

Published by the Franklin County Board of Developmental Disabilities  
*"Helping people to live, learn and work in our community"*

## Advocacy panel urges transportation improvements

When one of the panelists at the Statehouse described "driving" to Applebee's in his wheelchair, rolling along a road with fast cars but no sidewalks, Nicolas Comstock could easily relate.

"I have a similar story," he said. "I once drove to McDonald's in my wheelchair, which was really quite dangerous. I had access to transportation, but my staff just didn't want to take me."

Comstock, a former Richland County resident who now lives in the Columbus area, was glad that this year's Ohio DD Awareness and Advocacy Day event included a panel on transportation. He believes a key to progress for people with disabilities is for policymakers "to stop looking at transportation as a luxury, and start looking at it as a right."



Nick Comstock (right)

More than 500 people attended the annual gathering, which "sold out" in just three hours. Participants heard from various speakers, including state officials, on topics such as supported decision-making, assistive technology and recent investments in higher wages for direct-support professionals. They also met directly with legislators and their representatives.



Kyle McKay

"In Ohio, the power of advocacy is strong," Kim Hauck, Director of the Ohio Department of Developmental Disabilities, told the crowd.

Comstock is a past speaker at the event and says it plays an important role in lifting up the voices of people with developmental disabilities. In addition to improvements in public transportation, he says there should be more support – possibly in the form of grants – so that small service providers can purchase accessible vehicles.

On the day he used his wheelchair to get to McDonald's, Comstock wound up with a police escort on his way home. "Folks in Richland County were not too happy with me, but I got my Quarter Pounder," he said. "And dare I say, it was the best I ever had."



Zayne Harshaw

## Community invited to Franklin County advocacy event April 4



Christine Brown

Interested in learning about issues affecting the disability community? Want to make your voice heard?

The Franklin County DD Self-Advocate Advisory Council and the Ohio Self Determination Association are hoping for a great turnout on Friday, April 4, for Legislative Advocacy Day.

The event takes place every other year and gives self-advocates, families and others an opportunity to meet central Ohio legislators and talk about policies and issues important to them.

This year's gathering is from 10 a.m. until noon at the Columbus Metropolitan Library, 96 S. Grant Ave. in Downtown Columbus. The building is accessible, and event parking is free.

For more information or to request accommodations, email [ryan.phillips@fcbdd.org](mailto:ryan.phillips@fcbdd.org) or call 614-342-5984.

# Operation Feed kicks off 'meal-raising' challenge

Franklin County DD encourages everyone to support Operation Feed as it launches a community-wide challenge to raise more than six million meals this spring.

The Mid-Ohio Food Collective says the challenge aims to ensure that people in need have access to healthy, nutritious foods, and is timed to help prepare for the summer months when school is out. Last year, Mid-Ohio saw a 13 percent jump in services.

All county government agencies are taking part in the 2025 Franklin County Operation Feed Campaign from April 7 to May 16. The overall Operation Feed Meal Raising Challenge runs through June.



- To donate, go to <https://give.mofc.org/FranklinCounty> and select Franklin County Board of DD as your team.
- Franklin County DD staff also can donate via payroll deduction. Send an email to [giving@fcbdd.org](mailto:giving@fcbdd.org) with the amount and write 'Operation Feed' in the subject line.

For every dollar donated, Mid-Ohio can provide enough food for 2.5 meals. And because of the giant food bank's purchasing power, donor support and reach, every dollar raised allows it to distribute \$4.56 worth of groceries.

## Franklin County DD Day at the art museum a big success

The first Franklin County DD Day at the Columbus Museum of Art was a hit, drawing people with disabilities, their support providers, families and more to the Downtown venue for a free, fun and colorful visit.

Jeremy Pauley, self-advocate and founder of the nonprofit organization Developmental Assist, came up with the idea to help celebrate Developmental Disabilities Awareness Month during March. "I like art, and I was trying to figure out some cool things that people could do around Columbus that they might not have experienced before," he said.

Museum staff said the open house on March 26 was so successful that they would happily host the Franklin County DD community again. The museum also welcomes feedback on ways to make its visitor experience even more accessible and meaningful for people with disabilities.

Genene Blackwell, a pianist and studio musician who is blind, visited with her grandmother and listened to audio descriptions of several paintings. Pauley, who had his own artwork displayed at the museum as a high school student, loves roaming the galleries.

"As art has developed as a passion for more of the people we serve, it was great to see them viewing and enjoying the work of professional artists," said Ryan Phillips, Franklin County DD Director of Communications, Advocacy and Community Relations.



SAVE THE DATE

2025  
**Franklin County DD  
Provider Fair!**

✓ Tuesday, September 2

✓ 1 p.m. to 7 p.m.

✓ Kasich Hall  
Ohio Expo Center & State Fairgrounds

Franklin  
County DD  
Board of  
Developmental Disabilities



# Perspective: Striving for Educational Equity

As I sat in a classroom segregated from the rest of the school, looking at a lump of Play-Doh and feeling frustrated, I remember wondering how I got there.

My brother and I were less than 10 months apart in age. We were in the same grade, and had been in the same kindergarten class, sharing a happy year of learning and play.

But in first grade, I was placed in a special education room. The reason? I wore leg braces, and so, I was told, that meant I needed a different environment.

Never mind that my test scores were the same as my brother's, or that our mother had spent a great deal of time advocating for me to be in a typical classroom. I still went to the special education classroom.

Being a hopeful sort, I thought my teacher probably would be like my grandmother, who had started schools for children with developmental disabilities in Springfield, Ohio. My uncle had Down syndrome, and because she believed that all children deserved an education, she and other parents founded the Town and Country Day School.

My first-grade teacher, however, was not like my grandmother. When I asked when we would learn counting, like my brother's class, I was told we didn't need to. Same thing with every other area of study I brought up. She sat in front of the class all day and rarely engaged. The playground was off limits, too, because we might hurt ourselves. I watched my brother through a window instead.

This all took place 56 years ago, and special education was a new idea at this point. There weren't many rules or guidelines, and even within a single school district, there could be vast differences among classrooms.

My mother decided I was going backwards instead of forward, so we moved. I was never again in a segregated classroom. I got pretty good grades and was even offered a scholarship to Ohio University, which I declined in favor of Ohio State.

While my first-grade experience did set me back a bit, it also set me forward. Because my brother's teacher had told me all the things I would not be able to do, I felt more determined. She was a great motivator, even if she was only correct about one thing: I still cannot ride a two-wheel bike.

My hope remains the same today as when I first entered school long ago: that all families have a voice at the table, and all children have the chance to thrive in educational settings where they are welcomed, included and valued.

*Denise Blackburn-Smith was born with cerebral palsy and has been a Franklin County DD service coordinator for 17 years.*



**Denise Blackburn-Smith**

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## ECLC launches agency's second produce giveaway

Franklin County DD is expanding its efforts to provide free, fresh fruits and vegetables to families in need with another drive-through produce market.

The new market takes place at 4:30 p.m. on the second Wednesday of the month at the Early Childhood Learning Community (ECLC), 4141 Rudy Rd. on the city's Northwest Side.



The agency's other market is held at 5:30 p.m. on the third Thursday of the month at the Early Childhood Education and Family Center (ECEFC), 2879 Johnstown Rd. on the Northeast Side.

"We've always seen a need here," said Gretchen Uhl, intervention specialist and activities coordinator at ECLC. "I think this is amazing, because it's like we're partnering with Johnstown, and now there are two weeks out of the month that we know healthy, fresh food is going out to our families."

And ECLC staff, as at ECEFC, are committed volunteers already, Uhl said. Before the first market on March 12, "I told everyone we needed 13 to 15 staff. We ended up with 19 or 20. It was so great to see everyone wanting to help."

Both produce markets are free, open to all, and operate in partnership with the Mid-Ohio Food Collective. For more information, email [gretchen.uhl@fcbdd.org](mailto:gretchen.uhl@fcbdd.org) (ECLC) or [sarah.gillilan@fcbdd.org](mailto:sarah.gillilan@fcbdd.org) (ECEFC).

## Good For You

### Notable achievements in the Franklin County DD community

Thanks to self-advocate Christine Brown and Franklin County DD board member Marci Straughter for leading the way on a resolution from the Columbus City Council recognizing March as DD Awareness Month. This dynamic duo also appeared on the Spectrum News show *In Focus* to help educate the public about DD awareness and issues.



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Self-advocates and Franklin County Special Olympics athletes Will Hart and A.J. Cox were awesome ambassadors to South High School, where they spoke about the importance of accessibility and accommodations in housing. Way to go, Will and A.J.!

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A big shout out to I am Boundless and the women of its Boundlessly Beautiful campaign, which promotes inclusion and celebrates beauty without limits. Boundlessly Beautiful partnered with students at Aveda to give women with disabilities a spa day and makeovers, and to give students experiences working with clients with diverse needs.



Members of the Franklin County DD Self-Advocate Advisory Council showcased what matters to them – and shared some winning smiles on our social media pages – during the March meeting.



## Dateline

The Franklin County Board of Developmental Disabilities

**Dean Fadel, President**

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Information about Franklin County DD is always available on the internet at:

**[www.fcbdd.org](http://www.fcbdd.org)**



## Calendar

### April, 2025

- 4 Legislative Advocacy Day hosted by the Ohio Self Determination Association and the Franklin County DD Self-Advocate Advisory Council will be held at the Columbus Public Library at 96 S. Grant Avenue. Parking is free. For details contact Ryan Phillips by phone at 614-342-5984 OR [ryan.phillips@fcbdd.org](mailto:ryan.phillips@fcbdd.org)
- 9 Franklin County DD Early Childhood Learning Community (ECLC) and the Mid-Ohio Food Collective Produce Drive Through at 4:30 p.m. at ECLC, 4141 Rudy Road, Columbus, 43214. For more details, email Gretchen Uhl at [gretchen.uhl@fcbdd.org](mailto:gretchen.uhl@fcbdd.org)
- 10 Franklin County DD Self-Advocate Advisory Council, meets at 2879 Johnstown Road, 10 a.m. Contact Ryan Phillips for details: [ryan.phillips@fcbdd.org](mailto:ryan.phillips@fcbdd.org) OR by phone at 614-342-5984
- 17 Franklin County DD Early Childhood Education and the Mid-Ohio Food Collective Produce Drive Through from 5:30-7:30 p.m. in the ECEFC Bus Lane (accessed via Marilyn Lane). For more details, contact Sarah Gillilan at 614-342-5803.
- 18 Early Childhood Education preschool program and West Central School - parent / teacher virtual day. (classes closed)
- 21-25 Spring Recess for Early Childhood Education preschool programs & West Central School. Administrative offices and Service Coordination offices open.
- 24 Franklin County DD Board meeting, at 5 p.m. at 2879 Johnstown Road, Columbus. Board committees begin at 4 p.m. Please contact Amy Magginis at 614-342-5950 for details.

**FCBDD Board Meeting Link:**  
<https://bit.ly/3JvZSUJ>

## Career Milestones

**20 Years**  
**Tsuyako Carta**  
**Taronda Curry**  
**Lavonda McLean**

**15 Years**  
**Charisse Crump**  
**David McCluney**