

THE ADVOCATOR

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WELCOME AND LOOKING AHEAD

Welcome to the 2nd Quarterly Newsletter from the Office of Self-Advocacy!

We hope you had a restful close to the year. Building on the significant progress achieved in the 4th Quarter of 2025—which included the formal approval of our Self-Advocacy Peer Specialist Program, the launch of our new focus on supported employment, and invaluable relationship-building at the AL-APSE Conference—we are poised for an even more impactful year.

The Office of Self-Advocacy will be much more active in 2026. This year, we are dramatically increasing our outreach, expanding our partnerships, and dedicating more resources than ever to translating our strategic initiatives into tangible results for self-advocates across Alabama. We are committed to a year of greater visibility, deeper engagement, and accelerated action as we work together to champion independence and opportunity.

EMPOWERING ADVOCATES

THE PEER SPECIALIST PROGRAM IS READY FOR LAUNCH

The Office of Self-Advocacy is excited to confirm that the Self-Advocacy Peer Specialist Program, formally approved in the 3rd Quarter of 2025, is slated to commence immediately following the conclusion of the current Partners-in-Policymaking course. This is a deliberate and strategic timing decision, as the program is designed to be part of the Partners-In-Policymaking class, ensuring that the first cohort of specialists will be comprised of graduates already equipped with a deep understanding of advocacy and policy change.

The Peer Specialist Program is designed to be a comprehensive, focused training initiative that will solidify the skills necessary for peer-to-peer support and advocacy. The curriculum is detailed and ambitious, covering a range of critical, specialized topics designed to empower participants to act as informed advocates in complex situations. The sessions are designed to be intensive, and informative.

Key sessions are structured around practical rights and strategies, including a full day dedicated to Transportation Rights (scheduled for June). This session focuses on key federal and local laws governing accessible transportation, paratransit service specifics, and rights related to air travel, including the Air Carrier Access Act. Another essential session focuses on Healthcare and Mental Health Rights (scheduled for the anniversary of the ADA), covering topics like the Patient's Bill of Rights, informed consent, and the Mental Health Parity and Addiction Equity Act (MHPAEA). Finally, the curriculum includes a crucial session in August on Crisis Intervention, De-escalation, and Motivational Strategies. This module focuses on defining a mental health crisis from a peer perspective, practical de-escalation techniques, and motivational interviewing concepts to help peers advocate for themselves. This final session includes a Lived Experience Panel and concludes with a graduation (dates are pending, of course).

Each session incorporates expert panel discussions and action planning to translate knowledge into practical skills. The program represents our commitment to enhancing self-advocacy skills through lived experience and peer support, establishing a powerful network of trained advocates ready to make an immediate impact across the state.

A woman with curly hair, wearing a light blue suit, is seen from the back, speaking at a podium. In the background, a man in a dark suit is seated at a table, looking towards the speaker. The setting appears to be a professional conference or meeting room with large windows.

LEADERSHIP ON A NATIONAL SCALE

ELECTION TO THE APSE NATIONAL BOARD

We are thrilled to announce that I have been elected to serve on the national board of directors for the Association of People Supporting EmploymentFirst (APSE). This is not just a personal honor, but a monumental step forward for the Office of Self-Advocacy and the entire self-advocacy movement in Alabama. APSE is the only national membership organization focused exclusively on EmploymentFirst—a policy recognizing that integrated employment in the community must be the first and preferred option for all people with disabilities.

Our office's success in building invaluable relationships, particularly at events like the AL-APSE Conference, has elevated our voice and positioned Alabama as a leader in this critical area. This election provides us with a direct pipeline to national strategy and resource allocation, ensuring that the needs and perspectives of self-advocates here in Alabama are represented at the highest level of policy and practice.

Serving on the national board means we will actively shape the conversation around customized employment, career development, and systemic change, allowing us to bring cutting-edge, effective models back home. This new role significantly enhances our capacity to fulfill the promise of supported employment, which was formally launched as a new focus for our office in the 4th Quarter of 2025. It signifies a commitment to ensuring that individuals with disabilities have meaningful opportunities to work in integrated settings, earning competitive wages.

The board work will involve advocacy for stronger federal policies, fostering collaboration between state chapters, and ensuring a robust national network of resources. We are now more equipped than ever to leverage national expertise to accelerate our local initiatives, directly benefiting the advocates we serve. The Office of Self-Advocacy is dedicated to translating this national influence into tangible results on the ground, creating a future where integrated employment is the standard, not the exception, for all self-advocates in our state.

The visibility and credibility gained through this appointment will open doors for new funding, partnerships, and legislative successes that were previously out of reach, solidifying our reputation as a key driver for change. This board role is a reflection of the dedicated work performed by our entire office and the success we have demonstrated in implementing our strategic vision for self-advocacy.

Our presence on the national stage guarantees that Alabama's innovative approaches to supported employment will influence policy across the country, while simultaneously allowing us to adopt best practices from other leading states and organizations. We believe this synergistic relationship between local action and national leadership will dramatically improve outcomes for everyone involved in self-advocacy and employment services in the coming year.



A FOUNDATION OF CONSISTENCY

MAINTAINING OUR REGULAR SITE VISIT SCHEDULE

Consistency and boots-on-the-ground engagement remain non-negotiable priorities for the Office of Self-Advocacy. Despite new responsibilities and expanding initiatives, we are proud to confirm that our regular site visit schedule has been rigorously maintained throughout the quarter, ensuring continued oversight and direct connection with the organizations serving our self-advocates.

These visits are crucial to our operation, providing real-world insight into the successes and challenges within provider settings. Our reports capture essential data on compliance and quality of life, allowing us to identify areas for ADMH improvement. For instance, recent visits—including the highly successful visit to the Arc Of Baldwin County in July 2025 and multiple residential homes and day programs throughout the earlier part of the year—have confirmed that the vast majority of settings are observed to be mostly compliant with Home and Community-Based Services (HCBS) regulations.

Crucially, we continually confirm that the rights of individuals are being respected, including the fundamental right to refuse interviews or participation. The site visit agenda is comprehensive, covering everything from the site host's mission and programs to supported decision-making, communication access, and complaint procedures.

During many such visits, processes for supported decision-making were clearly presented and appeared fully implemented. The site's protocols were already standardized and exemplary, requiring no immediate next steps or action items beyond setting a timeline for general follow-up. These visits consistently reveal strong protocols and positive and productive interactions with staff and self-advocates.

While the positive findings are encouraging, the persistence of the site visit schedule ensures we catch subtle issues before they escalate. We are committed to a proactive approach that prioritizes self-advocate feedback and continuous quality improvement.

The information gathered directly informs our advocacy agenda, helping us target systemic gaps and reinforce best practices across the state. This sustained commitment to visibility and accountability is essential for maintaining the high standards of care and support that all self-advocates deserve. Our ongoing presence demonstrates our office's commitment to transparency and our role as a consistent partner in quality assurance. The maintenance of this schedule ensures we are a constant, reliable presence, dedicated to safeguarding the quality of life for all individuals served.

SYNERGISTIC ALIGNMENT

DEEPER INVOLVEMENT IN SUPPORTED EMPLOYMENT INITIATIVES

The Office of Self-Advocacy is dramatically increasing its operational involvement with the offices of Supported Employment by formalizing a robust collaboration strategy with key partners. This initiative, which builds upon the launch of our new focus on supported employment in Q4 2025, is governed by a comprehensive plan designed to align our efforts with AL-APSE and Vocational Rehabilitation Services (VRS) to significantly enhance job outcomes across Alabama.

This deepening involvement is structured across multiple phases, ensuring a sustainable and integrated approach to advocacy and service delivery. The initial Phase 1 focuses on Foundation & Communication, including the critical action of establishing a Joint Steering Committee composed of representatives from OSA, AL-APSE, and VRS.

This committee is tasked with defining shared goals, establishing bi-monthly communication protocols, and developing a shared mission statement. The ultimate goal is to establish a collaborative and synergistic relationship between all three organizations to bolster supported employment in Alabama.

Furthermore, we are actively engaging in Information Sharing and Resource Mapping to understand each organization's existing programs, successes, and challenges related to supported employment. This collaborative effort will culminate in a comprehensive shared document that identifies existing gaps and redundancies, ensuring our combined resources are maximized.

We are also working to develop a Shared Communication Strategy to ensure consistent messaging about supported employment.

The subsequent Phase 2, Collaborative Initiatives & Training, will see us launch joint outreach and advocacy campaigns, including a potential statewide "Supported Employment Awareness Month" campaign using social media, public service announcements, and op-eds. Crucially, we will implement Cross-Training and Professional Development sessions, organizing joint training on topics like customized employment, benefits counseling, employer engagement, and self-advocacy in employment to enhance staff capacity across all three organizations.

This heightened collaboration is aimed at streamlining referral pathways, ensuring that individuals seeking supported employment can easily navigate the process and access the appropriate services through a new "Supported Employment Navigator" guide for individuals and families. This commitment signifies our shift from simply promoting the idea of supported employment to actively driving its coordinated implementation and success across the state, with the eventual aim of expanding this model across all regions.



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