Leadership Trainees Bring Autism Message to Congressional Offices

Center for Persons With Disabilities

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Representatives of the CPD, the Utah Developmental Disabilities Council and the Utah Regional Leadership Education in Neurodevelopmental Disabilities (URLEND) program came together earlier this month to stay in touch with Utah’s Congressional delegation.

They attended the Disability Policy Seminar in Washington, DC and also spent some time on Capitol Hill.

It was a valuable experience for URLEND trainee Terisa Gabrielsen, who is involved in URLEND’s autism enhancement track. As the group planned out its visits on Capitol Hill, Terisa and fellow trainee Michelle Villalobos were assigned to speak on autism.

Teresa is a school psychology doctoral student from the University of Utah, and her involvement in autism-specific training through the LEND program gave made the visit important to her. “Our goal was to get support for the reauthorization of the Combating Autism Act and the Autism Treatment Acceleration Act,” she said.

She spoke specifically on how an interdisciplinary, multifaceted approach to autism is just starting to take hold in Utah through URLEND. The program’s autism-specific training is funded through the Combating Autism Act Initiative. URLEND trains post-graduate students and professionals to get a more complete picture of health care for children and adolescents with disabilities. The program is co-directed by Dr. Judith Holt.

The visit’s purpose was to make sure the reauthorizations and other issues were on the Utah delegation’s radar, said CPD Policy Analyst Jeff Sheen. “We were very much listened to. ... It’s always a good opportunity to connect.”

The URLEND trainees went in with a fact sheet and a plan. They came away with some valuable experience. They met face-to-face with Representative Jim Matheson and with staff members of four other Utah representatives and senators. Terisa came away impressed with how easy it was to communicate with them. “You can talk to your congressman if you make an appointment. They’re a lot more accessible than you think.”

Other tools that she found helpful were the fact sheet and a good, working understanding of the issues. Even better is a solution to suggest and an idea of how to fund it.

The group benefited from the expertise of its members, including Utah Developmental Disabilities Council Legislative Member Paul Ray, a state representative from Clearfield who sits on the Health and Human Services Appropriations Subcommittee of the Utah Legislature. Also present was URLEND faculty member Janice Palumbos, who teaches genetics.

As for Terisa, the Washington visit probably won’t be the last time she talks to policy makers, though her next efforts will be closer to home.

“It was kind of exciting,” she said.