

The Ability Connection

Spring 2026

A Newsletter by the Trumbull County Board of Developmental Disabilities

Special Olympics Basketball Brings Competition and Community to Fairhaven

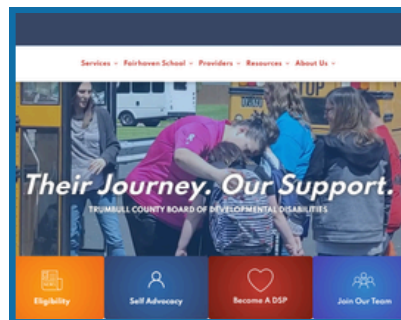
Our adult Special Olympics basketball teams have been taking the court with energy, skill, and great sportsmanship this season! In a highlight of the year, the athletes competed in a fun and competitive showdown for the Superintendent's Cup, where our very own TCBDD staff team—The Legion of Doom, led by John Danes—faced off against the adult Special Olympics teams.

The series wasn't just about the score; it was about community, inclusion, and celebrating the talents and dedication of all participants. Events like this showcase the power of sport to build friendships, strengthen confidence, and bring people together in spirited competition. We're proud of every athlete and volunteer who made this season memorable and look forward to more exciting games ahead!



A Fresh Look: Explore the New TCBDD Website

We're excited to share that the new TCBDD website is now live! The updated site was designed to be more user-friendly, informative, and visually engaging, making it easier for families, providers, and community members to find the information they need.



Visitors can explore improved navigation, updated resources, program information, event details, and the latest news from TCBDD—all in one convenient place. Visit tcbdd.com today and discover new ways to stay connected and informed.

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Funding the Future: Strengthening Ohio's Developmental Disabilities System

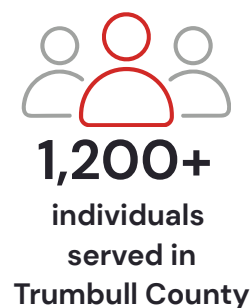


Ohio's developmental disabilities (DD) system is at an important crossroads. More than 110,000 Ohioans with developmental disabilities rely on services and supports provided through county boards across the state.

The Trumbull County Board of Developmental Disabilities (TCBDD) provides services to over 1200 individuals and families locally. These services help individuals live, work, and participate in their communities. However, the system, at the state level and locally, is facing significant financial pressures that could affect the long-term availability of these supports.

The good news is that leaders across the state are working proactively on solutions. Funding the Future is a strategic plan designed to make Ohio's DD system more sustainable while protecting access to high-quality services.

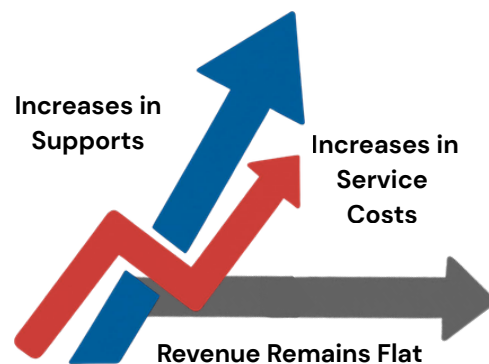
We are also taking steps locally to address long-term sustainability.



Understanding the Challenge

County boards of developmental disabilities play a critical role as both partners and funders of services. While property taxes have increased for many homeowners in recent years, county boards do not automatically receive additional funding because they operate on fixed-dollar levies that require voter approval to increase.

As a result, revenue for TCBDD has remained relatively flat, even as the cost of services continues to rise. Demand for supports is increasing, and recent efforts to address workforce shortages—such as provider rate increases in the last state budget—have also led to higher costs. These factors together have created financial pressures that must be addressed to maintain reliable access to services.



Funding the Future: Strengthening Ohio's Developmental Disabilities System

A Framework for Solutions

The Funding the Future plan focuses on practical reforms to strengthen the statewide system.

One key focus is strengthening the partnership with the State of Ohio. Because the state controls Medicaid policy and reimbursement rates, the plan calls for the state to share more responsibility when those policies increase costs. This could include making certain Early Intervention services required with partial state funding, setting limits on local contributions for waiver services with the state covering remaining costs, and establishing clear, consistent statewide authorization standards.

Another priority is maximizing available resources. This includes expanding shared services among counties, seeking additional federal funding opportunities, and using technology to reduce administrative burdens so Service and Support Administrators (SSAs) can spend more time working directly with individuals and families.

The plan also encourages expanding service options in strategic ways. For example, programs such as the Katie Beckett Medicaid eligibility pathway and medical childcare options could help children with complex medical needs access appropriate healthcare supports, reducing reliance on waiver services for primarily medical needs.

Addressing a Common Concern

Whenever system changes are discussed, people understandably worry about the possibility of service cuts. The goal locally and as a system is the opposite. System reforms are designed to protect access to services by addressing structural funding challenges before they create a crisis. By acting now, TCBDD and Ohio has the opportunity to make thoughtful improvements rather than being forced into sudden or disruptive changes later.

Looking Ahead

The next phase of this effort will involve collaboration and input from across the DD community. Advocates, families, providers, and community partners all play an important role in shaping the final approach. Some of the proposed changes may be challenging, but working together now will help ensure that the services for Trumbull County residents with developmental disabilities will remain strong and available well into the future. More information will be shared regarding Funding the Future strategies and changes we will make locally on our website and in future newsletters.



Edward J. Stark

Superintendent,
Trumbull County Board of Developmental Disabilities



Important Updates for STABLE Accounts

As of January 1, 2026, the federal ABLÉ Age Adjustment Act increased the age of disability onset for ABLÉ account eligibility from 26 to 46. This change allows many more individuals—including adults who developed disabilities later in life and veterans with service-connected disabilities—to save and invest without affecting federal benefits. Ohio Treasurer Robert Sprague highlighted the impact of this expansion, noting it will help more people access the independence and financial security offered through the STABLE Account program.

Participation in STABLE Accounts has grown significantly, increasing from fewer than 10,000 accounts in 2019 to more than 52,000 today. These tax-advantaged savings accounts allow people with disabilities to save for qualified expenses—such as housing, transportation, healthcare, and assistive technology—without losing benefits like Medicaid or SSI.

To encourage participation, the program also offers a STABLE Account Enrollment Incentive, matching the first \$25 contributed when opening a new account. Starting this year, the incentive is available nationwide. Opening a STABLE Account takes about 20 minutes online. Learn more or sign up at stableaccount.com.

Keith's Law: Supporting Safety and Awareness

Keith's Law (HB 144), which took effect January 19, 2026, expands Ohio's disability database to allow individuals with any medically diagnosed disability to voluntarily register information that may assist first responders during emergencies. The law is intended to help police officers, firefighters, and EMS personnel better understand and respond to the needs of individuals with disabilities, reducing the risk of misunderstandings during high-stress situations.



The legislation broadens Ohio's existing 2018 communication disability database, which previously covered only certain communication and mental disabilities. Under Keith's Law, the database now includes a wider range of medically diagnosed disabilities, making the system more inclusive and useful for individuals whose conditions may affect how they communicate or respond during emergency encounters.

Information provided through the program is integrated into 9-1-1 dispatch systems, allowing dispatchers to notify responding personnel of a registered disability before they arrive at a scene or conduct a traffic stop. Having this information available in advance can help first responders adjust their approach and communicate more effectively. Participation in the program is voluntary. Individuals may register their information through the Ohio Bureau of Motor Vehicles (BMV), typically with documentation from a medical professional verifying the disability.

Named after Keith Jesse, an advocate for individuals with developmental disabilities, the legislation was sponsored by State Representatives Gary Click and Brian Lorenz. Signed into law by Governor Mike DeWine in October 2025, Keith's Law builds on earlier county-level efforts and establishes a more comprehensive statewide system designed to improve safety and understanding during emergency interactions.

For more information, visit the Ohio Department of Developmental Disabilities website.

Growing Together: Fairhaven Backpack Program & Second Harvest Food Bank

The Fairhaven School Backpack Program, which sends meals and snacks home with students for weekends and extended breaks, is now one of over 160 community partners with Second Harvest Food Bank. Ordering from their warehouse will not only decrease food waste in the Valley, it will expand the offerings at a savings of up to 90%! This program is extremely vital to Fairhaven School to students, and it is also important to be fiscally responsible with the monies being received. Please contact Lindsey Ison at 330-652-5811 ext. 712 for more information about the program.



Art Without Limits: Showcasing Talent Across the Mahoning Valley

The Abilities Unite Foundation of the Mahoning Valley once again partnered with the Jewish Community Center of Youngstown to host an art exhibit featuring artists served through the Trumbull, Mahoning, and Columbiana County Boards of Developmental Disabilities. Held inside the Thomases Family Endowment of the Youngstown Area Jewish Federation Art Gallery, the show ran through the month of February and was open to the public. Over 35 unique pieces were on display, with several artists featured in their own galleries, and were available for purchase with the proceeds going directly to the artists. Participants in the all-abilities art classes in December and January also had their canvases on display, showcasing their unique perspectives and individual interpretation of the instructor's design.



Highlighting this annual exhibit was the artists reception, held on Thursday, February 12th, where the community interacted with the artists, learned about their creative processes and inspiration, and enjoyed a beautifully displayed spread of snacks and desserts, courtesy of our friends at the JCC. Many pieces were sold right in front of the artists, added another element of excitement and pride.

We are grateful to our friends at the JCC, especially Barb Wilson, director of cultural arts and Jewish engagement, for believing that everyone deserves and can benefit from a creative outlet, and for giving them an amazing opportunity to showcase their abilities.



For more information about their work, visit: www.abilitiesunite.org

Inclusion in Action at the Youngstown Phantoms Sensory-Friendly Game



More than 600 individuals and families from the tri-county Boards of Developmental Disabilities came together on Sunday, February 15, for a sensory-friendly game hosted by the Youngstown Phantoms. The event created an opportunity for members of the DD community to experience the excitement of hockey in an environment designed to be welcoming and comfortable for everyone.

Guests enjoyed an action-packed game along with snacks, a special meet-and-greet with Phantoms players and coaches, and visits from Sparky, the team's mascot. Several participants also had the chance to take part in memorable on-ice moments, including pre-game ceremonies, in-game contests, and even helping resurface the ice with a ride on the Zamboni.



Events like this highlight the importance of creating inclusive community experiences for individuals with developmental disabilities and their families. The excitement and smiles throughout the arena demonstrated how simple adjustments, such as consistent lighting, quieter music and announcements, and reduced sound effects, can make large events more accessible for many individuals.

TCBDD extends its appreciation to the Phantoms organization and Senior Vice President Kelsey Moreton for their partnership and commitment to inclusion, helping ensure that everyone had the chance to enjoy the energy and fun of Phantoms hockey.

Abilities Rock Carnival & Dance Party – Fun for Everyone

Abilities Unite Foundation of the Mahoning Valley is excited to host their annual Abilities Rock Carnival and Dance Party on Saturday, March 21st at Waypoint 4180 in Canfield. Held in honor of DD Awareness Month, this hands on and engaging day features accessible carnival games, prizes, fair-themed treats, a DJ-led dance party, and so much more. For the first time, they are hosting a Quiet Carnival for those who want to enjoy the fun, games, and food, but prefer a quieter setting without the music and dancing. Abilities Unite understands importance of communities coming together for a unified mission of celebrating abilities, supporting inclusion, and promoting respect for people with developmental disabilities and they look forward to several great engagement opportunities planned this year.



28th Annual Fairhaven Golf Classic

We're excited to announce that the 28th Annual Fairhaven Golf Classic will take place on Monday, June 15, 2026 at a new venue, Avalon Lakes Golf Course & Country Club in Warren, Ohio.

Join us for a great day of golf, networking, and community support. The Fairhaven Golf Classic is a wonderful opportunity for friends, supporters, and community partners to come together while supporting our mission.

Whether you are an experienced golfer or simply looking to enjoy a day on the course, this annual event promises fun, connection, and a meaningful impact for our community.

More event details, including registration and sponsorship opportunities will be shared soon. If you have questions or would like more information, please contact Lisa McGeary:

Phone: 330-652-9800 ext. 219



Strengthening First Responder Partnerships Through ID/DD Training

TCBDD hosted a specialized training at our Board Offices in Niles aimed at enhancing communication and safety between first responders and individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities. The session was led by Diane Dudziak, MS, a developmental disabilities and law enforcement specialist with more than 38 years of experience and a background in policing. She provided actionable guidance to support positive interactions in the field.

Using body camera footage and scenario-based videos, participants explored practical approaches to recognizing individuals with ID/DD and implementing effective communication and de-escalation strategies.

We appreciate the participation of our law enforcement partners, agency providers, school personnel, and Service and Support Administrators who continue to prioritize collaboration and community safety.



Fun at Fairhaven School

Fairhaven School has had an exciting and enriching semester filled with engaging programs and memorable experiences. From Preschool Library Story Time with the Warren-Trumbull County Public Library to inclusive Special Olympics basketball games, students have participated in activities that promote learning, creativity, teamwork, and community connection!



Turning Pages Together: Preschool Story Time

Fairhaven School is thrilled to host Preschool Library Story Time, where librarians from the Warren-Trumbull County Public Library visit to share the joy of reading with our youngest learners. During these sessions, children listen to engaging stories, explore new books, and participate in fun literacy activities designed to spark curiosity and a love of reading.

These visits help build early literacy skills, promote a lifelong love of books, and create special moments for children to connect with their community library.



Teamwork and Triumph on the Court

Our school-aged Special Olympics basketball athletes have been showing incredible teamwork, skill, and sportsmanship this season. Local high schools have joined the fun, with men's and women's basketball teams, bands, and cheerleaders coming out to play with, cheer on, and support our athletes. This collaboration creates a lively, inclusive, and celebratory atmosphere for everyone involved.

We are proud to support these talented young athletes as they compete in local and regional events. Every game is a chance for students to build confidence, develop new skills, and show that teamwork, determination, and heart always make a winning combination!



Tyler Pugh Finds His Path at Big D's Newton Grill

Scan the QR code
to watch the video!



Tyler Pugh has found his niche at Big D's Newton Grill in Newton Falls, where he is gaining valuable workplace experience while preparing for life after high school. Through the Community Integrated Training for Employment (CITE) program, Tyler was connected with the opportunity that has helped him grow his skills and confidence.

His strong work ethic and eagerness to learn have quickly made him a valued employee. In our interview, Tyler shares what he enjoys about the job and how the experience is helping him prepare for the future.



Julia Addy Honored for Excellence at Antonine Village

Julia Addy has spent the past five years working in the kitchen at Antonine Village senior living facility, where her dedication and positive attitude have made her a valued member of the team. Through her hard work and attention to detail, Julia helps ensure residents are served with care each day.

Scan the QR code
to watch the video!



Her commitment recently earned her the 2025 Honoring Excellence Award for Outstanding Kitchen Helper. In our interview, Julia and her supervisor, Sister Kawsar Choufani, share more about her journey and the impact she has made at Antonine Village.



VOICE Program

The February VOICE Self-Advocacy meeting, hosted by LEEDA Northeast, brought individuals together to talk about building and maintaining healthy relationships. The discussion focused on communication, boundaries, and respect in both romantic and platonic relationships, with participants sharing personal experiences and practical tips.

The conversation created a welcoming space for self-advocates to learn from one another and strengthen their connections. After the discussion, everyone enjoyed lunch together and wrapped up the day with some fun karaoke performances.



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