It is designed to teach parents, family members, caregivers, teachers, school staff, peers, neighbors, health and human services workers, and other caring citizens how to help an adolescent (age 12-18) who is experiencing a mental health or a substance use challenge or is in crisis. To request a

training in your area, feel free to contact the FAST program director at [balbert@lawv.net](mailto:balbert@lawv.net)

For FAST staff, this work isn't simply a job, it's a life's calling. Each Family Advocate holds a passion for helping children and families of children with mental/behavioral health disabilities, and many have lived experience that help them help others. As one Family Advocate stated, "FAST ensures that all children have a positive educational experience so that they can become productive and positive members of society when they become adults by making sure school districts are adhering to the various federal and state laws and policies that govern education. I love that I get to help shape the lives of children everyday by making sure that they are receiving the appropriate services and accommodations at school, and they are not being discriminated against based on their disability, gender, religion, ethnicity, or sexual orientation. Along with the other three FAST Family Advocates and our attorney, we work to address individual and systemic issues across the state of West Virginia. My co-workers and I are very passionate about the work we do, and we are happy we can help children and families and make even the slightest difference in their everyday lives."

To access FAST services or learn more about the program, please contact 1-866-255-4370 or click on this [link](#).

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For additional information, ideas for future newsletters, contact [Roxanne.K.Chaney@wv.gov](mailto:Roxanne.K.Chaney@wv.gov)

## DO YOU HAVE SOMEONE IN YOUR FAMILY OR A FRIEND WITH SUBSTANCE USE DISORDER?

If you have someone in your family or a friend who has a substance use disorder and you would like support or would like to learn how to better communicate with them and support them, there is a support group called Families Strong available and it is free. Families Strong offers a 9 week closed group meeting. The meetings are for 2 hours with a maximum of 12 members in a group. For more information on services offered by Families Strong, click on this [link](#). You can also contact this resource by email at: [info@groupmosaic.com](mailto:info@groupmosaic.com).



### Has Dealing with COVID and Other Life Situations Left You Feeling Anxious?

You are not alone. There is a compassionate trained counselor you can speak with at 1- 877 HELP304. We all feel overwhelmed at times and would like to have someone to talk with who understands. This strengthline is free and is available 24/7. Click [here](#) for more information.



Children's Mobile [Crisis](#)  
HELP 4 [WV](#)  
Children's Crisis & Referral [Line](#)  
Children's [Wraparound](#)  
Family [Coordinators](#)  
State Family Advisory [Board](#)  
Office of Children, Youth and [Families](#)

Click on the links for more information about these resources.