

SPAN's Policy re: Technical Assistance and In-Person Support and Advocacy

The Statewide Parent Advocacy Network (SPAN) is New Jersey's "one-stop" for families. Our mission is to empower families and inform and involve professionals interested in the healthy development and education of children and youth. Our foremost commitment is to families with the greatest need due to disability; poverty; special health or mental health needs; discrimination based on race, sex, language, or immigrant status; involvement in the child welfare or juvenile justice systems; geographic location; or other special circumstances. We house the Parent Training and Information Center (PTI), Family to Family Health Information Center (F2F), Statewide Parent to Parent USA affiliate, Federation of Families for Children's Mental Health chapter, and many other projects that enable us to educate, support, and empower parents. SPAN provides statewide training and technical assistance for families of children birth to 26 with and without special needs.

SPAN encourages parents to empower themselves by becoming educated in order to effectively advocate for their own children and family. Toward this end, SPAN offers technical assistance, workshops, printed materials, a resource-rich website, three regional mini-conferences/year, and a bi-annual conference. Every parent, regardless of any of the above criteria, how many times they contact us, or their state service choice(s), is provided with the following information:

- a. Their rights, and the rights of their child(ren), under the relevant education, health, child welfare, human services, labor, or other laws;
- b. If relevant, any research-based best practices that might assist the parent in making their decision (i.e., for a child with challenging behavior, the research demonstrates conclusively that positive behavior support is a more effective strategy than aversives, restraint or seclusion);
- c. How to navigate the relevant system (i.e., how to go up the chain of command); and
- d. Other relevant resources, including if requested, our list of free and fee-for-service attorneys as well as resources from national centers funded by the US Department of Education, US Department of Health and Human Services, US Department of Labor, etc.

Because we explain to parents how the procedures under the law and state regulations work, if a parent contacts SPAN demanding our assistance in helping them advocate for a particular choice of services in any system, we will let them know how the process works and give them information on effective strategies to begin a conversation with that service system. It is not part of our job as the PTI or F2F to tell a parent what to do to get a particular service they want, rather, it is to tell them their rights, the proper processes/procedures, partnership and advocacy strategies, relevant research, and other resources. That is what we try to do with every parent - but that is not always what every parent is looking for.

While PTIs and F2Fs are not required to provide more intensive, in-person assistance, SPAN sets aside funding in several grants (including our PTI and F2F grants) to help parents with more intensive needs and/or with limited resources. We prioritize our in-person technical assistance based on several criteria (because we receive MANY more requests for in-person TA than we can accommodate): (1) family's limited capacity to advocate on their own behalf due to limited literacy, limited English proficiency, and/or disability of the parent; (2) extent of harm or potential harm being caused to the child (for example, a child out of school for a long period of time due to suspension, or a child being subjected to harmful restraints and aversives); (3) known intractability of the school district or other agency; and/or (4) related to a major policy focus of SPAN. Most of the in-person TA is provided based on the first two criteria.

Because our goal is to empower families to advocate on their own behalf, SPAN *does not* generally accompany parents to IEP meetings, mediation conferences and/or due process hearings, *except in extraordinary circumstances*. In addition, SPAN has insufficient financial and personnel resources to accompany significant numbers of families to meetings. For example, we received well over 30,000 telephone calls last year from families seeking technical assistance. Many of those families requested support at their IEP meetings, mediations, and/or due process hearings. Further, SPAN's funding sources do not fund us to provide this service to families except in limited circumstances and under certain projects, including:

- **Family Resource Specialists** – Special Child Health Services Case Management Units serve as the single point of entry into the state case management system for children with special health care needs and disabilities. SPAN Family Resource Specialists housed at these Case Management Units and funded under our PTI and Family WRAP grants provide education and health-related case management and support for families whose children are registered with the SCHS Case Management Unit and who are referred to them for assistance by SCHS Case managers.
- **Family to Family Health Information Center** – Provides intensive, wrap-around support to underserved families of children and youth with special healthcare needs, including immigrant/limited English proficient families, families of color, and low income families.
- **Military Family 360 Support Project (MFS 360)** – provides intensive, wrap-around support to military families who have children with special needs across systems.
- **SPAN Resource Parent (SRP) Volunteer Program** – trained individuals who volunteer to help families located in their own communities. SRPs *may* accompany parents to meetings, based on their level of expertise, work schedule and/or other commitments. The majority of SRPs provide telephone technical assistance only. (*Most SRPs work full-time and have their own children with special needs*).

Families who receive intensive in-person TA generally will have two or more of the following features: immigrant or limited English proficient; parent with limited literacy or a disability; child involved in multiple systems (education, health, mental health, child welfare, juvenile justice); and/or low-income. **These examples translate into a relatively small number of families who are able to access in person-support at meetings, mediations, or hearings by SPAN staff or volunteers. SPAN's website provides multiple resources and SPAN workshops are conducted throughout the state to support and empower families.**

In addition, SPAN does not provide individualized TA in writing, whether by letter, email, text, or on Facebook or other social media. If a parent requests assistance in writing, we request that they contact our warmline, or ask for their telephone number(s) so that we may contact them. This helps to ensure the provision of the most effective and efficient TA, limits the likelihood of generating documents that can be used in litigation by or against a parent, and is less likely to result in unauthorized practice of law.

SPAN employees are *NOT* attorneys and *DO NOT* provide legal advice¹. SPAN's ultimate goal is to empower families through education and support, thereby increasing their capacity to be engaged and effective in every aspect of their child's education and healthy development.

¹ Although several of SPAN's staff, including one of its Executive Co-Directors, *are* attorneys, they do not function in the capacity of an attorney in their SPAN work with families. The agencies federally funded to provide representation to families include Disability Rights NJ (800-922-7233 or 609-292-9742), Community Health Law Project, and the Education Law Center (973-624-1815). Each agency has specific eligibility requirements.