

**Public Testimony before the
Fairfax County Board of Supervisors
on the FY 2019 Proposed Budget for Fairfax County**

April 12, 2018

Good afternoon! My name is Lori Stillman. I am a former member of the Community Services Board (CSB) and the parent of a young man with intellectual disabilities. Thank you for allowing me this time to inform you about an exciting new community collaborative on disabilities which began in February through the CSB. It is called the Welcoming Inclusion Network, or WIN, and seeks to address the many challenges facing individuals with developmental disabilities by improving community inclusion and integration, particularly in day and employment services.

When you hear the word inclusion, what do you think of? Being involved in something? Being a part of a group? Certainly, the word inclusion means different things to different people, but for those with disabilities, it means a purpose in life and a sense of belonging in fellowship with others. It's not just working beside someone, but working with them. It's not just being invited to the party, it's being asked to dance. Inclusion means creating an environment where everyone feels valued - the hallmark a successful community. While we strive to progress in this area, more work remains to be done. WIN was formed to foster these efforts.

As a result of growing numbers of students with disabilities graduating from our public schools, insufficient state funding for Medicaid waivers, and state waiver redesign which expanded eligibility to include developmental disabilities, there is increased demand for local day and employment services. Last year, the Board of Supervisors instructed the CSB to creatively begin looking at ways to meet this demand within available resources through extensive community collaboration with providers, advocacy groups and impacted residents.

The CSB began the community dialogue last summer with several workshops designed to solicit creative service proposals and innovative ideas. The energy and enthusiasm surrounding these events led to the creation of a Developmental Disabilities Services Stakeholder Group which was the beginning of our new initiative, WIN. Through the diligent efforts of many CSB staff and the leadership of our sponsoring Chair, Supervisor Cook, the goals for WIN were developed around the key action areas which emerged over the summer:

- **NETWORK & COMMUNICATION:** Build opportunities for increased information and resource sharing
- **DESIGN:** Ensure service equity and efficiency through community-designed services
- **EMPLOYMENT:** Boost employment opportunities through existing and new service models
- **INCLUSION:** Identify and address other challenges to full community inclusion

The current WIN Steering Committee is comprised of several key individuals from diverse fields, including a former state legislator, a member of the County Human Services Council, and representatives from Fairfax County Public Schools, George Mason University, and the County Office of Public Private Partnerships. We expect membership to expand to include a self-advocate, another parent or family member and others as we develop work groups focused around the WIN goals. We also have several CSB staff in key supporting roles.

We have held two monthly stakeholder meetings with two more scheduled. Our attendance has been favorable and continues to grow, but we need your help. We invite you to engage others and join us at our next WIN meeting on Monday, April 23, with an information and resource fair at 6 p.m. followed by discussion from 6:30-8 p.m.

We truly appreciate Supervisor Cook's efforts on WIN and the Board's past support and funding of developmental disabilities services. We look forward to working with you on the goals of WIN as we strive to create a more inclusive community for those with different abilities. When inclusion happens, we all WIN.

I would now like to introduce Dustin Nguyen, a self-advocate who will explain a little bit about what inclusion means to him. He will be followed by Laura Allen, an advocate and parent of a son with developmental disabilities.

I grew up in the area and just couldn't leave what has come to be my favorite place in the world. I try to balance family, friends and time for myself and enjoy all three. Although I need some level of care I prefer to be as independent as possible. I have lived in my own one bedroom apartment since August, I received the SRAP voucher and it has allowed me to live an active and independent life. I do have a part time caregiver to assist me with some tasks but for the most part I am able to live my day to day life with little assistance. My apartment is totally accessible and meets all of my needs, I feel both safe and comfortable there. I live in a great area that I got to choose on my own. I am close to the mall, my favorite restaurants and hang out spots. I have made friends with many of my neighbors and they often come by to check on me and chat. I enjoy their company and it is nice to feel so included in my apartment complex and neighborhood.

My main source of transportation is Metro Access which I use to go dancing, go hang out my friends, and Out to the bars. This Saturday night I am attending a concert in Washington DC that I am really looking forward too. I also use Metro Access to get to my doctors' appointments and run my errands. I call and schedule the ride appointments myself. Sometimes Metro Access can be running late, and a couple times they have not shown up at all but for the most part they are reliable and allow me to get to the places that I need too. Sometimes I even go out late at night and come back in the early morning hours.

Sometimes I find places to be a little challenging because of the bathroom situation and me not having a caretaker at all times, but on the other hand I enjoy it because I don't like to have someone following me around all the time. As active as I am within my community I do value my alone time as well. I am hoping to find employment in the near future. I wanted to take some time to get acclimated to my new independent living arrangement and make sure that I could get around the community before I looked for a job. I am interested in computer programming and photography and I am hoping I can find a part time job in one of those fields. I would also love a job that I can work from home and have been keeping my eyes open for one of those. I have also served as a volunteer and spoken to others about my experience with the SRAP program. I remain close with Jeannie from DBHDS and she has spoken to me about some more volunteer opportunities coming up. I am looking forward to helping others that are in the same situation as I am.

I have not had any problems with being a part of my community. I have found that most people are helpful and welcoming. I have some really great friends and my dad is really active in my life. I enjoy getting out and doing things with my friends and family. I can only hope that one day the community is as accessible for everyone as it is for me.

Welcoming Inclusion Network Testimony

My name is Laura Allen and I am a proud volunteer in three PTAs-Camelot Elementary, Frost Middle School, and the Fairfax County Special Education PTA.

There was the day I got married. The days I had my three children. And there was the day I spoke in my son's general education classroom about autism.

My son Zach is 13 years old and has autism. He was struggling socially and didn't have many friends. In second grade, at Camelot Elementary School, he was in a students with intellectual disabilities class and had specials and math with the general education class. I wanted to help him make more friends since he wasn't in his neighborhood school to be in this program. I read a story to the class about autism. I explained to the students that even though some things are hard for him, he is smart and good at many things. In fact he likes doing a lot of things that you do--like playing sports and video games. I gave them the chance to ask me questions. They really started to understand him.

When we were done with our discussion, he came in and we celebrated his birthday with my famous chocolate chip cookies. They made a book of a coloring page on autism and put messages in it. One little girl came up and asked, "Can I take a picture with Zach?" Pretty soon they were all fighting to stand next to him in a picture. The teacher and I were fighting back tears. They all yelled goodbye to him as we left and I will never forget how happy my son looked as we walked down the hall. The next year, over 20 kids attended his birthday party.

This classroom presentation got the wheels turning to do something more. In 2012, a group of us came together and made the Camelot Elementary School Acceptance Team. With funding from the PTA, over 25 members made of administrators, teachers, staff, and PTA parents created the Camelot Buddy Program, with 132 students in its fifth year--where students are paired together to do an activity once a month. Fourth through sixth graders act as a role model to their friend and other students in grades K-6. Our school does acceptance awareness events to educate students about acceptance, inclusion, disability awareness, diversity and anti-bullying. We created a Special Education Parent Group and much more. Today at my school, over 700 students are attending an event called ***A Walk in My Shoes***. We have a number of activities that enable students in grades K-6 to experience the perspective of students with disabilities or sensory issues and to build empathy and increase understanding. This is a success story of what a team did, school staff and parents working together. And the real stars are the kids who are encouraged to be a friend to anyone and everyone.

Could you imagine not only a school but a workplace, a city, a county, a country, or a world where we as citizens can help build a culture of acceptance and inclusion like we are doing at Camelot Elementary School. For four years, I have spent \$110 a week for my son to attend a social skills class so that he can fit in the real world. This idea is not my own, but why can't we help the real world fit in with him.

That is why I am here today. I saw the advertisement for the first meeting of the forming of the Welcoming Inclusion Network focusing on Day and Employment Services. I knew I had to be there. When I got there I saw this giant powerful room filled with people wanting to do more for the disability community.

Do you know what hope this brings to me and other families if this happens? In my son's young life he had a stroke at birth, seizures, was labeled with expressive/receptive language disorder, sensory integration disorder, hypotonia, dyspraxia followed by autism, anxiety, ADHD, and now dyslexia. So many labels. So many doctors' offices. So many therapies. So many bills. So many teachers. So many questions. It can be overwhelming for a parent.

We need help with those difficult questions...Questions that we lie awake at night thinking about. Where do I go for help? How am I going to afford all of this? What is going to happen to him when I am no longer here? Where will he live? Who will take care of him? Will he have a job? Will he have friends?

We can do more. So much more. For starters, we are heading in the right direction with the four goals outlined by WIN and the amazing collaborative group who are coming together. We need better communication tools to find information with ease and eliminate our fears. We need more employers in Fairfax County and Falls Church to not only hire those with disabilities, but include those with disabilities. We need better transportation opportunities. We need better day services. We need group homes.

And lastly, my passion. We need more social opportunities for those with disabilities. Not only in their younger years, but in their adult years. One of the WIN sessions even discussed coming up with an adult Buddy Program. We need those with disabilities to have access to more opportunities to get into the community and thrive. To create real relationships and have friends.

I thank you for the opportunity to speak to you today. I look forward to being a volunteer with WIN. We have a real chance to make a big difference in so many lives. My son is a walking example of how inclusion has helped him get to where he is today. Getting mostly As in a small classroom setting, on the Unified Special Olympics Team, and making friends at Frost Middle School. He heads to Woodson in the fall and he is ready.

I leave you with this. I told you about my son's many labels he received in his young life. But what about the label for him of smart. A friend. An athlete. A very capable young man who deserves a chance. Accepted. My favorite labels for him would be "accepted" and "Included."

Thank you.