

Dateline

March 2026



Helping people to live, learn and work in our community

Celebrate Developmental Disabilities Awareness Month in March

For the past 39 years, communities nationwide have stepped up their inclusive events, activities, and messages during March in celebration of Developmental Disabilities Awareness Month.

Much progress has been made since that first observance in 1987. Franklin County DD encourages everyone—civic leaders, elected officials, employers, educators and others—to keep striving toward a community that is welcoming and accessible to all.

Following are some of the public events in Franklin County during DD Awareness Month. All are free. Join us!



Sunday, March 1: Community Day and Resource Fair (Autism and the Arts theme) at the Franklin Park Conservatory, 10 a.m. to 5 p.m.

Tuesday, March 3 and March 10: Franklin County DD and Starfire Council are hosting online Inclusion Seekers gatherings at 11:30 a.m.

Wednesday, March 4: DD Awareness & Advocacy Day at the Statehouse, starting at 9 a.m.

Saturday, March 7: Franklin County Connections Disability Resource Fair, 10 a.m. to 1 p.m. at Blacklick Woods Metro Parks Golf Course, 7309 E. Livingston Ave.

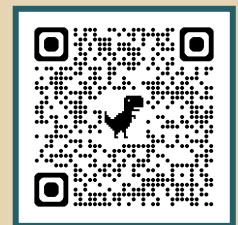
Thursday, March 12: Franklin County DD Day at the Columbus Museum of Art, 10 a.m. to 9 p.m.

Thursday, March 19: Franklin County DD Self-Advocate Advisory Council meeting, 10 a.m. to 12 noon at Franklin County DD, 2879 Johnstown Rd.

For event details, visit

<https://fcbdd.org/dd-month-events-2026/>

or scan the qr code



Goodbye, print: *Dateline* newsletter goes all digital in April

This edition of the Franklin County DD *Dateline* newsletter marks its last in print. After nearly 50 years as a publication delivered to home mailboxes, sent to community partners and displayed in agency lobbies, the monthly newsletter is moving to a digital-only format.

Online reading of the e-version of the newsletter is already the norm for a majority of *Dateline* subscribers. But for some, a printed copy remains the preference—and we regret the inconvenience this shift may cause.

As a public-agency print publication, *Dateline* has had quite a run: The inaugural issue appeared in February of 1978, with former Superintendent/CEO Jed Morison listed as the point of contact for readers “to send us your comments, suggestions, and story ideas.” He was often

the writer and photographer for the hundreds of issues that followed.

Until 2024, Franklin County DD was fortunate to have an on-site print shop for fast, economical printing of documents. That closure, and changing reader habits and needs, guide our decision to become fully digital.

Dateline was meant to be a tangible chronicle of agency milestones, a source for information, and a place to celebrate the people at the heart of the Franklin County DD community. Those will continue to be the goals for updated online, accessible, e-communications from Franklin County DD.

We'd love to have you follow along. Subscribe here: <https://bit.ly/4rwkPDO>

Franklin County DD welcomes new HR Director Shemaine Bakir



Shemaine Bakir, an experienced leader in human resources, operations and organizational transformation, joins Franklin County DD this month as the agency's HR director.

Bakir most recently served as a regional executive director for the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID), where she headed HR and administrative operations for more than 400 staff across eight countries. She is getting settled in the Columbus area after moving from South Africa.

"I'm passionate about public service," said Bakir, who holds a master's degree in social work from Columbia University. "Franklin County DD's mission and commitment to serving individuals and families in our community immediately resonated with me."

Bakir is from New York but lived in Ohio previously and still has important local connections. "Two of my children went to Otterbein University," she said with a smile. "They didn't want to leave."

She's looking forward to meeting staff members throughout the agency and learning more about the work that happens every day on behalf of people with disabilities, their families and caregivers. "I want staff to know that I'm joining Franklin County DD with a deep respect for the work you do and the services you provide," Bakir said. "My goal is to build trust through consistency, follow-through, and keeping people at the center of how we work."

Early Childhood training focused on neurodevelopment, prenatal substance abuse

Dr. Ira Chasnoff, one of the nation's leading experts on child development and the effects of maternal alcohol and drug misuse, provided important trainings in October and January for approximately 300 community professionals through the Franklin County DD Early Childhood Partnership.

Chasnoff explored the impact of prenatal exposure on children's learning and behavior, and discussed strategies for interventions that lead to lasting improvements.

During the second session, he and two colleagues—psychologist Christine Schmidt and occupational therapist Susan Green—also presented case studies of two children currently enrolled in the Franklin County DD Early Childhood program. The researchers reviewed the histories, then worked with staff to create strategies that benefit children's emotional and behavioral regulation, and sensory processing.

"We're so glad this training felt meaningful and supportive to our staff," said Dr. Kathy Lawton, Director of the Franklin County DD Early Childhood program. "They work incredibly hard every day for the children and families we serve, and we're grateful to support their continued learning and growth."

The topics for the trainings had been identified in a survey of Franklin County DD Early Childhood and partnership staff, who indicated a desire to learn more about neurodiversity affirming practices, neonatal abstinence syndrome and fetal alcohol spectrum disorder.

"I enjoyed the energy and passion of Dr. Chasnoff's team and our staff during the case studies discussions," said Danielle Norman, Franklin County DD creative arts specialist.

Attendees gained practical tools and information they could put to use right away. "Overall, the training was greatly appreciated by me and my team," said Debra Feasel, Early Childhood Development program manager at Nationwide Children's Hospital.

Aisha King, a family service worker with the Child Development Council of Franklin County Head Start, said she appreciated the visuals that were shown as Chasnoff discussed the structure of the brain. "I love learning and these trainings inspired me," she said. "It makes me want to go back and finish my master's degree."

Franklin County DD leaves 1650 Watermark site

Intake and MUI departments at Franklin County DD have moved to new locations after the agency discontinued its lease of 1650 Watermark Dr.

Intake staff members are now working in a newly renovated space next door

at 1600 Watermark, which also houses the Franklin County DD Service Coordination Department.

MUI (major unusual incident) investigative staff have moved to the Franklin County DD administration building at 2879 Johnstown Rd.

By ending the lease of the second Watermark building, the agency is saving \$250,000 per year. People seeking services and those already served by Franklin County DD should note that Intake and Service Coordination are now at the same place.

DD Awareness Month: A workplace perspective

Many years ago, when the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) was on the horizon but not yet law, I did trainings for companies called “Windmills Training.” The idea was to educate and to challenge general notions about disability, especially in the workplace.

The two-hour training featured activities such as tying a brick onto the bottom of your shoe so you could figure out how to handle that mobility difference, wearing a blindfold to experience blindness, and using ear plugs to see what it’s like to be hard of hearing or deaf. Another exercise asked participants to pick from a list the disability they would want if they suddenly became disabled. I also talked about wheelchairs, service dogs and other practical matters for a “disability etiquette” component.



While it appeared that participants did learn from the training, my larger wish—that they would leave with a newfound willingness to hire people with disabilities—wasn’t quite fulfilled. At least not at the rate I had hoped.

I still believe employers base hiring decisions on their own comfort level and experience. For example, employers who have interacted with an individual with a specific disability tend to be more open to hiring an applicant with that disability, so long as the interaction was positive.

In the “pick a disability” segments, I recall that many people chose cerebral palsy. I felt honored when a few said it was because of me, as they felt I had achieved a lot in life. That’s true, but my success has been dependent on so many things: privileges that others lacked, including a family with the resources to pay for my therapy and leg braces, plus access to public services and programs.

I noted that no one chose Down syndrome. Asked why, participants said they saw people with Down syndrome as unlikely to be able to do anything more challenging than an entry-level job. (These responses were anonymous, hence their bluntness.)

I want to believe that if I did a Windmills Training today, someone might pick Down syndrome, or even quadriplegia. I want to believe we have come so far that the disability community faces only minor employment challenges. But I know from my time as a Franklin County DD service coordinator that this is not true. Many people on my caseload looked for years before landing a job; one searched the entire time I worked with him.

Don’t get me wrong; times are better now than before the ADA. But what are the keys to further progress? More training? More interaction between people with and without disabilities? More education about the ADA? Maybe a combination of these ideas?

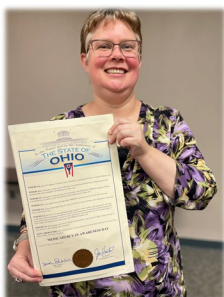
Whatever it takes, let’s all do what we can—during DD Awareness Month and every month —to help employers see the value in hiring workers with disabilities. Let’s start the windmills of change now!

Denise Blackburn-Smith was born with cerebral palsy. She is an intake specialist at Franklin County DD.

Workers with disabilities now can keep jobs and Medicaid coverage after 65

Thanks to years of advocacy by Christine Brown and others in the disability community, workers with disabilities in Ohio and throughout the nation no longer have to choose between their jobs and their Medicaid benefits after age 65.

Congress passed appropriations legislation in February that included an extension of the Medicaid buy-in program. Now workers over 65 who earn slightly too much to qualify for Medicaid will be able to continue to buy in to the Medicaid program to keep the home- and community-based supports that are not covered by Medicare.



Brown, a member of the Franklin County DD Self-Advocate Advisory Committee, fought for nearly a decade to remove the age limit for workers with disabilities. After success in Ohio in 2024, advocates kept working to enact change nationwide.

“For a long time, the rules said that when I turned 65, I would have to choose between my paycheck and my independence,” said Brown, who works at the Ohio State University Nisonger Center. “I deserve to keep working and keep my supports no matter how old I get.”

Mark Davis, President of PAR (Pennsylvania Advocates and Resources for Autism and Intellectual Disabilities) said the change is also celebrated by Medicaid providers. He thanked Brown, advocates and federal legislators for removing an unnecessary age limit.



DD AWARENESS MONTH EVENTS

Celebrate with us
in March!

2026

1

Sunday
March 1

Franklin Park Conservatory
Community Day: Autism and the Arts

10 am-5 pm

3,10

Tuesday
March 3, 10

Inclusion Seekers: online
learning sessions

11:30 am-1 pm

4

Wednesday
March 4

DD Awareness and Advocacy
Day at the Statehouse

8:30-11:30 am

7

Saturday
March 7

Disability Resource Fair:
Blacklick Woods Golf Course

10 am-1 pm

12

Thursday
March 12

Columbus Museum of Art:
Franklin County DD Day

10 am-9 pm

19

Thursday
March 19

Franklin County DD Self-
Advocate Advisory Council

10 am-12 noon

Scan the code for
event details!
Or call
614-342-5161



#DDawareness26

#InclusionMatters

Good For You

Notable achievements in the Franklin County DD community



Heartfelt thanks to the wonderful artists—and staff members—of Open Door Art Studio & Gallery for supplying the artwork that has created a colorful, engaging display in the lobby at our Franklin County DD administration building. We love the makeover, and we're especially happy that the pieces are available for purchase!

Happy trails and many, many thanks to Pat Davis, who retired from the Franklin County DD Service Coordination Department at the end of February after 40 years of dedicated service. "There will never be another Pat Davis," said her former colleague, Donna Frye. "She started calling people on the phone at 5:30 a.m. every day and lived/breathed working to make individuals' lives better. Pat has the biggest heart imaginable."

Congratulations to our Franklin County Flyers for another grand performance at the Special Olympics Ohio Winter Games! Love that gold for the women's basketball team.

Congrats to Franklin County DD board member Marci Straughter for scoring an invitation to the Black History Month celebration at the governor's mansion. Marci spoke with Gov. Mike DeWine, Ohio First Lady Fran DeWine, and met lots of interesting people. Thanks for representing, Marci.





It's always great to see our Early Childhood staff turn out for the annual MJB Foundation Bowl for Joy fundraiser. The foundation is named for Meghan Joy Brochowski, who attended our Early Childhood program. The nonprofit supports central Ohio children with disabilities and health challenges.

Career Milestones

40 Years
Pat Davis

25 Years
Cameron Underdown

20 Years
Michelle Burton
Jane Clore
Jennifer Cunningham
Maria Porter
Kristy Schuyler

15 Years
Lindsey Allen
Jessica Bonham

10 Years
Yolanda Hairston
Henry Sanders

5 Years
Hunter Skaggs

Rescheduled Polar Plunge set for March 7

The Columbus Polar Plunge, which was postponed in February due to dangerously cold temperatures, is now set for March 7.

Most other details about the fundraising event remain the same: The plunge moves to a new location this year at Fortress Obetz, a sports and entertainment complex in southern Franklin County. Check-in starts at 9:30 a.m., followed by opening ceremonies, awards and a costume contest at approximately 10:40 a.m. Plunging starts around 11 a.m.

To donate in support of the Franklin County Flyers' team, go to <https://support.soo.org/goto/FreezinFlyers26>

For event details or to register to plunge, visit <https://sooh.org/polar-plunge/>

There's still time to support the most polar event of all, too: Now scheduled for March 13, the Super Plunge features several hearty (crazy?) fundraisers jumping into the freezing-cold water every hour, for 24 hours straight.

Last month's Super Plunge was stopped after eight plunges; Franklin County DD Communications, Advocacy and Community Relations Director Ryan Phillips and Special Olympics Specialist Avery Charles are ready to give it another go. To support the Super Plunge, go to <https://bit.ly/46qfLe9>



Join Provider Council meeting for chance to win \$50 gift card

Are you a provider serving the Franklin County DD community? The Franklin County Provider Council wants to hear from you—and you could win a \$50 gift card just by speaking up during an online meeting.

The council is encouraging more people to attend its monthly Zoom meetings, where Franklin County DD staff and providers share information and resources, give updates and ask questions. “It’s a great way for providers to stay informed about policies, events and other important news,” said Larry Macintosh, director of administrative and support services at Franklin County DD.

The next Provider Council meeting is set for 10 a.m. March 13. To be added to the email list and receive links to the meetings, email joni.sparks@fcbdd.org

The online Provider Council meetings are open to all. To be eligible for the \$50 Visa card drawing in March, participants must:

- ⇒ Be a staff member of a Franklin County agency waiver provider, or a certified independent waiver provider
- ⇒ Attend the online meeting and ask a question that is reasonable and serious
- ⇒ Appear on screen and ask the question out loud (not via the chat function), and state your name and agency



Dateline

The Franklin County Board of Developmental Disabilities

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Gene Harshaw

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The Franklin County Board of Developmental Disabilities does not discriminate in employment or services on the basis of race, color, creed, sex, national origin, or disability.

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

www.fcbdd.org



Calendar

March, 2026

- 1 Franklin Park Conservatory Community Day and Resource Fair (Autism & Arts theme), 10 a.m. to 5 p.m.
- 3 Inclusion Seekers online training through Starfire Council. Registration: <https://bit.ly/4kc9y8Q>
- 4 DD Awareness & Advocacy Day at the Statehouse. Pre-registration required and is now closed.
- 7 **Rescheduled** from February 7: Special Olympics - Polar Plunge at “Fortress Obetz” Check-in begins at 9:30 a.m. Opening ceremonies are at approximately 10:40 a.m. and plunging begins at 11 a.m. Fortress Obetz is located at 2015 Recreation Trail, Obetz.
- 10 Inclusion Seekers online training through Starfire Council. Registration: <https://bit.ly/4kc9y8Q>
- 11 Franklin County DD Family Support Meeting (Noon) rescheduled from March 4 which conflicts with the Ohio Statehouse kickoff of DD Advocacy and Awareness Month.
Family Support Meeting Link:
<https://bit.ly/3JvZSUJ>
- 11 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
- 12 Columbus Museum of Art, Franklin County DD Day 10 a.m. to 9 p.m.
- 19 Franklin County DD Early Childhood Education (**Johnstown Road**) and the Mid-Ohio Food Collective Produce Drive Through at 4:30 p.m. in the ECEFC Bus Lane (accessed via Marilyn Lane). For more details, email Sarah Gillilan at sarah.gillilan@fcbdd.org
- 19 Franklin County DD Self-advocate Advisory Council, meets at 2879 Johnstown Road, 10 a.m. Contact Ryan Phillips for details by email at ryan.phillips@fcbdd.org OR by phone at 614-342-5984
- 26 Franklin County DD Regular Board meeting, at 5 p.m. at 2879 Johnstown Road, Columbus. Board committee meetings begin at 4 p.m. Please contact Amy Magginis at 614-342-5950 for details.

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