

## Arc hosts transition workshop series for parents

By **Denise Coffey - Staff Writer**  
Regional - posted Fri., Sep. 28, 2012

Mallory Murray and Dawn Lazaroff are the director and administrator of educational services at the Arc of Quinebaug Valley. Photos by D. Coffey.

The Arc of Quinebaug Valley held a workshop for parents of children with developmental and/or intellectual disabilities on Sept. 25. The aim was to educate parents on how to transition their children from public school-sponsored programs to state-funded ones. The Connecticut Special Education law requires that school districts pay for programs

until an individual turns 21 years old. After that, the state's Department of Developmental Services takes over.

The Arc's administrative director of educational services, Dawn Lazaroff, said, "Everything is an entitlement before 21. When an individual turns 21, they have to be qualified by the state in order to get funding for future programs."

Lazaroff suggests parents apply for guardianship or conservatorship six months before their child turns 18 years old. "It's extremely important that parents realize what's possible if they don't have that in place," she said. "A doctor doesn't have to talk with you about medical treatments if that isn't in place."

Lazaroff knows first-hand the difficulties many parents face. Her 35-year-old son Jamie has developmental disabilities. She and her husband have partial guardianship so they can help him with finances and medical issues. "It's extremely important that you explain to your son or daughter that you aren't taking their rights away," she said. "This is about protecting them."

Thirty-five years ago there weren't the laws, programs or funding in place to help the Lazaroffs. It was trial by fire. Now Lazaroff makes it her mission to educate parents on their choices. The Arc,



which is one of several agencies that work with children with developmental and/or intellectual disabilities, offers several programs that are geared towards transitioning participants to adult life.

The Arc offers educational resources, self-advocacy, job and social skills programs. Vocational transition programs allow participants to work on cleaning and lawn care crews, or in individual placement settings that match their skills with the work requirements of a particular job. "We don't start with expectations for a child," Lazaroff said. "We have to figure it out first. We end up with expectations for a child and go from there."

When students are covered by public school funding, parents are part of the Pupil Placement Team (PPT) and they exercise a good deal of control over the decisions affecting their sons or daughters. When their child turns 21, parents are still involved in the discussions about funding and programs, but the DDS has the final say.

The first step is qualifying the child with DDS. A level of need (LON) is established, and that level determines the amount of funding the child will receive. "Parents are still involved," Lazaroff said. "A case manager is involved. But that case manager sends the paperwork to a DDS team and they decide what will and won't be provided. Everything is based on funding."

From there, parents need to decide what agency they want to work with. There are several, and the DDS provides contact information on them. Each one is a little different, so it's important that parents do their research, Lazaroff said. The Lazaroffs decided to have the state funding Jamie receives go to a physical intermediary. It enables them to hire and fire personnel of their own choosing, which is something they couldn't do if they used an agency. While Lazaroff has to sign off on payroll and mileage forms, it's the intermediary that takes care of payroll and taxes.

The DDS conducts yearly reviews and creates individual plans for all participants. The LON is redone every year. "You want to be able to ask a person what their hopes and dreams are," Lazaroff said. "Some can answer; others can't. But you still should try to ask."

As for Jamie, he's found a niche as self-advocate coordinator at the Arc. "He spends his time helping teach others how to advocate for themselves," Lazaroff said. "He's on a council working on developing a transportation system in the area. He's working hard. We're proud of him."