



I WANT YOU!

The Family Café
CHANGE AGENT NETWORK
THEY NEED YOU!

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This Newsletter Is A Project Of The Family Café

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The Change Agent Network is a project of The Family Café and offers an opportunity for advocates and change agents to work collaboratively to transform the system by: combining abilities, skills, ideas, and talents; standing together for meaningful system reform measures; taking the lead in our communities and neighborhoods; sharing information to help families become effective players within their communities; developing statewide networks to organize and discuss the issues that are most important to families and persons with disabilities; and creating a united position on critical disability policy issues.



The 2021 Florida Legislative Session: So Now What?

We hope this finds you happy, healthy and looking forward to a bright new year. It's hard to fathom the amount of personal hardship and tragedy so many experienced in 2020. We pray that 2021 will be a year of healing and renewal for our country and that we move past this terrible pandemic.

In the meantime, with the Florida Legislature having already begun interim committee meetings and the legislative session scheduled to begin in March, the need for our voices to be heard as individuals with disabilities and their advocates is more important than ever. The Florida Legislature will be facing very difficult decisions, especially as it relates to the budget. It's critical we stay vigilant as these decisions are being discussed and made, even though, at least for the time being, traveling to Tallahassee, meeting with our elected officials and attending committee meetings will be difficult at best, and impossible at worst.



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So how do we do it? In this article we will discuss the best ways to advocate with limited face-to-face contact with our elected officials.

As I write this, the rules between the Florida House and the Florida Senate are a little different as it relates to attending committee meetings and meeting with your local officials in Tallahassee. Both indicate they will revisit these policies prior to the beginning of the legislative session as more and more people are vaccinated. In the meantime, committee meetings will be off limits in person on the Senate side UNLESS you are a member of the press or an invited member of the public attending to testify at the hearing. On the House side, for those members of the public wishing to physically attend a committee hearing it will be on a first come, first served basis, and everyone in attendance will be spaced out in accordance with social distancing guidelines once inside. Rules about in person meetings are less clear and (while not specifically disallowed) it will be important to call ahead first.

Obviously, these precautions are important and in our collective best interest. Below we have outlined some commonsense ways to continue to be heard despite a “new normal” this year.

Develop contacts prior to session: More than ever, it will be important to get to know your local legislators in the House and Senate, as well as their legislative assistants. Unless you are in a position to call or text your representative or senator directly, getting to know the aides will be critical. They will decide what information or message gets through in the chaos of busy days. If possible, set up a meeting with their legislative assistant prior to session to make it clear what issues you care about and find out how you can best reach them during session. Get their email addresses and start the conversation. There is not a professional lobbyist on earth more valuable than an informed constituent!

Become familiar with the websites: www.myfloridahouse.gov and www.flsenate.gov will broadcast all the committee hearings that are held. It will be possible to watch any and all committee meetings live. Even if you miss one, they are archived for viewing at a later date. Also, it is worth the time to check out www.thefloridachannel.org. This channel includes most executive branch activity as well as public meetings not covered by the individual legislative webpages. If you intend to follow the process from home this year, these will be your most commonly used web-



sites.

Engage with established advocacy groups: Most organizations are members of a professional association that will advocate for certain policy measures and keep their members updated on the latest developments from Tallahassee. For example, the Developmental Disabilities Council does a very good job in the advocacy arena and provides regular updates on their website www.fddc.org.

Tune in for “Let’s Talk!”: We, too, at The Family Café are committed to keeping you informed about what's going on in Tallahassee, and how it might impact you and your family. That's why we will again be bringing back our "Let's Talk!" Legislative Conference Call series for 2021!

Each Friday at 4:00 during session we will host a public conference call that will serve as an update about what is going on in Tallahassee. During the conference call we will host various speakers, including community leaders, legislative leadership, and local activists to share ideas/comments regarding the agencies and programs funded by the state. Our vision of meaningful family engagement in the legislative process can only be successful with your participation! It will be important (especially this year) to concentrate our strength, power and wisdom in order to insure an improved quality of life for all Floridians.



Your input, suggestions, and sharing of resources will ultimately make this community as powerful and productive as it should be.

Stick Together: Lastly, we in the disability community need to be unified in our messaging. We all have individual needs and goals as organizations, but in a year where billions of dollars will need to be cut from the budget, our support for getting people needed resources and services will take a group effort. Truth be told, the legislature wants nothing less than to cut services to Floridians, but our balanced budget requirement makes for some very difficult decisions in lean years. A unified front will be important.

Please be safe in the coming months. We hope to be able to see you at The 23rd Annual Family Café! In the meantime, if there is anything we can assist you with please do not hesitate to contact us at (850) 224-4670.

Important Dates

February 2: Submission Deadline for Appropriations Project Request forms.

February 8-12: Interim Committee and Subcommittee Meetings.

February 15-19: Interim Committee and Subcommittee Meetings.

February 26: All Member Bill Requests Deadline in the Florida House. Bill requests must be in final draft form (including requests for companion bills) by 5 p.m.

March 2: First Day of Session.

April 30: Last day of Regular Session, if Legislature completes work in 60 days.



Don't Forget to Register for The 23rd Annual Family Café!

The registration brochure for The 23rd Annual Family Café is here! If you registered for last year's Annual Family Cafe, you have likely received a copy of the registration brochure in the mail already. You can also find it online at <https://familycafe.net/new/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/2021-Family-Cafe-Registration-Brochure.pdf>.

We encourage you to share the registration brochure with anyone in your network that might be interested in the resources we bring together at Florida's signature disability event! If you would like additional copies to distribute, please contact our office and we will be happy to provide them.

Online registration for The 23rd Annual Family Cafe will open on Monday, February 15th. The easiest way to register is to visit familycafe.net beginning on February 15th, but we also accept registrations by mail or fax. The registration brochure includes a hard copy version of the event registration form. No matter how you register, your chances of receiving Financial Assistance to cover the cost of your hotel stay remain the same!



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