



Informing Families ... Today and Tomorrow

A project of the Washington State DD Council



Celebrating 12 Years of Informing Families

When Informing Families was first created—in partnership with the Developmental Disabilities Administration, parent leaders and other professionals—we had one goal: Create clear and helpful information that individuals and families can trust.

It's hard to imagine in today's world of Google and social media, but there was a time when news and information about issues affecting people with I/DD was difficult to find.

Since that first meeting twelve years ago, we have reported on a lot of big changes: new programs, new terms, a reduction in the decades' long wait list for services, and a big shift toward person-centered approaches to planning and living life.

Although it's not surprising that people



L-R Amy Berkheimer (Yakima County P2P) together with Michelle Williams and Debbie Chapman (Informing Families Coordinators)

want clear and accurate information, we did not expect to see the degree to which Informing Families would be embraced by individuals, families, organizations, and even the general public.

Even though a lot has changed over the

years, our quarterly newsletters have always remained in print. We're going to continue to mail our newsletters the old fashioned way; however, for those who prefer their news online, we'd like to offer the opportunity to go paperless.

If you'd like to opt out of print mailings like this one, visit: informingfamilies.org/paperless to sign up for newsletter notifications.

Whichever way you prefer to hear from us, we'll continue our mission of providing clear and helpful information that you can trust.

Sincerely,

Ed Holen, Director
Washington State



Developmental Disabilities Council

Earned Income Tax Credit



The Internal Revenue Service wants taxpayers with disabilities and parents of children with disabilities to be aware of the Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC), a federal income tax credit for low income workers. Those who qualify, could pay less federal tax, pay no tax at all or even get a tax refund that puts an extra \$2 to \$6,318 into their pocket.

The IRS estimates that as many as 1.5 million people with disabilities miss out on this valuable credit because they fail to file a tax return. Many of these non-filers fall below the income threshold requiring them to file. Even so, the IRS urges them to consider filing anyway because the only way to receive this credit is to file a return and claim EITC.

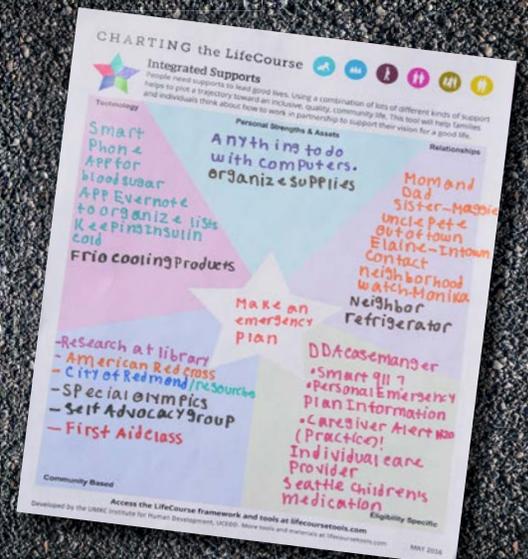
To qualify for EITC, you must have earned income from employment, self-employment or another source that does not exceed income limits, as well as meet a few additional criteria explained at www.irs.gov/eitc. Social Security benefits or Social Security Disability Income (SSDI) do not count as earned income.

Additionally, taxpayers may claim a child with a disability or a relative

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THINKING OUTSIDE THE BOX

Inside the STAR



by Betsy McAlister

Those of us raising a family member with an intellectual and developmental disability are constantly bombarded with system changes, new terminology and ever-changing circumstances.

When I find something unique and fun, I charge ahead and see if I can talk my daughter into giving the new tool a try. Since Leah is a teenager, I never know if she will have an interest. Luckily, a fun tool she has tried is the star form on the Informing Families website.

The star form has helped us look at the different ways Leah can get support to reach goals of all kinds—from emergency preparedness to dream vacations, and everything in between.

We also use it as a way to share information about Leah with important people in her life.

Strengths-Based

Leah loves anything paper, as well as pens and markers, so the colorful star form was a hit on the first try. She lines up her colorful sharpies and begins filling in the blue section, *Personal Strengths and Assets*.

Since she has done many power point presentations for her IEP meetings, thinking about what she is good at has become a natural starting point whenever we use the star form.

When Leah wants help with spellings or ideas, we brainstorm by writing a list on a white board and seeing which ones she wanted to include on her star form.

Making the Most of Technology

Technology has been another easy section to fill in. Leah uses her smart phone for fun, texting, and surfing for new ideas to explore. The technology section has become an important topic because it gives us a chance to find opportunities for Leah to use her skills. Recently, a para educator showed her a transit app, and now Leah has turned into the family bus scheduler.



Leah with a four-legged friend

Expanding Relationships

We finish off the top section of the star form with *Relationships*. Although she is happy to have mom and her friends listed, I encourage Leah to think of others who are important in her life. Who might she like to get to know better? Are there neighbors she likes? How about friends at her transition

program?

Services as Support, Not the Focus

We then usually move to the *Eligibility Specific* section, which she has no interest in at all. This is OK, but having her write down a few services helps me to think of ways she can get support for some of her activities.

Community Connections

We end on the *Community-Based* section as we always have lots of ideas on places to go. This is a great time to think of events at libraries, music and many other free community events. We've attended presentations on owls, learned to make felt, and attended a journal class, all for free at local libraries.

When my daughter was younger, families used to say if she got services on a waiver that was the "golden ticket." As Leah has aged, I've realized services are helpful, but they are only part of her life. To have a full and great life, Leah needs to develop connections and support beyond services.

People often say, "Think outside the box," and now we are being asked to think inside the star. We did and it was fun. Give it a try!

Download and print a Star form at informingfamilies.org/star.

Tools for Inclusion: Travel Training

Inclusion can't happen if you don't show up.

As any family who has a loved one with a disability knows, figuring out how to get from Point A to Point B can be a major undertaking. Learning to use fixed route transit can be a good way to increase community inclusion without causing a lot of additional stress.

Most transit agencies throughout the state offer individual instruction to anyone old enough to travel on his/her own. It's for persons of any ability, including those who use para transit services who would like to explore the increased flexibility and independence that using one or more fixed routes can provide.

While travel training varies from county to county, most transit agencies provide:

Assessment: An in-person meeting to identify the individual's goals and needs for using transit, as well as any barriers that need to be addressed.

Training: Learning how to ride specific routes; read and understand route maps; pay fares and purchase passes; get to and from the bus stop; recognize bus stops and landmarks; get on and off the bus safely; use a wheelchair lift; position a wheelchair on the bus; transfer to other buses; get information; and travel with confidence.

Trip Plan: A step-by-step plan to help the individual get where they need to go.

For more information about travel training in your area, visit:
wsdot.wa.gov/choices/bus



(EITC continued from front page)

with a disability of any age to get the credit if the person meets all other EITC requirements.

People with disabilities are often concerned that a tax refund will impact their eligibility for one or more public benefits, including Social Security disability benefits, Medicaid, and Food Stamps. The law is clear that tax refunds, including refunds from tax credits such as the EITC, are not counted as income for purposes of determining eligibility for benefits. This applies to any federal program and any state or local program financed with federal funds.

Use the EITC Assistant at IRS.gov to determine eligibility and estimate the amount of your credit.



MY LIFE PLAN

My Life Plan is a free online planning tool to help you and your family member identify strengths, interests, abilities, and the supports needed to reach goals that are specific to your son/daughter's life.



This updated version makes it easier to update the plan as many times as you need, changing it as your family member grows and develops new interests and abilities.

The new My Life Plan also comes with the ability to share the plan with important people in your family member's life—from IEP team members and DDA case manager to care providers and family members—allowing them to provide their own input and ideas.

To use this free online planning tool visit:
mylifeplan.guide



My Life Plan is a free resource created by the Washington State DD Council and The Arc of Washington State.

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Staying Safe & Healthy for Winter

Are You Ready?

While winter can bring the joys of watching the snow fall, sipping hot chocolate and getting cozy by a fireplace, it can also bring the potential for power outages and other kinds of emergencies. For individuals with medical, mobility, or communication challenges, it's especially important to plan ahead.

Are you prepared if power is lost for several day or even weeks?

Do you know the location of the nearest accessible shelter?

Do you have enough medications if you cannot get to a pharmacy? Batteries to power essential equipment? Food/water for everyone in your home, including pets?

Learn more about preparing for an emergency at: informingfamilies.org/ep.

ACHOO!

Winter also brings with it the chance of colds and flu, as well as complications such as pneumonia, which can result in hospitalization or even death. There are different things you can do prevent the flu, such as diligent hand washing, getting a flu shot and other general precautions.

Learn more about flu risks and prevention, along with other health & safety topics at informingfamilies.org/caregiver-alert.

