

Jennifer Harrison

Director, The Family Institute

Give us a bit of background about how your previous roles with The Arc of NJ has led you to this new role as The Arc of NJ Family Institute's Director?

I started working at The Arc of NJ as the Sexual Violence Prevention Project (SVPP) Coordinator in 2023 with a a grant from the Department of Justice. I have a master's in criminal justice, so the topic is near and dear to my heart. What I didn't anticipate was becoming so invested in the lives of people with disabilities. After two years with SVPP, our grant ran out and I left The Arc but was thrilled to return eight months later as Director of Planning for Adult Life. I am now newly Director of The Family Institute and everything I've learned over the past nearly-three years is coming together. The Family Institute lends support and resources to individuals with IDD and their families, which draws on the personal safety content I created with SVPP, and the individual and family support I provided with PFAL. It's very exciting to now utilize everything I've learned so far and to continue to grow.

What is your vision and goals for The Family Institute?

The Family Institute is an incredibly well-oiled machine, so I do not want to undo any of the phenomenal work that Lisa Ford did with the program. Instead, I want to expand on what FI already is: in particular, by developing even more Go Bags, providing information about and establishing new opportunities for respite, highlighting housing, and creating exciting social opportunities for individuals. And from there… onward and upward!

What do you want families and their loved ones with IDD to know about you and The Family Institute?

I want families and their loved ones to know that this is about them – their needs, their wants, their happiness. The Family Institute and I are here to not only answer questions and make sure that families get all the services and resources that they need, but to help these families thrive.

Michael Pearson Jr.
Senior Director, Governmental Affairs & Communications



Give us a bit of background about how your previous roles with The Arc of NJ and beyond have led you to this new role as Senior Director?

When I started as a DSP at The Arc of Monmouth's Work Opportunity Center, I had no idea that my path would eventually lead here. Looking back now, each step along the way has prepared me for this new role as Senior Director of Governmental Affairs and Communications. Some of the most memorable experiences from my previous roles here at The Arc of New Jersey are advising self-advocacy groups, serving as a non-attorney advocate in IEP meetings, and writing and delivering testimony at New Jersey Senate hearings. I most recently served as the Director of Support Services at the Family Resource Network, where I oversaw respite and recreation programs and gained a deeper understanding of the challenges faced by provider agencies.

Throughout my career, I've been fortunate to work alongside some of the most dedicated and inspiring people I have ever met, and I have tried my best to learn everything I can from them. The knowledge I've gained from mentors and the experience from previous roles will serve as my foundation to further The Arc's mission.

What are your vision and goals for the Governmental Affairs & Communications department?

Stepping into this role in mid-May, my immediate focus has been on the FY27 budget. We have been working closely with our local chapters and the New Jersey Association of Community Providers (NJACP) to present a unified front in advocating for a 3% COLA increase for Home and Community-Based Services. This funding would help protect services for people with IDD, address rising operating costs, and provide a much-needed DSP wage increase.
Of course, the biggest concern on everyone's mind is the threat to Medicaid at the federal level. Medicaid is a lifeline for people with disabilities, and we will actively fight against any cuts to this vital funding.

Personally, I'd like the youth service system to become more accessible, flexible, and reflective of the lifelong nature of IDD. We are monitoring a bill that could address a few of these issues by increasing the length of authorization periods and allowing families to utilize more than one type of respite. It could make a big difference for families who have a child with IDD.

What do you want individuals with IDD and their families to know about you and the Governmental Affairs & Communications department?

I really want individuals and their families to know how important they are, and how much their stories and experiences can help shape policy. I also want to encourage people to get involved in advocacy as much (or as little) as they'd like. Join us at Medicaid rallies, testify in Trenton, call your legislators, and if nothing else, call us. We want to hear from you about what's working, what's not, and how you'd like to make New Jersey better for people with IDD and their families.