

THE MISSION

of the Youth Advocacy Project for Routt County (YAP) is to enhance the effective services of Routt County agencies serving special needs, at-risk, and/or low income youth through financial and hands-on support.

Spring 2017



Letter from the Director Bridging A Critical Gap: Securing vital services as youth with disabilities transition into adulthood

As any parent knows, it is challenging enough for the average teen to cross that bridge into successful adulthood. However, as high school graduation looms for disabled and special needs youth, it can be an extremely daunting task to navigate the complex and unfamiliar world of adult disability services, career opportunities, and health care. Once a student with special needs graduates from high school, or when they turn 21, their special education services end. This is true across the country, including here in Steamboat Springs. For special needs youth and their families, the road to adulthood takes additional preparation and a great deal of effort. They face all of the typical issues other families do when preparing for their young adult to leave home, but they also have many more “unknowns.” Multiple challenges include issues with health care and insurance, legal guardianship, living arrangements, transportation and just daily aspects of basic living. Young adults with special needs don’t automatically transfer between the disability systems – one for children and one for adults. Not only is the adult system different, but where schools are tasked with finding and providing services for special needs youth, young adults must find out what services they need and apply for those services on their own. Not all families with a disabled student have the community connections or resources to find out what adult services are available. For example, if a student with special needs wants to continue on to college there are services available for them that they can access through the college’s Disability Coordinator. Unfortunately, it is completely up to the young adult to connect with the Disability Coordinator which, while a good idea, can be extremely difficult for a special needs person to undertake. The Disability Coordinators do not contact special needs students for an initial meeting, and parents are often left out of the planning process due to privacy laws.

Luckily, here in Routt County we have stellar advocates from area nonprofits, schools and other government entities who support disabled youth. This list includes advocates from BOCES, Horizons, Northwest Colorado Center for Independence (NWCCI), STARS, Yampa Valley Autism Program (YVAP), Department of Vocational Rehabilitation (DVR), Minds Springs Health, Routt County public school special education teachers, counselors and administrative staff, Boys & Girls Club of Northwest Colorado, CMC, Northwest Colorado Health, YVMC, local pediatricians and doctors. This newsletter highlights the specific support at NWCCI and YVAP to help youth and their families navigate through the transition into adulthood and empower each young person by partnering with them to create an individualized plan of services that best suits their particular needs and goals moving into adulthood. ■

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Sara Craig-Scheckman".

Sara Craig-Scheckman Executive Director



Youth With Special Needs and the Challenges of Transitioning to Adulthood

We are so very fortunate here in Routt County to have agencies that are helping at-risk youth and teens with special needs, along with their families, prepare for their future as adults. The Northwest Colorado Center for Independence (NWCCI) is one such organization. NWCCI offers services to individuals with special needs from birth through senior citizenship. Their Youth Transition Program, coordinated and led by Elisha Colson, supports 14-21 year olds and their families in planning for life after high school, whether it be work, vocational training, or college. Colson assists these youth with independent living opportunities and connects them to adult disability services. Colson was instrumental in creating her position at NWCCI and getting the now dynamic and highly collaborative Youth Transition Program up and running. The Youth Transition Program currently serves about 20 young adults each year, and those services can include one-on-one direct work, information and referrals, or peer group activities. The program is tailored to each young adult's needs and plans are made on an individual basis.

Colson, as an experienced and grassroots Routt County advocate of special needs youth, works with all three Routt County school districts, government entities and partnering nonprofits to help support and coordinate efforts for individuals to plan and reach their independent life skills. NWCCI's philosophy is to empower youth to problem solve, set goals and begin to manage the complex world of adulthood. Colson is currently helping local at-risk youth with "real world issues" by educating them about how to look for a job in the newspaper or online, creating a resume, and learning how to craft a budget. Additionally, Colson explores college or career opportunities with her clients as well as assists with searching for housing. Colson says this is one of the most difficult aspects of her job because, in the case of Steamboat Springs, finding housing often consists of helping her clients get on a waiting list for the few affordable locations available in the area. Government-run housing is particularly difficult to obtain as residents have to qualify and this can be complicated and often unobtainable. NWCCI also helps youth with a disability acquire critical resources such as transportation, access to Medicaid, getting copies of their Social Security card or birth certificate, as well as applying for food assistance and other government benefits.

NWCCI and the Yampa Valley Autism Program (YVAP) augment each other's work and are strong advocates for each other. Each has a good understanding of what the other organization does, and can refer clients to the other depending on which organization would be more impactful to the client. One young adult that Colson has been working with has come a long way since entering a youth transition program. This person has profound disabilities including cerebral palsy, as well as cognitive and communications delays. Prior to taking part in the program this young man had



tendencies towards aggressive behavior, mainly stemming from frustrations with communication difficulties. NWCCI, working together with YVAP, collaborated with the student's family and the schools, and gave them the option of youth transition programs outside of the high school environment. They found this individual would benefit from YVAP's particular services, so the district is paying for him to participate in YVAP's youth transition program (STRIDES), and also helps the family with transportation costs. This young adult will continue in the program for the next few years, and will learn job training and other skills to help him succeed in the world. He has had a major increase in positive behavior and has not demonstrated any aggressiveness since taking part in the social environment of STRIDES. According to YVAP's Executive Director, Lisa Lorenz, "This has been an extremely successful year for him. He's shown a lot of growth, is learning to engage in the community, and is following the stages of moving to adulthood more closely to what his peers might be doing much more than if he were still with younger students in the high school."

As mentioned above, NWCCI and YVAP often work together to help youth with special needs. YVAP's Lisa Lorenz says, "We have so much collaboration with each other! We have a great relationship and I feel we have little or no duplication of services that each of our agencies offer." YVAP "provides resources and direct services to individuals and families living with autism or other disorders to cultivate their abilities and maximize quality of life," and can help with the challenges of special needs teens transitioning to adulthood.



Among YVAP's many offerings, they recently launched their STRIDES (Students Transitioning Reaching Independent Direction Education in Steamboat) program for young adults between the ages of 18-21 who meet the needs criteria. STRIDES is a wrap-around program that includes collaborations with Northwest Colorado BOCES, the Steamboat Springs School District, Horizons, CMC, and other organizations. The program supports people with a broad range of disabilities, from students who struggle with significant cognitive and physical disabilities to students with disabilities who need support with college level coursework and social functioning. STRIDES also assists young adults through daily challenges, including planning healthy meals and how to use the bus system, and creates solutions for each individual. They strive to help these young adults become engaged members of the community, who can take pride in their involvement and contributions.



STRIDES is different from what NWCCI offers in that YVAP is a direct service provider and case manager specifically for students with developmental disabilities that qualify for public education/transition services. The school districts contract directly with STRIDES to manage Individual Education Plans (IEP's), develop student goals, collect data and report to the Colorado Department of Education. Currently, there are five people taking part in the program. Started in 2015, Lorenz says that STRIDES "helps prepare special needs youth for independent life, within their abilities." Participants have the opportunity to obtain apprenticeships in an area of interest, as well as receive social coaching on how to be an appropriate roommate and what it means to live apart from family. YVAP also administers vocational assessments and support, and all aspects of job coaching, including mock interviews.

The Northwest Colorado Center for Independence and Yampa Valley Autism Program each have transition services for local at-risk and special needs youth; their services compliment each other and are extremely impactful for many young adults who need additional supports in our Routt County community. These programs are so important in helping individuals with daily living skills that most people take for granted. These young adults are working hard towards self-sufficiency and may hit bumps in the road along the way, but like any young adult it is important to experience failure and success in their pursuit of independence.



Vision

The Youth Advocacy Project for Routt County (YAP) envisions a strategic network of collaborative, sustainable youth serving agencies that builds resiliency in youth and guides them towards their optimal potential.

Calendar of Events

July 17 – August 16
CSFF Office Closed

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