Inspired to improve the quality-of-life for individuals on the autism spectrum, Charlottesville Region Autism Action Group (CRAAG) launched in March 2010. Under Commonwealth Autism’s auspices, we brought together autism stakeholders – parents, educators, and other professionals in our region – Charlottesville, Albemarle, Fluvanna, Greene, Louisa and Nelson.

Bob Kreps, CRAAG Chairperson, explains CRAAG’s importance: “Through CRAAG, parents meet other like-minded advocates and find an outlet for their passion supported by a group of caring professionals in tune with our mission.” Crystal Lantz, Director of Child and Adolescent Case Management at Region Ten and CRAAG supporter since the beginning, values CRAAG because: “As professionals we benefit from the networking opportunities with other professionals and with the parents and self-advocates. Through CRAAG we become part of the needed growth in our collective knowledge and service provision to individuals with autism.”

From the beginning a number of organizations engaged with CRAAG: Commonwealth Autism, Region Ten, Virginia Institute of Autism (VIA), WorkSource Enterprises, Department of Aging and Rehabilitative Services (DARS), Department of Behavioral Health and Developmental Services (DBHDS), Blue Ridge Care Connection for Children (BRCCC), Piedmont Regional Education Program (PREP), Legal Aid Justice Center, ARC of the Piedmont, Charlottesville Parks and Recreation, and UVA. They continue to be our key allies today.

Together we have accomplished a lot in the last 8 years. In the same period, we’ve seen 10 positive autism service improvements in Virginia, most notably, the autism insurance mandate, ID/DD waiver reform, single point of entry for autism services and other developmental disabilities, and model program initiatives for autism employment, adult day services, and inclusive housing.

Many CRAAG parents have watched their post high school family member fall into the “black hole” as the “safety net” for children disappeared after high school. Many families have taken advantage of the simplified waiver screening process. Demand for waivers far exceeds supply. Only the lowest functioning individuals living in precarious situations will be successful in getting a waiver – everyone else is on the growing wait list. For individuals on the wait list and those without the means to self-pay for services, the result is social isolation, economic distress, and certain emotional and physical health problems. For aging parents, this means incredible anxiety over what will happen to their family member when they are no longer able to provide care and support.

Another major disappointment is that very few of the policy options listed in JLARC’s 2014 report on needs of those transitioning out of high schools have been acted on.

CRAAG’s current mission is to advocate for a broad safety net for young adults/adults with ASD and others with similar developmental and intellectual disabilities. We advocate supported living, employment, socialization and recreational opportunities, and safety for individuals in transition.

Following some brainstorming to set CRAAG’s agenda for 2018, we ask a number of questions:

1. How can you help CRAAG take advantage of opportunities in outreach, housing and services, employment, and public awareness?
2. The current environment is rich with possibilities: are we up to the task?
3. Our mission is on target: are we organized to take advantage of the opportunities?
4. Our core leadership group is strong: are we engaging new reinforcements and diverse advocates to expand our reach and prevent burnout of those most actively involved?
5. Our collaborations with autism stakeholders are strengthening: are our messages resonating with new stakeholders and the community at large?
6. Housing and associated services are our number one concern: are potential affordable housing...
allies and other disability advocates aware of CRAAG and to what extent can we partner together to our mutual benefit?

7. We have more than 500 people on the CRAAG mailing list, many are regular attendees at our events, like us on Facebook, and/or read our monthly newsletters: are they potential real-life advocates, and if so, how do we engage them?

Make CRAAG your 2018 New Year's Resolution! Your voice and commitment will make a difference. There is truth to the statement that there is strength in numbers. A stronger CRAAG will more effectively communicate the enormous need to those who hold the purse strings and set policies.

Please attend the next Lifespan meeting on Wednesday, January 25th from 10 – Noon at WorkSource Enterprises, 1311 Carlton Avenue in Charlottesville. If you have any questions, please email CRAAG. Or, just come to the meeting. Either way, we will welcome you with delicious bakery goods from BreadWorks!

In February's newsletter ... CRAAG takes a hard look at the number of waivers and waiver waitlist in our region (Charlottesville, Albemarle, Fluvanna, Greene, Louisa and Nelson)

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**CRAAG Updates**

**CRAAG Lifespan Meeting:** The first meeting of 2018 is on January 24th from 10 AM – Noon, at WorkSource Enterprises, 1311 Carlton Ave, Charlottesville. For more information email CRAAG. Hope to see you at the meeting.

FACEBOOK: CRAAG needs your help to grow our Facebook page and get the word out about our cause. Please like CRAAG's Facebook page and share it with 2 other self-advocates, family caregivers, or autism professionals. Thank you!

**Partner Updates**

**PROJECT LIFESAVER DONATIONS:** Wow! Thanks to you, 5 individuals with ASD will be getting lifesaving transmitters. We’ve received word that based on CRAAG’s appeal, so far the Albemarle County Sheriff’s Office Foundation received $1,200 and the Louisa County Sheriff’s Office received $350 in donations. Thank you for your generosity! If you still want to donate, here's how you can help Project Lifesaver.

**GUEST SPEAKER ON TRANSITION:** The next Jefferson Area Transition Council meeting is January 8th at Workforce Center, 2211 Hydraulic Road in Charlottesville from 2 PM - 3:30 PM. Meetings are free and open to the public. This month Marianne Moore, VDOE, Secondary Education Transition Specialist is the guest speaker. Space is limited, so the Council is asking attendees to RSVP by email or by calling Catherine Lochner at 808-228-1663. Seating is limited to 50.

**ADVOCACY EVENT:** The Arc of Virginia announces a Developmental Disabilities Advocacy Day in Richmond on January 17th, the second week of the 2018 Virginia General Assembly. Sign up for the Arc's mailing list to keep informed on important advocacy issues.

**ANNUAL ART SHOW:** The VSA Charlottesville/Albemarle, an arts organization committed to promoting arts by and for individuals with disabilities and seniors, requests original artwork by January 31st for the VSA's Visual Art Show. The show runs from March 10th - August 25th at Carver Recreation Center. Learn more and register. Start creating art!

**ANNUAL AUTISM CONFERENCE:** Commonwealth Autism announces its 17th Annual Autism Conference March 7th - 8th in Richmond. To receive Conference updates and other helpful information, join Commonwealth Autism's mailing list.
WINTER EVENING WORKSHOP SERIES: Register now for PREP’s (Piedmont Regional Education Program) Autism Spectrum Disorder series. The 4-week series will be presented by PREP’s Autism and Behavior Team members. Meets on Mondays January 22nd to February 12th from 5:30-7 in Charlottesville.

TRAINING - MENTAL HEALTH FIRST AID (MHFA): Region Ten CSB announces its 2018 training schedule. The first class in 2018 on January 22nd deals with youth issues. Mental Health First Aid helps individuals to support those experiencing mental health problems and aids in getting people professional help and support. It is an interactive 8-hour course that teaches a 5-step action plan to offer initial help to people with the signs and symptoms of a mental illness or in a crisis, and connect them with the appropriate professional, peer, social, or self-help care. See brochure or website for more information.

SUMMER 2018 OPPORTUNITY FOR YOUTH: The Youth Leadership Academy is an exciting opportunity for 25 rising high school sophomores, juniors, and seniors with disabilities to hone their career, advocacy, and leadership development skills. Program is held at Virginia State University in Petersburg, VA from July 9-12. Food and lodging paid for by Virginia Board for People with Disabilities! Self-advocates can learn more and apply by March 18th.

HOUSING INJUSTICE: Legal Aid Justice Center Community Organizer, Emily Dreyfus shared the Technical Assistance Collaborative’s interactive webpage Priced Out in the United States. "In 2016, there was no housing market in the United States where a person with a disability whose sole source of income was SSI could afford a safe, decent rental unit." Check out Charlottesville and other cities across Virginia and the nation to understand the challenge that extremely low income people face.

Autism Support Groups

CRAAG/BRCCC Special Needs Support Group: for parents and grandparents of children with special needs. This month’s topic is the School Year Check-In.
Time: 2nd Friday of the month from 12:30 - 2:30 PM
Location: 500 Park Street, Charlottesville
More information: Flyer

VIA Autism Support Group: Parents/caregivers of a child or grandchild newly diagnosed with autism, join VIA’s Hilary Nagel, MSW, LCSW for support and resource sharing.
Time: 1st Wednesday of the month from 9 -10:15 AM
Location: C’Ville Coffee, 1301 Harris St. Charlottesville
More information: Flyer

Fun On The Spectrum: For parents and youths ages 18 to young adult
Time: 2nd Thursday of the month from 7:00 - 9:00 PM
Location: Maple Grove Christian Church Youth Center, Profitt Road, Charlottesville
More information: Flyer

Recreational Activities

ATA Martial Arts for Children with Autism
For children ages 3+
Time: Tuesdays & Thursdays, 3:30 - 4 PM
Location: 243 Zan Road, Charlottesville
Flyer

Autism Class at the Little Gym
For children ages 4 to 10
Time: Fridays, 5 - 5:45 PM
Location: Stonefield, 2075 Bond St., Suite 140, Charlottesville
Flyer

Therapeutic Recreation
Charlottesville Parks & Recreation
Website and newsletter

Special Olympics - Virginia
Provides year-round sports training and athletic competition in a variety of Olympic-type sports for children and adults with intellectual disabilities.
Website

LINKS for
10 Positive Autism Service Improvements

1. JLARC’s 2009 Assessment of Services for Virginians with Autism Spectrum Disorders, Governor’s 2010 response.

2. Virginia becomes the 26th state to enact autism insurance mandates. Current insurance coverage.

3. Virginia and US Department of Justice reach a settlement agreement that resolves the DOJ’s investigation of Virginia’s training centers and community programs and compliance with the ADA and Olmstead with respect to individuals with I/DD.

4. Virginia Institute of Autism (VIA) launches its Academy for Adults.

5. Faison Residence in Henrico County opens as an inclusive residential community with managed units for up to 24 adults with autism.

6. The Department of Behavioral Health and Developmental Services (DBHDS) launches a housing initiative for I/DD individuals, the Housing Choice Voucher Set-Aside for the DOJ Target Population.


8. Region Ten and the 39 other Community Service Boards/Behavioral Health Authorities become the single point of entry into the I/DD system and the new Medicaid waivers. Region Ten’s Screening Letter and Screening Form.

9. The Department of Aging and Rehabilitative Services (DARS) report on Innovative Employment Programs and Initiatives explains the agency’s positive new initiatives to address the significant increase in applications for employment support from youth with autism.

10. The UVA Curry School of Education and the UVA Brain Institute along with co-sponsors Virginia Institute of Autism, The Faison Center, and Autism Speaks hosted Autism Pathways: A Symposium on Autism Research and Initiatives at UVA.

* Links change monthly