

[View FYI in your browser](#)

UNIVERSITY OF MINNESOTA

**CE+HD** COLLEGE OF EDUCATION  
+ HUMAN DEVELOPMENT

**FYI**

**ICI** INSTITUTE *on*  
COMMUNITY INTEGRATION

Ensuring that all children, youth, and adults with disabilities, and those receiving educational supports, are valued by and contribute to their communities of choice.

December 2025

Follow us on [Facebook](#) and [LinkedIn](#) :: Learn [about us](#) :: [Subscribe](#)

## Featured Stories



## Filling a Gap: New Training for Paraprofs

As more schools embrace inclusive education, many are discovering they lack sufficient training for the paraprofessionals who support students with disabilities in general education classrooms. A new training series created by ICI's [TIES Center](#) helps fill this gap.

The self-paced, introductory modules are the first in a planned series of trainings that address current needs in inclusive education. [Empowering Inclusive Classrooms: A Learning Series for Paraprofessionals Supporting Students with Disabilities](#) helps these professionals better understand their role in providing instructional support, develop skills, and demonstrate those skills through reflection and activities. Participants who complete the training can earn certificates and digital badges.

"Paraprofessionals often have very little relevant training, and as a group they have very high turnover and attrition rates," said [Jessica Bowman](#), a research associate at the Institute. "Many of them have told us that the training they do receive doesn't align with the work they are actually doing in the classroom."

The on-demand training covers how to support students with disabilities within general education classrooms and across the school day. Although it is intended to increase the skills of paraprofessionals supporting students inclusively, those who are in special education environments will benefit from the training as well, along with those who support students with high support needs as they transition between special and general education classrooms.

The course, TIESX001, is available through the [University of Minnesota professional learning site](#). For more information, contact [TIEScenter@umn.edu](mailto:TIEScenter@umn.edu).

[Learn more about training paraprofessionals.](#)



## Two UCEDDs Unite: A New Partnership to Strengthen New Jersey's Direct Support Workforce

**New Brunswick, NJ** — In a significant move to bolster the stability and quality of support for individuals with disabilities, two University Centers on Excellence in Developmental Disabilities (UCEDDs) have launched a joint state-wide project.

The Boggs Center on Disability and Human Development at Rutgers Robert Wood Johnson Medical School is sponsoring and hosting a major collaboration with [Direct Support Workforce Solutions](#), the national consulting group of the University of Minnesota's Institute on Community Integration.

Launched in August and continuing throughout the year, this initiative brings national expertise to the local level, aiming to address the critical challenges facing the direct support professional workforce in New Jersey.

Led by Direct Support Workforce Solutions, the project focuses on implementing evidence-based strategies to improve recruitment, training, and retention across the state.

A key component of this partnership is strengthening frontline supervision. The

year-long training program builds both foundational and advanced supervision and management skills.

[Learn more about strengthening direct support in New Jersey.](#)



## Unbounded Spirit: Remembering John G. Smith

Friends, family, and colleagues will gather December 20 in Minneapolis to celebrate the life of John Good Smith, an award-winning disability advocate and a research specialist at the University of Minnesota's Institute on Community Integration for more than 30 years. He died December 4 at age 66.

Smith's work focused on translating complex research and policy into clear, accessible information that helps people with intellectual and other developmental disabilities take greater control of their lives. His contributions spanned knowledge translation, program evaluation, self-determination research, and the development of tools and training for direct support professionals.

"Those who knew John will remember a man who approached challenges with grit and creativity, who lifted others through encouragement and laughter, and who never lost sight of the dignity and worth of every person," ICI Director [Amy Hewitt](#) shared in a note to colleagues. "His legacy endures in the many colleagues he mentored, the self-advocates he championed, and the countless people whose lives were made better because of his work."

The celebration of life on December 20 will begin with a visitation at 9:30 a.m., followed by the service at 10:30 a.m. at Spirit Catholic Community in the New Branches building at 5011 31st Avenue South in Minneapolis. The service will also be [livestreamed on YouTube](#). Guests requiring accommodations may email [finalblessingsmn@gmail.com](mailto:finalblessingsmn@gmail.com) or phone 612-888-0462.

Hewitt said Smith's self-determination was a lasting legacy. "He lived as he chose to live and through his mentoring of self-advocates, college students, scouts, community members and colleagues, he taught others about the right that people with disabilities have to live self-determined lives."

Smith's life-long commitment to disability rights was recognized with the *Access Press* Charlie Smith Award and the Rose and Jay Phillips Award – honors that reflected both his professional impact and the deep respect he earned within the community.

"John Smith was a unique and remarkable person," said Charlie Lakin, the former director of the Institute's Research and Training Center on Community Living. "John provided all who knew him a model of effectively dealing with life's challenges."

Other colleagues, friends, and family members shared stories of Smith's tenacity, intelligence, and sharp wit through his own journey as someone with cerebral palsy, along with remembrances of how he lifted up those around him. In many ways, they said, Smith was the soul of ICI, having influenced its work throughout much of its history.

"While his journey included significant physical challenges, his spirit was utterly unbounded," Erin Simunds posted on social media, praising Smith's work ethic. "He taught me more about resilience, perspective, and genuine human connection than anyone I know. He had a gift for asking the perfect question that would cut through complexity and force you to think deeper about the work, and life itself. He made me a better professional and, frankly, a better person."

[Learn more about Smith.](#)

[Read Lakin's remembrance of Smith.](#)

---

## Social Media Spotlight



## Recently featured on ICI's Facebook page

"We cannot allow a proven civil rights victory to unravel. We can recognize the problem, face it directly, and rebuild a system that works for everyone." – Amy Hewitt.

[Read Hewitt's December 7 opinion piece, "[America is abandoning people with disabilities](#)," in the *Minnesota Star Tribune*.]

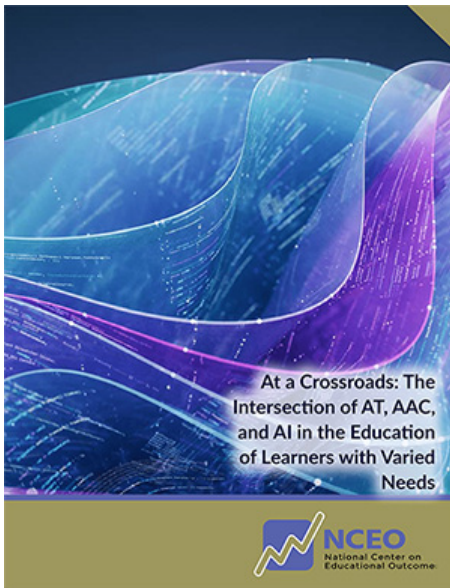
---

## New Releases

### At a Crossroads: The Intersection of AT, AAC, and AI in the Education of Learners with Varied Needs

Authors: [Marianna Quanbeck](#), [Andrew Hinkle](#), [Virginia Ressa](#), and [Kristin Liu](#)

[This report](#) summarizes the key discussions and findings from a forum held on June 25, 2025, in Denver, Colorado. Organized jointly by the Assessment, Standards, and Education for Students with Disabilities (ASES) Collaborative and ICI's National Center on Educational Outcomes (NCEO), the event brought together nearly 40 participants from state education agencies, assessment vendors, and technology experts. The forum focused on the critical and rapidly accelerating intersection of assistive technology (AT), augmentative and alternative



communication (AAC) devices, and artificial intelligence (AI) in education. The main objective was to analyze the implications of these converging technologies on instructional quality and assessment validity for all learners, and to reach a full understanding of their combined impact on educational access. Published by NCEO.



## MTI Quarterly Training: Transportation Solutions for Community Engagement and Employment

[This webinar](#) from ICI's Minnesota Transformation Initiative (MTI) notes that transportation is a critical part of the employment process and is key to accessing one's community. For many provider agencies, navigating transportation, or the lack thereof, is identified as a major challenge or barrier to providing quality day and employment services. This quarterly training will dive into the transportation conversation with a focus on identifying strategies and solutions for enhanced transportation options. David Hoff, Senior Associate Training and Technical Assistance, Institute for Community Inclusion UMass Boston, will lead learners in understanding the critical importance of transportation skill development, how to incorporate person-centered practices into transportation planning, and

developing strategies for partnering with transportation resources and experts to create solutions. Published by MTI.



## Momentum: Winter 2025–26

Editor: [Mary Hauff](#)

[This issue of \*Momentum\*](#) opens with Betsy Malecha, a prospective college student who wants to become a gym teacher and coach. The News section features grantee updates, takeaways from the Minnesota Inclusive Higher Education Consortium's (MIHEC) 2025 needs assessment, conference recaps, community outreach, presentations, the

legislative annual report, and a partner's retirement. The newsletter also announces upcoming Learning Community events and various resources. Part of MIHEC's *Momentum* quarterly newsletter series.



## RISP Data Byte: Medicaid HCBS Expenditures Per Person by Age in FY 2021

Authors: [Sheryl Larson](#), [Jon Neidorf](#), and Brian Begin

[This Data Byte](#) from ICI's Residential Information Systems Project (RISP) notes that in 2021, almost a million people with IDD received HCBS waiver services with an average per-person expenditure of \$51,835. Adults often live in non-family homes, so their waiver expenditures are generally higher because paid staff cover all needed hours of service. Expenditures are lower for children since they usually live with family and receive services at school. However, when child recipients age out of school, their waiver allocations may need to rise to offset the loss of school services.



## Rethinking What Works: December 2025

Editors: [Beth Wike](#) and [Danielle Mahoehney](#)

[This issue of \*Rethinking What Works\*](#) spotlights MTI's *Leadership Essentials for Middle Managers* course. The newsletter also contains information about Supplemental Security Income for workers with disabilities, upcoming trainings, and other resources. Part of MTI's *Rethinking What Works* monthly newsletter series.

---

## Events and Announcements



## Navigating School for Children with Mental, Emotional, Developmental, and Behavioral Health Needs/Special Education

**December 18**

**12–1 p.m. Central Time**

Join this TeleOutreach Center's Longitudinal ECHO webinar on school and educational services in Minnesota and the Upper Midwest. M/E/D/B Needs / Special Education affect approximately 1 in 5 children and youth in the United States. Navigating educational services, school-linked mental health, and special education are important when supporting these children and youth. Learn about services available in educational settings, evidence-based interventions, and resources. Attendees are encouraged to engage in case-based learning as part of the ECHO session. Social work continuing education units (CEUs) will be available for this series. The webinar is free but [registration is required](#).



## Pre-Doctoral Fellowship Opportunities in Adolescent Health

**Applications due January 9, 2026**

The University of Minnesota Leadership Education in Adolescent Health (UMN LEAH) program is accepting applicants for its Fall 2026 predoctoral fellowship cohort. This federally-funded, interdisciplinary fellowship prepares emerging leaders in Adolescent and Young Adult (AYA) Health, including health care professionals, researchers, educators, and public health experts. LEAH alumni advance the field by improving clinical services, developing innovative community-based programs, conducting research, and educating diverse audiences. LEAH provides interdisciplinary leadership training in AYA Health for fellows from diverse disciplines including medicine, nursing, nutrition, psychology, public health, and social work. LEAH is particularly eager to engage fellows from backgrounds under-represented in higher education. This one-year, pre-doctoral fellowship offers interdisciplinary training, skill development, hands-on experience, and professional growth. [Learn more and apply](#).



## MIHEC Learning Community Event: "Parent Perspectives of Inclusive Higher Education"

**February 10, 2026**

**6–7:15 p.m. Central Time**

Join this webinar from ICI's Minnesota Inclusive Higher Education Consortium (MIHEC). The panelists include Minnesota parents who have supported their students throughout their college search, time in college, graduation, and beyond. Learn from their experience, tips, challenges, and celebrations. MIHEC increases sustainable opportunities for inclusive postsecondary education for people with intellectual and developmental disabilities in Minnesota. [Register.](#)

---

### Staff Updates

**Barbara Kleist** and **Julie Bershadsky**: On November 3–6, [Kleist](#) (pictured) and [Bershadsky](#) represented ICI and [Direct Support Workforce Solutions](#) at the 2025 NASDDDS Annual Directors Forum and Conference in Phoenix, Arizona. They served as panelists in the *Supporting Supporters: Maximizing Policy, Practice, and Innovation* track, where they highlighted ICI's recent research, evaluation, training, and technical assistance. Their presentations, delivered with project partners from the National Alliance for Direct Support Professionals, the Human Services Research Institute, NASDDDS, Georgia, and New York, emphasized strengthening workforce stability through effective recruitment and retention strategies.



**Jennifer Hall-Lande and Libby Hallas:** On November 7, [Hall-Lande](#) (pictured) presented on the [Minnesota Autism and Developmental Disabilities Monitoring Network](#) project (MN-ADDM) to the Early Intensive Developmental Behavioral Intervention Advisory Council in Minneapolis. On November 19, Hall-Lande and [Hallas](#) presented on MN-ADDM to the Autism Interagency Committee. On November 20, Hall-Lande and Amy Esler presented on MN-ADDM to the Early Intensive Developmental Behavioral Intervention Learning Collaborative in Minneapolis.

**Eileen Klemm:** On November 11–13, [Klemm](#) participated in the Council for Exceptional Children, Teacher Education Division conference in Kansas City, Missouri. During the conference, she co-presented "Fostering Student Engagement and Self-Determination through Mentoring: A Combined Approach" with colleagues from the University of Kansas and the University of Virginia.



**Jennifer Sommerness, Jessica Bowman, and Gail Ghere:** On November 12, [Sommerness](#) (pictured) and [Bowman \(TIES Center\)](#) presented "Accessible and Inclusive PBIS" to the Tucson Unified School District in Arizona. On November 20, Sommerness and [Ghere \(TIES Center\)](#) presented "Strengthening Inclusive Classrooms and Learning: Tiered Development of Paraprofessionals" at the Ocalicon 2025 conference. On November 24, Sommerness and Bowman presented on the

"Culture of Inclusion: Vision, Shared Ownership, and Sense of Belonging" to Washington State's Inclusive Practices Technical Assistance Network and facilitated several breakout groups. The TIES Center recently launched a series of non-credit paraprofessional online modules, "Empowering Inclusive Schools: A Learning Series for Paraprofessionals Supporting Students with Disabilities." On November 22, Sommerness was appointed to the TASH Board of Directors. Her term is an annual appointment which may be renewed for up to six years. As a TASH board member, Sommerness provides strategic governance and systems-change expertise to advance the organization's mission to promote equity, inclusion, and the human rights of individuals with significant disabilities. Her duties have already begun.

**Megan Sanders and Barbara Kleist:** On November 13, [Sanders](#) (pictured) of [Direct Support Workforce Solutions](#) presented a webinar to New Jersey providers focused on implementing competency-based job analysis and job descriptions. She



facilitated a corresponding learning forum on the same topic the following week, on November 20. On November 17–19, Sanders and [Kleist](#) (Direct Support Workforce Solutions) traveled to Branson, Missouri, to participate in the annual Starling provider network conference, where Direct Support Workforce Solutions was an exhibitor. Sanders and Kleist lead a statewide discovery consulting project for Starling to assess Missouri's direct support workforce and recommend strategies and tools to improve its stability and strength. They facilitated a focus group on this topic during

the conference.



**Amy Hewitt:** On November 14, [Hewitt](#) presented a plenary session at The Arc National Convention in Charlotte, North Carolina, focused on community inclusion—where we have been and where we are headed in the future. On December 4, she delivered an opening plenary presentation, "The New Era of Workforce Strategy: Tools, Trends & Tactics for the IDD Workforce," at the 2025 Leadership Conference hosted by the New York Alliance for Inclusion and Innovation.

**Andrea Castillo:** [Castillo](#) ( [TeleOutreach Center](#)) presented at multiple community events and conferences in the past month, including as a guest speaker at "Help Me Grow: Support for Early Childhood Development," an online session hosted by the Mexican consulate of Minnesota. On November 17, she presented at the Infant and Early Childhood Multidisciplinary Conference, sharing results from the AutismFIRST study (teleoutreach) and resources from the MN-ADDM study. Her presentation was titled, "Rooted in Culture and Grounded in Care: Latine Family Experiences, Empowerment, and Culturally Responsive Autism Supports."



**Julie Bershadsky, Kris Foss, Barbara Kleist, and Amy Hewitt:** On November 18, [Bershadsky](#) (pictured) and [Foss](#) of [Direct Support Workforce Solutions](#), along with Molly Morris of the Self-Direction Network, presented on workforce challenges, trends, and successes within self-directed services nationwide. The presentation was part of a peer learning collaborative hosted by the Direct Care Workforce Strategies Center, which brought together state leaders from across the country for shared learning and technical assistance. The presentation by Bershadsky and Foss focused on recent pilot efforts in Rhode Island to collect and analyze workforce data from, and deliver workforce consulting to,

individuals who self-direct their services. The Peer Learning Collaborative is part of a large national workforce project that provides technical assistance to the workforce in participating states. Bershadsky, Foss, [Kleist](#), [Hewitt](#), and Kelly Nye-Lengerman all work with assigned states to support workforce efforts across the IDD and Aging and Disability sectors.

**Sarah Hall:** On November 18, [Hall](#) presented the webinar "Finding a good fit and supporting participation in community groups" for the Milwaukee County,



Wisconsin DHHS Seminar Series.



**Mari Quanbeck, Virginia Ressa, and Andrew Hinkle:** On November 19, [Quanbeck](#) (pictured) and [Ressa \(National Center on Educational Outcomes\)](#) presented "Ensuring Access: A Review of Research and Policies for Alternate Assessment Accommodations" at OCALICONLINE 2025. That same day, Ressa presented a webinar, "Empowering Parents and Families to Make Informed Choices About Assessment," to national parent center staff, hosted by the Center for Parent Information Resources. On November 20, [Hinkle](#) presented "From Alternate to General Assessment: Examining the Impact of the 1 Percent Cap" at OCALICONLINE 2025.

---

Update



## "I Have More to Do"

Marking the completion last spring of a master's degree in special education and the Minnesota LEND program, Kamola Salimova (MNLEND 2024–25) was focused more on beginnings.

"I have more to do," she said. "I'm interested in a master's degree in public health, or further studies in the field."

With a passion for special education and mastery of several languages, Salimova hopes to work with children with complex support needs and their families.

She hopes to specifically serve families with children with disabilities who have immigrated to the United States and are learning English. As a MNLEND fellow, she translated a book about early developmental milestones into Uzbek as part of the Institute on Community Integration's Act Early project.

"Each of these children is unique, and we have to help them and their parents as they deal with all of the developmental issues, the emotional issues, and all of the paperwork," Salimova said. "If we can do that, just think about what a large impact that would have. It makes me so grateful to be in this career."

[Learn more about Salimova.](#)

---

This email was sent to ICI staff and all building occupants of the Masonic Institute for the Developing Brain, our partners and colleagues by Institute on Community Integration, 2025 East River Parkway, Minneapolis, MN, 55414, USA. The University of Minnesota is an equal opportunity educator and employer.

[mass email privacy statement](#)

---

The University of Minnesota stands on *Miní Sóta Makhóche*, the rightful homelands of the *Dakhóta Oyáte*. ICI recognizes that the U.S. did not uphold its end of these land treaties. It is the current and continued displacement of the *Dakhóta Oyáte* that allows the University to remain today. At ICI, we affirm our commitment to address systemic racism, ableism and all other inequalities and forms of oppression to ensure inclusive communities.