

Rhode Island Developmental Disabilities Council Brings Family Leadership Network to RI

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/EINPresswire.com/ -- In a world where individuals with disabilities often face societal barriers and misconceptions,

[Rhode Island Developmental](#)

[Disabilities Council \(RIDDC\)](#)

is dedicated to building inclusive communities. Taking inspiration from the Cincinnati-based Starfire program, the RIDDC is underwriting a RI Family Leadership Network in collaboration with [Best Life RI](#).



Starfire's non-profit mission is to support families in creating strong social connections and empowering their children with disabilities to be seen and valued as individuals. They are focused on fostering community integration and reducing isolation for individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities (I/DD) and their families.

In September, Sue Raposo, of Best Life RI, was invited to attend a conference with the Starfire team in Cincinnati, Ohio. While there several people from Starfire's family leadership network were in attendance. "They were sharing stories of community, relationship building and connection with each other. This is exactly what Rhode Island needs."

In Rhode Island, Starfire's RI Coordinator, Nithya Narayan serves as a mentor, reaching out to and guiding families through their projects and supporting them in building community connections. The network offers monthly learning sessions open to all families, providing a platform for sharing experiences, learning new strategies, and fostering a sense of community.

These sessions are crucial for families in the early stages of their projects. They offer insights, encouragement, and practical advice, helping families navigate the challenges and celebrate their successes.

The program works with families follows a structured yet flexible process, guiding them through phases of discovery, exploration, and activation. This journey begins with helping families uncover their child's gifts and interests. By focusing on what makes each child unique and passionate, families can start to see beyond the traditional service-driven model that often

defines the lives of individuals with disabilities.

- Discovery Phase - This initial phase is about identifying and appreciating the unique talents and interests of the individual. For instance, a child might have a keen interest in art or a love for birds. Recognizing these interests lays the foundation for building meaningful connections within the community.
- Exploration Phase - Families explore how these gifts can be shared with others. This phase involves reaching out to potential allies in the community, such as local libraries, art groups, or nature clubs.
- Activation Phase – This phase brings these connections to life. Families are supported in initiating community projects or events that center around their child's interests. The goal is to create spaces where individuals with disabilities are valued for who they are, not defined by their disabilities.

A crucial element of the philosophy is leading with the humanity of the individual rather than their disability. By emphasizing their interests and strengths – introducing someone as a “bird lover” rather than “someone with a disability,” for example - the program helps families and communities to see the person first. This approach not only changes public perception but also empowers the individuals themselves to see beyond their disabilities.

Historically, people with disabilities have been marginalized, often seen as less capable or even disposable. This deeply ingrained societal attitude creates significant barriers to forming strong social connections. Starfire addresses these barriers by fostering environments where individuals with disabilities can thrive as active, contributing members of their communities.

In Rhode Island the program has begun to take root, with families participating in monthly learning sessions and mentoring. These sessions are crucial for building the confidence needed to step outside traditional support systems and engage with the broader community. The process of reaching out and forming new connections is challenging, especially given the societal tendency towards isolation exacerbated by technology and social media.

A significant challenge in this work is shifting from a service-driven mindset to a community-led approach. Families often start with little experience in engaging their broader communities. Starfire supports them through this transition, helping them build confidence and resilience.

The Family Leadership Network exemplifies the power of family-led initiatives in fostering inclusive communities. By empowering families to discover their gifts, explore their communities, and activate meaningful projects, RIDDC is creating a ripple effect of connection and belonging. As these efforts continue to grow, they offer a promising model for other communities seeking to make a meaningful impact in the lives of individuals with disabilities and their families.

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