



Disability & Mental Health Summit

Co-hosted by:
Rep. Jessica Benham, Rep. Emily Kinkead & Rep. Jen Mazzocco



May 7, 2026

Community College of Allegheny County
Allegheny Campus, North Side



A Message from

Representatives Jessica Benham,
Emily Kinkead, and Jen Mazzocco

Welcome to our 13th Annual
Disability & Mental Health Summit!

Now in its 13th year, the Summit has touched thousands of lives, educating legislators from both sides of the aisle, while helping to inform families and working to increase opportunities for self-advocates across the board. The Summit is designed to bring resources and experts out of their offices and into an easy-to-access environment, where people can meet face-to-face to better solve problems.

This event would never be possible without the countless volunteers, community partners, and our fantastic hosts at Community College of Allegheny County.

The Summit has evolved over the years, in both form and content, and no two years are exactly alike! There are always free informative sessions, but topics and presenters are rotated so that novel sessions are always part of the program. Other activities include our general resource fair, targeted resource fairs for students preparing to move from high school to adult life, artwork from people in the disability community, and legislative panels that serve as policy hearings.

This Summit stands on the shoulders of countless heroes, and we thank them all for their work. We also know that for every person who can attend, there is a parent who couldn't get off work, a self-advocate who couldn't get an accessible ride, and a child in school today who simply hopes that their peers will talk to them. We still have a way to go and promises to keep, but we will get there as long as we work together. Thank you for attending, and I hope you enjoy your time here!

Jessica Benham, Emily Kinkead and Jen Mazzocco
State Representatives

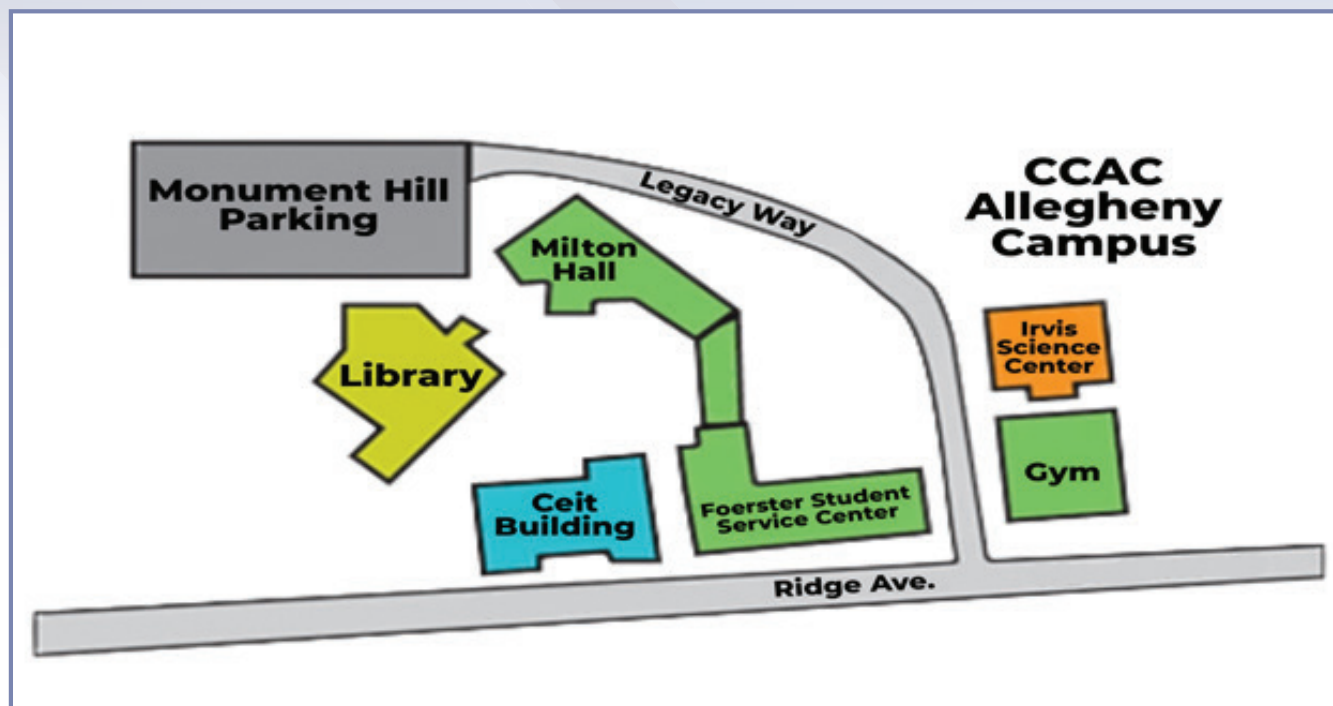
Reps. Jessica Benham, Emily Kinhead and Jen Mazzocco's



Summit At-a-Glance

Thurs., May 7	Resource Fair - 11 a.m. - 2 p.m.						
8:45 a.m. - 9:00 a.m.	Summit Welcome & Kickoff - Auditorium						
9:00 a.m. - 10:00 a.m.	Keynote Speaker - Auditorium						
10:00 a.m. - 11:00 a.m.	Breakout Sessions (Choose One)						
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	<p>Stabilizing the ID/A System Workforce: Critical Challenges and a Path Forward</p> <p>Mental Health on Campus: What it Means to Support our College Age Students</p>						

Venue Map



Schedule

8:45 – 9:00 a.m. Summit Welcome & Kickoff

Foerster Student Services Center – Auditorium

State Representatives Jessica Benham, Emily Kinkead, and Jen Mazzocco

9:00 – 10:00 a.m. – Keynote Presentation

Foerster Student Services Center – Auditorium

State Supreme Court Justice Kevin Dougherty with Allegheny County Court of Common Pleas Judge Dan Miller

Pennsylvania Supreme Court Justice Kevin Dougherty has made a career of fighting for kids, equality, and fairness in our legal system, and he has become the leading statewide advocate for addressing autism in the judiciary through his landmark initiative “Autism and the Courts.” Thanks to his efforts, every county in the Commonwealth now takes part in this program, and its impact is only growing.

Join us for this special discussion with Justice Dougherty as he details why he has made Autism and the Courts his top priority, the challenges facing our system of justice in relation to it, and what he sees as the future of the courts when it comes to accessibility for all. The Justice will be joined by Judge Dan Miller, who chairs the Autism and the Courts committee in Allegheny County.

10:00 - 11:00 a.m. – Breakout Sessions

Accessing Mental Health and Substance Use Disorder Services in Allegheny County/ Southwestern PA

Milton Hall Room 110

Janice Meinert

It is estimated that one in three Pennsylvanians has a mental illness or substance use disorder. Accessing behavioral health treatment and services is critical to a person's overall well-being, yet many people do not know what services are available or how to get them. In this session, Pennsylvania Health Law Project will cover programs and resources for behavioral health services available to children and adults in PA. The focus will be on accessing these services through Pennsylvania's Medicaid program but other possible resources, such as county-based funding, will also be identified. The presentation will also include tips for addressing common problems clients can face when accessing behavioral health and substance use disorder services.

Housing Rights for Individuals with Disabilities

Foerster Student Services Center - Auditorium

Morgan Williams, Esq. and Robert Taylor, Esq.

This session will focus on rights afforded to individuals with disabilities in housing under the Commonwealth's anti-discrimination law. The attorneys will discuss individuals' rights to reasonable accommodations, reasonable modifications, and the differences between these concepts. Participants will learn what a housing provider is entitled to request when faced with an accommodation or modification request, what landlords can and cannot charge tenants for, and how individuals may enforce their rights if they are discriminated against. The most common types of requests will be discussed, including emotional support animals, as well as a detail of remedies available for victims when the law is violated.

Chill Schools, Thriving Minds: How Mindfulness Creates Space for Everyone

Milton Hall Room 116

Isabelle (Izzy) Cutler

Mental health is for everyone, and schools play a crucial role in shaping how communities access care, build resilience, and reduce stigma. This session explores how mindfulness and intentional, strengths-based mental health practices can create more regulated and connected school communities. Drawing on insights from AHN Chill Project™, a mindfulness school-based program, participants will learn practical strategies for fostering emotional regulation and well-being across students, educators, and families.

Beyond Birth: Addressing Maternal Mental Health Inequities

Milton Hall Room 112

State Rep. La'Tasha D. Mayes, Carmen Alexander, Dr. Ewurama Sackey, and Mariah Peoples

Maternal mental health is a frequently overlooked component of maternal health. In Western PA, provider shortages, misconceptions in care, and systemic inequities leave pregnant women and birthing people vulnerable to maternal morbidity, with Black mothers facing the greatest risk due to structural racism and unequal access. The PA Black Maternal Health Caucus and their PA MOMNIBUS bill packages, budgetary advocacy and culture changes have taken the lead in addressing this crisis. Panelists will discuss the scope of this public health crisis, its disproportionate impact on local Black mothers, and the policy and community actions needed to drive meaningful change to save all moms in our Commonwealth.

What I Wish my Family Knew about Pathological Demand Avoidance/Pervasive Drive for Autonomy

Milton Hall Room 114

Liz Peace and Tessa Watkins

Pathological Demand Avoidance (PDA), colloquially known as Pervasive Drive for Autonomy, is one of the most challenging obstacles faced by neurodivergent families. In this session, a clinician and a self-advocate discuss what PDA is, what it feels like on the inside to experience PDA, how to identify when someone is experiencing a PDA episode, and how best to respond to a PDA episode to reduce its duration and minimize stress.

11:00 a.m. - 12:00 p.m. Breakout Sessions

Accessibility and Inclusion in an Often Inaccessible World: Self-advocate Stories

Milton Hall Room 112

Adam Blank, Kayden Duncan, Dominic Gordon, and Toni Maione

In this session, we will hear from a panel of self-advocates who will share their experiences navigating education, employment, community life, and relationships. Panelists will discuss the strategies, supports, and inclusive practices that have enabled success and progress, and offer guidance on how allies can partner with them to remove barriers and strengthen inclusion for everyone.

Key Information to Understand and Navigate the Medicaid Changes Ahead

Foerster Student Services Center - Auditorium

Josie Badger, Erin Gabriel, and Erin Guay

This session will provide an overview of the historic Medicaid changes coming in late 2026 and early 2027, including work reporting requirements, more frequent renewals, shortened retroactive period, and changes to immigrant eligibility. We will discuss how people with disabilities could be impacted by these changes and what people need to do to prepare. We will also discuss ripple effects of these changes and basic Medicaid rights and protections that can help people stay connected to coverage and care.

Breaking Barriers Together: How Technology and Self-Advocacy can Impact Communities

Milton Hall Room 116

Dr. Dan Ding, Craig Douglass, Travis Fiem, Diana Petschauer, and Jeffrey Ruffing

For many people with disabilities, technology can be a doorway to greater independence, but tools devices may be too costly, too complicated, or not designed with real people in mind. This session will include practical ways that self-advocates, families, and caregivers can work side-by-side in exploring technology, testing it in daily life, and making sure it truly supports individual goals. We'll highlight spaces that allow people to discover new tech tools, as well as discussing exciting new technologies like robotics and AI.

From Backpacks to Big Moves: How School-based OT and PT can Empower Every Step

Milton Hall Room 113

Holly McElhinny, Ginger Nese, and Jill Smolenski

When included as a related service in an IEP, school-based occupational therapy (OT) and physical therapy (PT) play vital roles in helping students access their education and participate in daily routines from the classroom to the playground. This session offers a practical overview of how therapists support skill-building, independence, and collaboration, and it will provide attendees with tools to better understand and advocate for meaningful therapy services in schools.

Leading with your Disability in the Workplace and Beyond

Milton Hall Room 114

Tim Hinds, Amanda Neatrour, Shannon Parris, and Anjelica Perez-Johnston

This session will center on disability and accessibility in the workplace, explore the influence of disability stigma on how we understand leadership, and consider the impact of self-advocates showing up professionally as their most impactful and authentic selves. The personal leadership journeys of some local Disability Lead members, who are diverse in background, expertise, and professional sectors, will be explored. Leadership contributions in civic spaces will be discussed, including elected offices, political appointments, task forces and nonprofit boards. Panel members will discuss how they've expanded their impact, as well as describing obstacles they've encountered along the way.

Psychiatric Rehabilitation Services for those with Serious Mental Illness and/or Autism

Milton Hall Room 110

Heather Conroy, Jamie Kulzer, Christopher Palmer, and Sheri Washington

Over the past decade, the number of Pennsylvanians with autism has increased dramatically. Despite this, limited programming for autistic adults is accessible and effective. The ASERT Collaborative has supported and trained local Psychiatric Rehabilitation Service (PRS) providers to recruit and include autistic participants within their existing programs. This session will shed light on the unique approaches of PRS and the ease with which it has been adapted to support people with autism. Professionals will be prompted to consider similar adaptations they can make within their own service lines, and information about access to this service line and its potential benefits will be shared.

12:00 - 1:00 p.m. Breakout Sessions

It Starts Here! Early Access to Services and Strategies for Young Children

Milton Hall Room 116

Ashley Harland, Deysi Keegan, Kelly Kimmy, and Whitney Pecovich

By age five, a young child's brain has developed up to 90% of its full size, highlighting the importance of early access to disability and mental health services. This session, facilitated by Trying Together and DePaul School's SAILL Preschool Program, includes a summary of early childhood brain development, then shifts to a broad overview of regional disability and mental health support services for young children. We will include a brief discussion of both the IFSP (birth to 3) and the IEP (3 and up) that outline services and supports deemed necessary for the child to succeed. Finally, we'll provide participants with the opportunity to explore hands-on, play-based strategies to support early childhood development with a focus on social-emotional skills, regulation, early language, and literacy foundations.

Parkinson's – More than Just a Tremor

Milton Hall Room 112

Kelsey Harris and Laura Maines

For many of us, muscle tremors are the medical condition we most associate with Parkinson's Disease. But the reality is that there is so much more to this progressive brain disorder than tremors. In this session we will learn about how Parkinson's Disease often affects mental health, the related disability issues, and its impact on family supports, caregivers, and those who are diagnosed with the fastest-growing neurological disorder in the world. We will discuss how Parkinson's can impact cognition, impulse control, sleep, depression, and anxiety, and how navigating the care system frequently fails to ease such concerns.

Transitioning to Adulthood: Accessing Medical Care and Supported-Decision Making; Everyone Needs Help Sometimes

Foerster Student Services Center - Auditorium

Jenee' N. Oliver, Esq., and Melissa Skiffen

This session will explore Supported-Decision Making as a powerful alternative to guardianship. Supported-Decision Making is a solution-focused approach that can help individuals direct their own lives, even if they may need some support from others to make their goals a reality. There will be a discussion about Medicare services and waiver-funded services available to young adults graduating or aging out of school services. In order to assist the audience with self-advocacy, an overview of disability discrimination laws in healthcare settings will be presented with resource material made available for future use.

Real People. Real Voices. Medicaid Matters.

Milton Hall Room 114

Christie Cyktor and Jacquelyn White

Medicaid serves as a critical bridge to independence, opportunity, and inclusion for people with disabilities and their families. This session will bring together self-advocates, parents, and professionals as individuals with lived experience to share personal stories that highlight the true impact of Medicaid on daily life. Attendees will gain an understanding of how Medicaid supports access to healthcare, community living, and essential services that promote autonomy and participation in all aspects of society, helping individuals to overcome barriers, navigate complex systems, and advocate for the support they need. Stories will highlight both the successes and the ongoing challenges within the system, providing a candid look at how advocacy and awareness can lead to meaningful change.

The Well Parent Effect: How Parent Mental Health Transforms Your Child's Life and Future

Milton Hall Room 110

Emma Neel and Maggie Zangara

Parents and caregivers play an essential role in the emotional and developmental outcomes of children with mental health challenges or developmental disabilities, yet the well-being of caregivers themselves is often overlooked. When parents are emotionally supported and mentally healthy, children experience improved stability, engagement in treatment, and overall well-being. We will examine the vital connection between caregiver mental health and child outcomes, offering a compassionate and practical look at how stress, burnout, and emotional strain can impact family dynamics and child progress. We will emphasize that caring for oneself is a key component of caring for one's child.

1:00 - 2:00 p.m. Breakout Sessions

Benefits for Veterans: Understanding and Navigating Programs Through the Veterans Administration

Milton Hall Room 112

Michael V. Quatrini, Esq., and C. Denise Senft

The VA has numerous programs available for Veterans struggling with mental and physical disabilities. Join attorney Michael V. Quatrini, Esq., and Denise Senft, Justice Outreach Coordinator for the Pittsburgh VA, as they provide an overview of program availability, eligibility, and how Veterans can take the first step toward assistance, to which they are legally entitled.

Unplugged: How a Lower Tech Approach Fosters Healthy Development

Milton Hall Room 113

Kristen Beddard, Dr. Nick Flower, and Katie Talarico

Discover the science of persuasive design, how it is embedded in electronic devices and platforms, and how it affects our mental and cognitive health. Learn how adopting simple, lower-tech lifestyle strategies can benefit social and emotional well-being.

Inclusive Emergency Preparedness

Milton Hall Room 110

Matthew Berwick and Knox T. Walk

Emergencies—from natural disasters to public health crises—disproportionately impact individuals with disabilities. This session will provide an in-depth look at how UPMC has developed and implemented disability-informed emergency preparedness protocols. Through real-world scenarios and case studies, participants will learn how the healthcare system collaborates with disability advocates, emergency planners, and clinical teams to ensure that emergency response plans are inclusive, accessible, and responsive to the diverse needs of the disability community. The presentation will highlight tools for communication access, sheltering strategies, and continuity of care, and will offer guidance for replicating these practices in other healthcare or community settings.

Peer Mentorship as Mental Health Support: Harnessing the Power of Lived Experience

Milton Hall Room 116

Joel Richard

Peer support and education are crucial for people living with a mental health diagnosis. They create spaces where individuals feel understood, validated, and less alone in their experiences. Connecting with others who have navigated similar challenges helps reduce stigma, normalize struggles, and demonstrate that recovery is possible. Through shared stories and mutual support, participants gain practical coping strategies, increased confidence in managing their mental health, and a stronger sense of empowerment in their recovery journey. The session will also highlight how peer-led education and support help individuals better understand their diagnosis, identify wellness tools that work for them, and build supportive networks that extend beyond clinical care. By combining knowledge with lived experience, peer support fosters trust, builds resilience, and strengthens a person's ability to sustain their recovery over time. Participants will leave with a deeper understanding of how peer education and support complement traditional mental health services and why it is a vital component of a recovery-oriented network of care.

The Relationship Between Media Representation and Employment Outcomes for People with Mental Health Disabilities

Milton Hall Room 114

Scott Hammerstrom

Media representation shapes the way the general public understands mental health disabilities. While focus can sometimes be placed on entertainment media, news broadcasters, newspapers, journals, and other trusted media outlets, how they portray people with mental health disabilities holds even greater sway. This session will focus on exploring how these sources impact stigma, reinforce myths, and affect employment outcomes.

2:00 - 4:00 p.m. Legislative Panel Foerster Student Services Center - Auditorium

2 – 3 p.m. – **Stabilizing the ID/A System Workforce: Critical Challenges and a Path Forward**

Providing the necessary supports and services to individuals with Intellectual Disabilities and Autism (ID/A) in the places where they live and work depends upon having a robust workforce of Direct Support Professionals (DSPs). DSPs provide essential services, but it has been a struggle to maintain a stable workforce because of insufficient compensation and other issues. Join us as we learn more about the challenges facing DSPs, the important roles they play in the lives of the individuals they serve, and steps the legislature can take to help stabilize this critically important system of support.

3 – 4 p.m. – **Mental Health on Campus: What it Means to Support our College Age Students**

Our college age students are more likely to seek mental health care than any other generation. At the same time, they often face unique barriers to care that include challenges with insurance coverage, inexperience in navigating systems of support, difficulty finding providers, and more. In this panel, we will hear from experts about what they are encountering, what common challenges they see students facing, and what the critical areas are that should be addressed to strengthen the system. With a particular eye to our state-owned, state-related, and community colleges, we will discuss ways the legislature can work collaboratively to improve student stability, safety, and success in relation to mental health.



Resource Fair

Thursday, May 7 – 11 a.m. – 2 p.m.

Physical Education Building (Gym)

Providing you with opportunities to connect with services and resources that matter to you is at the heart of our Summit. Our free Resource Fair features dozens of organizations that offer a wide range of disability and mental health supports and services. Whether you're interested in meeting service providers, learning about educational opportunities or inclusive recreational options, networking around employment, engaging with advocacy groups, finding resources to help with future planning, or learning about options for assistive technology – our Resource Fair has something for just about everyone. We invite you to stop by any time between 11 a.m. and 2 p.m. and see for yourself!



Join us for an

Art Exhibit

Creative Citizen Studios

at the 13th Annual Disability & Mental Health Summit

Stop by to see unique works of art created by artists with intellectual or developmental disabilities!

Thursday, May 7th
9:00am - 2:00pm
CCAC Allegheny Campus

For more information on our Disability & Mental Health Summit
visit DisabilitySummit.com



Art Exhibit from Creative Citizen Studios

Thursday, May 7 – 9:00 a.m. – 2:00 p.m.

Milton Hall

Stop by to see unique works of art created by artists with intellectual or developmental disabilities!

Continuing Education

Forms available in the Registration Area – look for the Continuing Education sign.

Act 48 Credits for Educators

All sessions are approved for Act 48 credit for educators in Pennsylvania through the AIU. A maximum of 7 credits can be earned at this Summit. To ensure that your Act 48 hours are correctly reported to PDE, provide your seven-digit Professional Personnel Identification (PPID) number when completing your form. There is no cost to obtain these credits.

CEU Credits for Social Workers

All sessions are approved for credit for Social Workers at a cost of \$15 for NASW members and \$25 for non-members. A maximum of 7 credits can be earned at this Summit. NASW has been designated as a pre-approved provider of professional continuing education for social workers (Section 47.36), Marriage and Family Therapist (Section 48.36) and Professional Counselors (Section 49.36) by the PA State Board of Social Workers, Marriage & Family Therapists and Professional Counselors.

CEU Credits for Rehabilitation Counselors

All sessions are approved for credit through the Office of Vocational Rehabilitation and will satisfy CRC requirements of continuing education for rehabilitation counselors. A maximum of 7 credits can be earned at this Summit. There is no cost to obtain these credits.

CLE Credits for Attorneys

Select sessions are approved for up to 7 credit hours – only \$1.50 per credit hour. Individuals will be responsible for completing and mailing all forms, along with the appropriate fee (payable to PACLE), to the Pennsylvania Continuing Legal Education Board. The certification fee is \$1.50/credit hour or partial credit hour.

Legal sessions approved for continuing education:

- 9 a.m. – Keynote Address by State Supreme Court Justice Kevin Dougherty
- 10 a.m.
 - Accessing Mental Health and Substance Use Services in Allegheny County/Southwestern PA OR
 - Housing Rights for Individuals with Disabilities
- 11 a.m.
 - From Backpacks to Big Moves: How School-based OT and PT Can Empower Every Step OR
 - Key Information to Understand and Navigate the Medicaid Changes Ahead
- 12 p.m.
 - It Starts Here! Early Access to Services and Strategies for Young Children OR
 - Transitioning to Adulthood: Accessing Medical Care and Supported Decision Making
- 1 p.m. – Benefits for Veterans: Understanding and Navigating Programs through the Veterans Administration
- 2 p.m. - Legislative Panel (2 credits)

Thank You!

Thank you to everyone who played a role in helping to plan the Disability & Mental Health Summit this year! Thanks to all the members of our Planning Committee, who spent months helping us shape this program to make it as impactful as possible. Also, we could not have made this event happen without the efforts of the many volunteers who offered to help; the Upper St. Clair School District and Pittsburgh Public Schools for their partnership; the many testifiers and speakers who shared their expertise with us; and our friends at Community College of Allegheny County for being so accommodating. Also, we are grateful to Joe Polk from Thirteen Ball, who volunteered his time to update and manage our website. There can be no doubt that all of these people and organizations helped us to help others, and we are truly grateful for everyone's efforts.



Disclaimer:

The views and opinions expressed during the Summit sessions are those of the speakers and do not necessarily reflect the views or positions of any entities we represent. All content is for informational purposes only, and no material presented is intended to be a substitute for professional advice, diagnosis, or treatment.

Special Thanks to our Sponsors







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