



## **Technical Assistance and In-Person Support and Advocacy**

Vermont Family Network's (VFN) mission is to empower and support all Vermont families of children with special needs. We do this by Giving a Strong Start, Lifting Family Voices, and Advancing Inclusive Communities. Our work also informs and involves professionals interested in the healthy development and education of children and youth with disabilities and special health needs. We are Vermont's federally-designated Parent Training and Information Center, the Family-to-Family Health Information Center, and the Vermont chapter of both Family Voices and Parent-to-Parent USA. We have been serving Vermont families and the professionals who work with them for more than 30 years.

As the state's Parent Training and Information Center, VFN encourages parents to educate and empower themselves in order to effectively advocate for their own children and family. Toward this end, we offer individualized assistance, workshops, printed materials, a resource-rich website, an annual conference, and co-facilitate the Vermont Leadership Series for individuals with disabilities and the family members who support them. Our Family Support Consultants are skilled parents with lived experience navigating complex systems associated with their children's disabilities. Parents who contact us are provided with information which could include:

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

Through our statewide Helpline, our Family Support Consultants can provide technical assistance, support, and resource information based on the questions and concerns of the family. We can assist families to better understand and navigate the special education process, the healthcare system, and their rights within those processes.

Because our goal is to empower families to advocate on their own behalf, VFN *does not* generally accompany parents to One Plan/Individualized Education Program (IEP) meetings or mediation conferences, *except in extraordinary circumstances*. Based on staff availability and with enough advance notice to allow for proper meeting preparation we can, when appropriate, provide IEP meeting support by phone or video conferencing. Last year, we received well over 4,000 telephone calls from families seeking technical assistance. Many of those families requested support at their IEP meetings or mediations. Unfortunately, due to our limited resources and staff availability it is rare that we can provide in- person support for IEP meetings.

In addition, VFN does not provide individualized technical assistance 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 Helpline, 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 technical assistance and limits the likelihood of generating documents that may result in the unauthorized practice of law.

VFN employees are not attorneys and do not provide legal advice. VFN'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.