

## **Goal 1: Self-Advocacy**

**By 2031, the Council will increase the number of people with intellectual/developmental disabilities to become effective self-advocates, peer trainers, and/or community leaders.**

### **Objective 1**

**By 2031, the Council will reach 10,000 self-advocates with community-building activities, training, events, projects and resources that build their capacity for self-governance and to become effective, active leaders, peer trainers and mentors.**

### **Objective 2**

**By 2031, the Council will reach 5,000 self-advocates, representing California's population, to be active in cross-disability and peer networks and groups by providing support and peer advocacy/leadership opportunities.**

### **Objective 3**

**In the event of unexpected project opportunities, emerging needs, and/or community, cross-regional or statewide requests, the Council may engage in additional activities with and/or on behalf of family and self-advocates and those who support and serve them.**

**Please share your comments about Goal 1:**





Every five years, SCDD creates a State Plan that guides the Council's work across California. This plan focuses on three key goals:

- Self-Advocacy
- Systems Change
- Capacity-Building

This 5-year State Plan will help us decide how to use our time, partnerships, and resources to better support the community of people with I/DD and their families, as well as those who support and serve them.

The State Council on Developmental Disabilities appreciates that so many of you responded to its State Plan survey. Based on survey responses (with thousands of comments) and research provided by Council staff, the Council's State Plan Committee developed its proposed State Plan. The Council is now asking for public review of and comments on its proposed 2027-2031 California State Plan. This public comment period will be open until noon on January 5, 2026.

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#### Objective 1

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Cape Cod Community College  
and  
Project Forward  
certify that

*Christopher Thomas Bennett*

has successfully completed the course of study in  
Basic Retail/Office Technology

*William J. Kelly*  
President, Cape Cod Community College

*Robert J. Kelly*  
Director, Project Forward

Aug 28 2003





# NAPA NONPROFIT STEPS INTO SPOTLIGHT

PHOTO BY DARRYL BUSH FOR THE PRESS DEMOCRAT



For nearly three decades, Moving Forward Towards Independence has quietly helped neurodiverse adults in Napa build the skills they need to live independently — offering support, housing and a path toward self-sufficiency.

On Sunday, the nonprofit stepped out from behind the scenes.

The May 18 event marked not only the organization's largest fundraiser of the year, but also a rare public moment for the 501(c)(3) nonprofit, which has spent 27 years fostering greater autism awareness while serving adults with developmental differences.

Residents in the program live on the group's Elm Street campus as well as in homes throughout the community, where they receive customized support and coaching as they work toward their goals.

Above, guests and residents of Moving Forward Towards Independence enjoy crafts and snacks at an Art & Wine Fundraiser sponsored by Every Gal Wines benefiting Moving Forward Towards Independence, at Ilsley Vineyards in Napa on May 18, 2025.

Left, Merilee Bennett, left, and Sue Samuel, pose with their sons, Christopher Bennett, top left, and Dylan Samuel, both residents of Moving Forward Towards Independence.

Bottom, left, Henry Tate Adams, resident of Moving Forward Towards Independence, makes crafts as Ellen Sweigert, also a resident,



ACTIVISM

# Napan honored for advocacy

Has been vocal on Down syndrome issues for years

SAMIE HARTLEY  
 shartley@napanews.com

Christopher Bennett talks with his hands when he's excited, and he's got a lot to be happy about these days. The Napa resident was recently honored with the Christian Pieschel Memorial Citizen Award by the National Down Syndrome Congress.

Bennett was presented with

his award, which honors self-advocates who have made strides to be role models in the Down syndrome community, during the National Down Syndrome Congress annual convention in Dallas earlier this month.

Down syndrome is a genetic disorder. The human body is made of cells which contain 23 pairs of chromosomes. People with Down syndrome have an extra copy of the 21st chromosome, which causes developmental delays. People with Down syndrome also have the distinct facial feature of wide-set, almond

shaped eyes.

According to the National Down Syndrome Society, approximately one in every 700 babies in the United States is born with Down syndrome, making Down syndrome the most common chromosomal condition. About 6,000 babies are born with Down syndrome in the United States each year.

Bennett, 36, has Down syndrome, but he doesn't see it as a disability. He has a job, lives on his own and has a girlfriend, just

Please see BENNETT, Page A4



SUBMITTED

Christopher Bennett of Napa was recently honored with the Christian Pieschel Memorial Citizen Award by the National Down Syndrome Congress.

## Bennett

From A1

like you might expect of anyone his age.

Bennett knows people may see him as different based on the tell-tale facial characteristics of Down syndrome, but he uses these moments as opportunities to educate people about Down syndrome rather than shy away from people.

"When someone comes up to me and asks questions, I am always friendly," Bennett said. "I make sure to make eye contact when we are talking. I want to be supportive. I know they aren't trying to be rude or mean. They are curious because, to them, I look different. But I like to help them understand that we are more alike than different."

Bennett has been a self-advocate for himself and others with Down syndrome for as long as he can remember. His resume of self-advocacy efforts include participating in the

Partners in Policymaking in Sacramento and serving on the Developmental Disabilities Board in Sonoma County. He's attended lobbying events in Washington, D.C. and he speaks about living with Down syndrome at public events and fundraisers.

His lifelong commitment to self-advocacy gained notice of the National Down Syndrome Congress Board of Directors, which decided to choose him as this year's Christian Pieschel Memorial Citizen Award honoree. The award was founded by Dr. Siegfried Pieschel, a trailblazer in the Down syndrome community who authored several books about the importance of self-advocacy.

Bennett is no stranger to the National Down Syndrome Congress, a non-profit dedicated to improving the lives of individuals and families living with Down syndrome. He's been attending their conventions since he was a kid and has even been invited to speak

at the event several times.

At the most recent convention, Bennett was invited to speak about his Down syndrome self-advocacy toolkit, a booklet he's written that informs people with Down syndrome about how to get involved in legislative advocacy on local, state and federal levels.

Bennett said the toolkit is a guide for people with Down syndrome to build relationships with elected officials to make sure that people with Down syndrome aren't ignored when it comes to developing and drafting new laws.

Bennett said he has met with many local leaders in Napa and Napa County. He even considers Napa mayor Jill Techel a friend. "We see each other at the grocery store all the time," Bennett said.

Bennett said he learned of being selected for the Christian Pieschel Memorial Citizen Award while he was on a pilgrimage to Israel with his church group.

"The email came in on my phone and it woke me up," Bennett said. "I read it and I was so happy. Self-advocacy is very important to me, and it is such an honor to be chosen for this award. I've been working toward this for a long time."

**A commitment to advocacy**

Bennett said he's been working to educate people about Down syndrome since he was a teenager growing up in Riverside, Calif. As a result of his Down syndrome, Bennett had some speech delays, but as soon as he could talk, he began to find his voice in the community, starting by speaking to teachers

and administrators at his school.

"My parents have always advocated for me to make sure that I was included and treated like everyone else, but when I got older, they encouraged me to speak up for myself," Bennett said.

Bennett's mother Merilee said she and husband Bruce have always encouraged Christopher to speak up and practice his communication skills rather than intervening on his behalf.

"We have always encouraged him to learn to navigate life and take care of himself. He has always wanted to do what everyone else was able to do and to follow the example of his brother Brian," Merilee said.

When Bennett's older brother left home for college on the East Coast, Bennett decided he, too, wanted to go to college. He and his parents found out about a program offered at Cape Cod Community College in Massachusetts that offered students with learning disabilities seeking to gain skills for independent living.

"He was asked once by a friend if he wasn't nervous about going to the East Coast for school to which he replied, 'my brother went east to school,'" Merilee said. "He went and really enjoyed his time there, making friends, going to college and learning skills to be independent like how to fly on his own, which he has done since then. We are not overly protective of him nor have we been in the past. We feel that teaching a person with a disability how to live life safely is much more

important and fruitful than hovering."

**Life in Napa**

Bennett moved to Napa 15 years ago to join the Moving Forward Towards Independence program, a residential program for adults with developmental learning and autism spectrum disabilities. When he started the program, he lived in a group-living setting while furthering his independent living skills.

Through this program, he found work at Napa Cinemas, Taco Bell and Napa Valley General Store. Today, Bennett works at Meritage Resort Hotel and Spa in Napa in the housekeeping and groundskeeping departments.

"I really like my job at Meritage," Bennett said. "It's a five-star resort, and my job helping keep the main areas and the grounds clean is very important. We want our guests to have the best experience possible, so no matter what I'm doing, I want to offer friendly, five-star service."

Bennett works at Meritage through a contract with Napa-based WineBev Services, a program run by United Cerebral Palsy of the North Bay which helps people with disabilities find employment.

WineBev Services program director Angelica Gemo said Bennett is a model employee.

"I've known Christopher for about eight years and he's made so much progress since he started with us," Gemo said. "He's been at Meritage for about a year, and he's very diligent in what he does. He takes a lot of pride in his work. He gets along with everyone.

He's a good role model, and he's great with communication."

In one of his latest self-advocacy efforts, Christopher helped create the WineBev Mentors Program where senior members mentor new clients who are just getting into the workforce.

"Christopher is always looking for new opportunities to educate people," Gemo said. "When he told me about winning his award from the National Down Syndrome Congress, I wasn't surprised. Christopher looks out for people. He likes to make sure people are all on the same page. It's what makes him a good employee, as well as a good friend and all around human being."

Rhonda Daniels, executive director of Moving Forward Towards Independence, said she wasn't surprised to hear about Bennett's award recognition either.

"Christopher is a great advocate for himself and others," Daniels said. "He's the kind of guy who lights up a room when he walks in. He's a genuine guy, a friend to the world."

As part of the Moving Forward Towards Independence program, Bennett has a case worker who he meets with weekly, but he lives in his own apartment and maintains his own schedule. In addition to his advocacy via the Moving Forward Towards Independence and WineBev Services, he's also been involved with other Napa County organizations such as ParentsCAN and Napa Valley Support Services - both of which serve individuals with developmental delays.



## 11. Improving Housing and Community Living

SB671 AB1172-AB  
1220

Every person with I/DD should have the opportunity to live in the community. Permanent, affordable, accessible, safe, and sustained housing options must be continually developed. Statewide inclusive living options for individuals with I/DD must be increased and enhanced through access to housing and subsidies, paired promptly, with needed services and supports.

The Council will work to implement the policy recommendations in the Statewide Strategic Framework for Housing and create a dedicated housing fund to support integrated community housing for people with I/DD.

For more information contact: [Policy@scdd.ca.gov](mailto:Policy@scdd.ca.gov) | (916) 263-7919

SB 671

AB 1172

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## Identifying & Prioritizing Emerging Issues in the I/DD Community

Every person with a developmental disability should not have to deal with problems that arise due to the emergence of inequality issues in the community. Events in our everyday lives, both due to policy changes and unforeseen events, have the ability to cause unintended consequences for the I/DD community. These issues must be identified and acted upon swiftly to ensure as little harm as possible is inflicted.

The Council will work to ensure any and all emerging issues, including but not limited to dealing with disparity across all I/DD issues, barriers to participating in a community setting, and roadblocks to access for people with I/DD, are dealt with through policy changes.

The Council will work to ensure the Self-Determination Ombudsperson program at the Department of Developmental Services uses its authority to ensure people with I/DD become successful participants in the Self-Determination Program.

## Promoting Access to Quality Supports in the Community

AB 1099

AB 315

Every person with I/DD should be able to fully participate in their communities. The ability to receive quality, individualized services, is the cornerstone for people with I/DD to be safe, healthy, and to promote self-determination, interdependence, and inclusion.

Community-based services/supports require adequate wages for providers; therefore, the state must restore rates. Disparities in access, outcomes, and quality of services and supports must be addressed, and complexities in the service delivery systems must be reduced.

The Council will work to continue to restore the Department of Developmental Services programs cut in 2009, to make meaningful improvements to the service delivery system to reduce disparities, increase transparency and accountability, and increase quality outcomes, support efforts to provide adequate wages to providers for inclusive and quality supports, and work to ensure successful implementation of the Self-Determination Program.

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## Ensuring Safety in the Community

AB 1172

AB 1220

SB 671

AB 1172

AB 1220

Every person with I/DD has a right to be safe and must receive emergency preparedness training and training in personal safety. Law enforcement personnel, first responders, emergency medical professionals, and the judicial system must be trained in how to work with people with I/DD (including those who are suspects, victims or witnesses of crimes).

The Council will work to ensure people with I/DD are safe, free from abuse and neglect and have access to services and supports in their communities during all types of disasters or emergencies and an adequate safety net for people in crisis and access to adequate crisis intervention services.





that every Californian has a fair chance to meet their needs and achieve their goals. A person's background, income level, or aspect of identity should not determine their health, safety, or life outcomes.

### **Actively Listen, Learn, and Understand**

State agencies and departments must engage directly with individuals, families, and communities to better understand their needs and priorities. Agencies must proactively seek input by holding town halls, convening workgroups, and engaging advisory committees and other stakeholder bodies. Listening deeply and building collaboration into program design strengthens relationships and outcomes, advances self-determination, and ensures policies and services reflect the needs and priorities of the communities they serve.

### **Use Data to Drive Action and Mitigate Harm**

Robust use of data is essential to identify community needs, measure program impact, and highlight opportunities for improvement. Agencies must integrate, interpret, and share data responsibly to produce actionable insights that drive informed decision-making. Data must also be used to monitor unintended consequences and mitigate potential harm, ensuring policies advance equity, improve outcomes, and support the well-being of all Californians.

### **See the Whole Person**

Policymakers must recognize the full range of needs, preferences, and values of individuals and families. Cultural, economic, and social factors must be considered, and programs aligned or integrated across departments and with community partners to meet these needs. Person-centered approaches must replace siloed systems to honor dignity, support autonomy, and help people thrive.

### **Cultivate a Culture Of Innovation**

Innovation must be pursued with intentionality, collaboration, and responsiveness to diverse and emerging needs. Agencies should design flexible, resilient systems by partnering across departments, engaging counties, collaborating with community-based organizations, and consulting with tribes. Creative solutions must be applied effectively to ensure programs meet the needs of all Californians.





## GUIDING PRINCIPLES FOR BUDGET-RELATED ADVOCACY

These guiding principles are intended to support the California State Administration and Legislature in approaching Medicaid-related budget adjustments with a focus on equity, transparency, and the preservation of essential services. Drawn from SCDD's core values and the California Health and Human Services Agency's Guiding Principles, these principles create a framework for ethical decision-making that emphasizes the need to center the voices of people with developmental disabilities and their families, upholds California's longstanding commitment to community inclusion, and asserts the rights and well-being of individuals who rely on these services to fully participate in their communities. By grounding budget decisions in these principles, policymakers can navigate fiscal constraints while safeguarding the dignity, health, and opportunity of all Californians.

### 5. **Promote Community Living**

The core values for community living are in law and include independence, productivity, integration, inclusion, self-determination, protection, advocacy, and quality of life. Budget decisions must actively advance and uphold these values, ensuring that every action taken strengthens opportunities for full participation, equity, and dignity in community life.

### 6. **Focus on Community Priorities**

State budget and policy decisions should reflect the real needs and values of Californians with developmental disabilities and their families. Community priorities must be central in this process. SCDD has heard clearly from individuals with developmental disabilities, family members, and community partners about what matters most to them. These priorities include protecting and enhancing civil rights, guaranteeing access to education and employment, promoting access to quality supports in the community, ensuring safety in the community, and improving housing and community living. As policymakers work to navigate fiscal challenges and design responsive systems, grounding decisions in the lived experiences and expressed priorities of the disability community can help ensure equitable and effective outcomes.

### **Focus on Equity**

Efforts to adjust budgets must confront systemic inequities, including but not limited to those related to race, ethnicity, gender identity, sexual orientation, disability, and economic status. Equity must be centered at every stage. Barriers must be removed so



## Policy Priorities 2025–2026

### 2025 Bills-Watch Position

#### Protecting and Enhancing Civil Rights AB1225 SB.84

A Every person with intellectual and developmental disabilities (I/DD) has the right to self-determination, equality of opportunity, full participation, independent living and economic self-sufficiency, no matter their disability.

1 The Council will work to ensure civil rights, including identification and reduction of racial and ethnic inequalities and disparities are protected and enhanced and full implementation of state and federal policies, including but not limited to the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act, Home and Community-Based Services Settings Rule, Every Student Succeeds Act and Achieving Better Life Experience Act.

#### Guaranteeing Access to Education and Employment

SB373/SB.244/AB784

SB.889

2 Every student with I/DD has the right to a quality inclusive education with their peers that prepares them for post-secondary education and/or competitive integrated employment (CIE). Students with disabilities must be provided the same learning opportunities, in the classroom and online, as students without disabilities.

3 Every person with I/DD should have the opportunity to be employed in CIE. Individuals must have access to information, benefits counseling, transition planning, job training, career exploration and information and support for inclusive post-secondary education. New or expanded pathways to CIE must be developed and supported, including apprenticeships and internships.

4 The Council will work to ensure the implementation of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, Every Student Succeeds Act, and other federal and state policies to ensure that students with disabilities are provided the services and supports needed to receive quality inclusive education.

The Council will work to ensure the full and robust implementation of the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act and California's Employment First Law, that policies and practices improve opportunities for and incentivize CIE, to create hiring incentives and supports for all employers and contractors and make the state a model employer.

SB422 AB308 AB315-11





North Bay  
Regional Center

Hosted by:  
The Public Policy Advisory  
Committee and the Client  
Advisory Committee of  
North Bay Regional Center

# SAVE THE DATE

## 2026 North Bay Legislative Lunch

**4.10.2026**

**11 am - 12:30 pm**



*We have a*  
**VOICE**

**In person attendance in Napa, CA**

*RSVP link & address will follow*

**Virtual attendance by Zoom**

*RSVP link will follow*

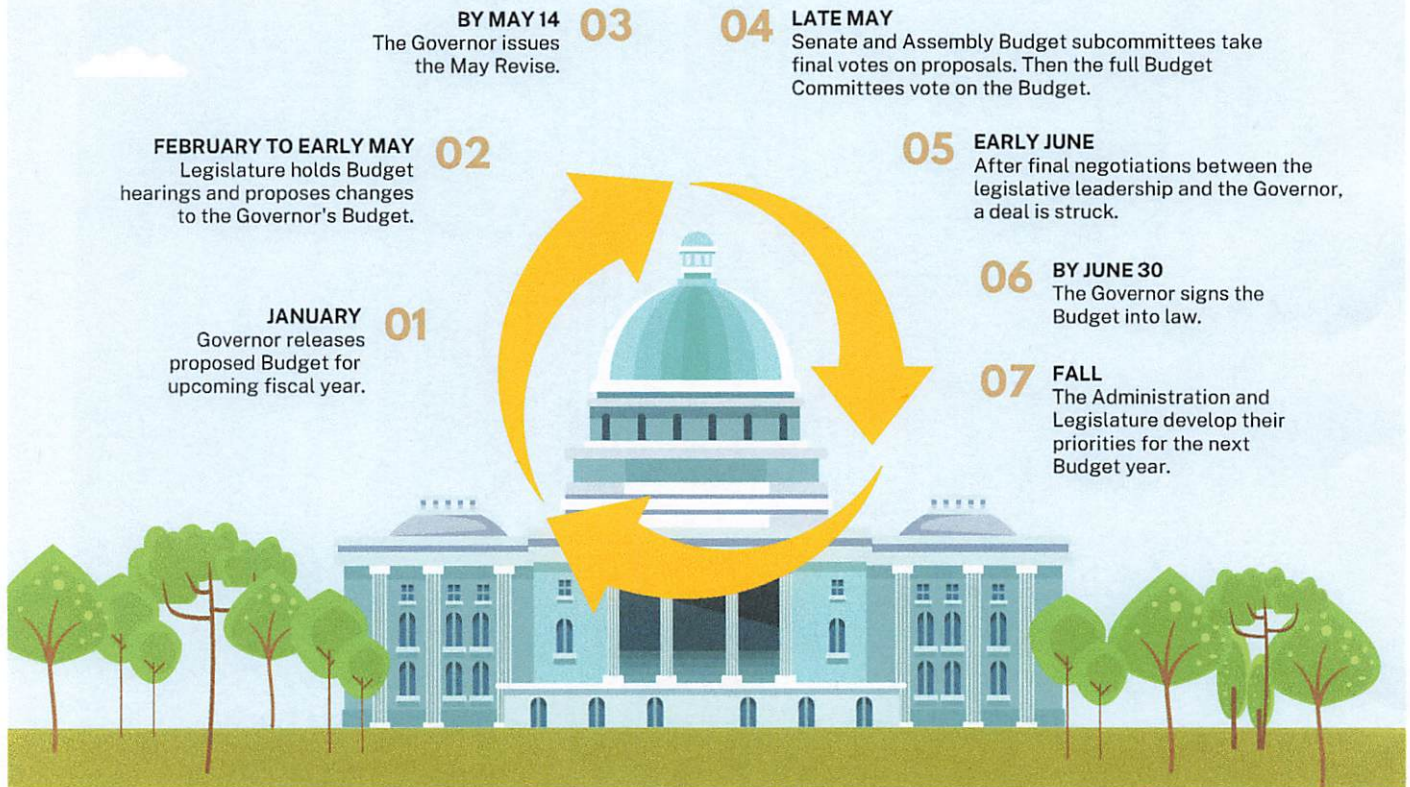
All Presentations will be in English with Spanish  
and ASL interpretation available

Contact [MariamG@nbrc.net](mailto:MariamG@nbrc.net) for additional  
accommodation information & questions



# Good of the Order

## CALIFORNIA'S STATE BUDGET PROCESS



Sent from my iPad



Advocacy to Amy Westling at the  
ARCA Association for Regional Centers  
a copy to Christopher Aguire w/  
DDS at a PIOR board meeting  
from before for the CA governor  
to update the masterplans  
for Regional Centers my slides  
will talk about it in further  
detail w/ Public Policy w/ the  
Regional Center, Present it to  
The Public Policy Committee.

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Executive Directors Report

Disability Rights United / ARCA Association  
Press Conference, Lobby DAY  
Legislation LUNCH



# Executive Directors Report/ CAC One Pagers

## Presentation Introduction

I was in attendance at the  
DOS Subcommittee hearings with  
the State Legislature committees  
hearings Regional Center,

Special Olympics stories sharing  
their stories at the microphone ~~on~~  
on a five minute time limit, not  
enough time to share their stories,  
not enough Regional Center advocacy  
at Sub Committee hearings for all

Regional Centers I gave a Letter  
talking one Pagers for Regional Center