

# Vermont Autism Task Force

## Summary of 2020-21 Goals and Activities

### Goals for 2020-21 - Accomplishments

#### **1. Continue improving and expanding use of social media for advocacy and information.**

We continued a major effort to update our Website and increased its utilization with at least 110 people reached, and 43 post engagements this year..

We also emphasized the usage and scope of our Facebook page with 528 followers, 78 post engagements.

We expanded the number of postings on our Facebook page during our April Autism Acceptance Month with 160 post engagements and shared 11 times. | .

We followed the lead of the Autism Society of America by using the term "Acceptance" rather than "Awareness" in this activity. We believe that the 'Awareness' goal by the public has been mostly accomplished and that the emphasis now should be on gaining 'Acceptance.'

#### **2. To participate and/or have a presence at disability-related workshops and conferences, as much as possible.**

We participated in the planning of and supported and advertised the COVID related remote events of the Disability Awareness Day developed and presented by the Vermont Coalition of Disability Rights (VCDR) of which VAFT is a member. We introduced the idea to the VCDR DAD planning committee the use of the term next year of "Acceptance Day" in place of "Awareness Day."

#### **3. Monitor state-wide planning groups (Census-Based Funding Work Group re: Act 173, Special Education Advisory Group, and the AHS Autism Work Group) and provide advocacy to these groups for the Autism community.**

We attended most of the monthly/periodic remote meetings of these three state-wide autism related endeavors. To the Census-Based Funding Work Group and to the Special Education Advisory Panel (new name as by legislative action last year) we made our presence known at these meetings as representing the autism community of Vermont, and we strongly supported the efforts of both groups for the changes to the Agency of Education Rules and Regulations regarding Eligibility requirements for special education services. We attended the periodic meetings of the Agency of Human Services Interdisciplinary Autism Work Group and informed this large state-wide group of providers and parents of the activities and resources of the VATF (especially our comprehensive website and active Facebook page) and led the informing and action of this Work Group in supporting the Rules changes at the AoE concerning the eligibility requirements for special education services, especially the Adverse Effect or Step 2 of the old Rules. (see also below for more information on this issue).

**4. Attend, articulate, and advocate for the autism community in schools, through public hearings around the state (due to Act 173), especially for changes in the adverse effect step of eligibility for special education services.**

We attended and presented to the State Board of Education our perspective on the history of and need for changes in the Agency of Education Rules regarding Eligibility for special education services by students on the autism spectrum, many of whom are often found ineligible based on the inaccurate and onerous Adverse Effect, or Step 2 of the eligibility process. Our testimony can be found in the minutes of the SBE, especially in April and December 2020. We also advocated for enhanced Parent Consent and involvement in the IEP process and final document. In joint work with a number of organizations and special education advocacy groups (especially the Vermont Legal Aid's Disability Law Project (DLP) who formed and collaborated with SPEAC (Special Education Advocates Coalition - composed of DLP staff, several private special education lawyers, several representatives from the VT Family Network, and VATF). With all these combined efforts, and the opportunity for AoE Rules changes required by the Act 173, we were successful in: 1) changing the AoE definition of special education to conform to the federal IDEA language, 2) dropping the Adverse Effect eligibility for special education, and 3) enhancing considerably the AoE requirement for parent involvement in the IEP process and finalization. The change in the Adverse Effect requirement was a culmination of several decades of work by many special education advocates, individuals and organizations (including VATF), AND will greatly improve the delivery of needed and deserved special education services for many students on the autism spectrum.

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In addition to our work on the above 2020-21 VATF Goals, we also created a new Vision statement that will be valuable for our future work in the area of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion and will address these important elements now found in many/most other non-profits throughout the U.S. See our website and click on About Us for the Vision statement.