

FAMILY VOICES[®]
National Center for
Family♥Professional Partnerships



PROMISING PRACTICES IN CULTURAL COMPETENCE:
Statewide Parent Advocacy Network (New Jersey)

For almost 30 years, the Statewide Parent Advocacy Network (SPAN) has been committed to empowering parents of children with disabilities and special healthcare needs and improving the health and well-being of families across New Jersey. As NJ's "one-stop" for families across education, health/mental health, and human services, SPAN's mission is to provide families with the resources, training, and support. SPAN's goal is to provide families with the knowledge, skills, and confidence to advocate for themselves and ensure that their children receive the care they need to lead healthy, happy lives.

NEW JERSEY COMMUNITIES

Given the state's position bordering one of the nation's major urban centers, NJ is one of the most diverse states in the country. According to a recent census, 13% of the state's population is African American, 13% Hispanic, and 6% Asian. Additionally, 21% of the population is foreign-born and roughly 25% consider themselves to be "language minorities." 15% of NJ residents speak Spanish and 8% speak an Asian or South Asian language.

Additional statistics reflect a population of which nearly one quarter is under the age of 18 and 11% live below the poverty line. Considered collectively, these statistics represent a state with considerable racial, ethnic, linguistic, and cultural diversity. As such, it is reasonable to presume that the parents and families of children with significant physical, mental, or emotional disabilities will require an equally diverse organization to turn to for support, education, and advocacy.

ESSENTIAL ELEMENTS:

Provision of language access: Given the significantly diverse population of New Jersey, language access is one of the biggest keys to SPAN's success. The center has made a considerable effort to employ staff with strong language skills, presently able to speak 10 languages, and an easily accessible board member who is fluent in Arabic. Additionally, SPAN maintains a strong relationship with parent partners who add an additional 4 languages to their "language bank."

Written materials are translated by bilingual parents and then tested with parents who speak the language to ensure that they are easily understood. Materials are generally printed with English on one side and the other language on the reverse side so parents who are not fluent in their language of origin or English can access information in both languages. Other efforts to expand language access include:

- Written materials available in a digital or print format in English, Spanish, Russian, Chinese, Hindi, Korean, and Portuguese.
- Distribution of translated SPAN materials in non-English speaking communities.
- A google translate plug-in for the SPAN website that is capable of translating the site into more than 100 languages.
- Strong efforts to collaborate with immigrant service providers and other community organizations that can help SPAN reach a wider, more diverse audience.
- Workshops and trainings regularly offered in Spanish and English, with additional trainings offered throughout the year in languages other than English.
- A strong working relationship with a 24/7 language line.
- Willingness to contract with translators willing to facilitate workshops or train-the-trainers seminars.
- Staff-led periodic self-assessments on cultural and linguistic competence, language access, trauma-informed care, and family-centered services periodically to ensure that they are keeping up with the needs of families.
- A goal of having each new document translated within two months of publication.

Office environments support the diversity of families: SPAN's main office is located in Newark, NJ, a low-income community with many families of color, a large immigrant population, and with people who have varying degrees of English language proficiency. Additionally, SPAN has representatives and satellite offices located throughout the state in order to meet the demands of families and children including on NJ's joint military base. Efforts to create a welcome and diverse office include:

- A diverse staff that reflects the racial, ethnic, and cultural diversity of children and families seeking services, including 60% African American, Latina, South Asian, and American Indian. Our leadership team is over 80% of color.
- Completion of the Office for Women's Health Trauma Informed Care for Diverse Women self-assessment and used the results to be more family-friendly.
- Posters, brochures, and other materials that reflect a broad array of children, families, and providers.
- Social media and outreach materials that reflect racial, ethnic, and cultural diversity.
- Materials offered at different levels of difficulty to accommodate those with varying literacy skills.

Staff and partnerships reflect diverse populations: As previously noted, SPAN staff is comprised of multiple ethnicities, races, and includes a mix of men and women. Moreover, SPAN staff is made up almost entirely of parents who first came to SPAN seeking services and support for their families and children. This gives SPAN staff unique insights into the needs and wants of diverse parents, children, and families.

SPAN has a wide network of parent and community partners across the state that participates in and facilitates workshops within their communities. SPAN is a member of the NJ Statewide Network for Cultural Competence and helps facilitate its annual statewide conference. Further, SPAN makes a strong effort to offer events, trainings, and workshops that are accessible by public transportation, thus easing the financial burden on families and increasing their opportunities for collaboration. SPAN makes learning opportunities available during the day, evenings, and weekends, with simultaneous translation in multiple languages available upon request, as well as on-line in English and Spanish.

Connecting families to other families with shared experiences & similar backgrounds: Facilitating parent partnerships and mentoring opportunities is at the core of SPAN’s mission. They achieve this objective, in part, by offering trainings within communities, but also in the following ways:

- Matching parents and families on a child’s diagnosis, and also on other shared experiences and demographics like location, race and ethnicity, and language.
- Using funds from health and education grants to conduct regular support groups for immigrants, offering informal opportunities for families and parents to connect.
- Offering a *Grandparents as Caregivers* group focused largely on African American and Latino parents.
- Facilitating regional parent leadership groups across NJ to bring parents together for collaboration and knowledge-sharing.
- Hosting an annual father’s conference to ensure the special needs of fathers are addressed.

Providing opportunities for diverse families to share their opinions and feedback: SPAN places a heavy emphasis on constituent/parent feedback to ensure that families and children in need remain at the center of the conversation. SPAN conducts focus groups in multiple languages on a regular basis to ensure that the organization is keeping up with family needs as well as changes in demographics and industry trends. Additionally, SPAN consults with external evaluators to receive an unbiased assessment that has improved their ability to reach marginalized communities.

STEPS FOR SUCCESS

- Emphasize the racial, ethnic, and cultural diversity of staff to foster a welcoming and inclusive atmosphere and reflect the growing diversity of children and families.
- See every family, regardless of race, ethnicity, language, literacy level, or socio-economic status, as a leader – whether in their family, neighborhood, community, state, or nation. Partner with, learn from, and follow the lead of diverse families in designing, implementing, and evaluating services.
- Continue to expand understandings of “diversity” to include aspects beyond those related to race or ethnicity, including gender, sexual orientation, and income.
- Emphasize parent partners and encourage parents and families to connect with others from different racial, ethnic, and cultural backgrounds.
- Engage staff in self-assessments and use outside evaluations to ensure the highest level of culturally appropriate behavior among staff and partners.

WHAT FAMILIES SAY:

“SPAN provided information that was supportive of me as a person, as an individual and as a parent. SPAN nurtured my wounded spirit and helped me on the road to healing by giving me information that was relevant to my life circumstances. I was mentored by individuals who were credible, knowledgeable and could serve as role models for me. I was able to network with a diverse group of people going through similar struggles like myself and share stories of victory and triumph. What really helped was SPAN’s belief in me and confidence that I had the ability to not only advocate for my own child but go beyond that by testifying on behalf of others, and writing letters on helping social systems coordinate their services in a way that could truly help families. SPAN showed me the big picture and how, by doing my part, I could make a difference not just for me but for others.” (African-American parent)

"I did not know how to help my child before. I thought I could never live a life even close to normal... thank you for understanding my family's circumstances, thank you for creating learning opportunities and transporting me there, thank you for lending me your voice because I did not speak the language, thank you for helping me find my voice and learn how to speak for my child and family." (Spanish speaking mother)

"Your planning and support helped our enrollment assisters to more effectively reach faith-based partners, while providing great assistance to individuals with language barriers who would have otherwise had great difficulty enrolling." (CMS NY Regional Office)

NEXT STEPS

"SPAN is committed to continuous quality improvement including in appropriately serving the full range of our state's diverse families. An important population SPAN is beginning to target now are New Jersey's Native American communities. While New Jersey does not have any federally-recognized tribes, there are New Jersey-based tribal nations, including the Nanticoke Lenni-Lenape, Powhatan Renape, and Ramapough Lenape/Lunaape, as well as Native American families from other tribal nations. SPAN will be working with the Native American Parent Technical Assistance Center housed at EPICS and the New Jersey Commission on American Indian Affairs to develop and implement a plan to more effectively reach and serve families from these communities."

(Diana MTK Autin, Executive Co-Director, SPAN)



*Statewide Parent
Advocacy Network*

is a Family Voices State Affiliate Organization and a Family-to-Family Health Information Center.

Statewide Parent Advocacy Network • 35 Halsey St., Fourth Floor, Newark, NJ 07102

Phone: 973-642-8100 • Fax: 973-642-8080 • Toll-free: 1-800-654-SPAN • <http://www.spanadvocacy.org/>

Family Voices National Center for Family/Professional Partnerships • Mailing Address: P.O. Box 37188, Albuquerque, NM 87176
Physical Address: 3701 San Mateo Blvd NE, Suite 103, Albuquerque, NM 87110 • Phone: 505-872-4774 • Toll Free: 888-835-5669
Fax: 505-872-4780 Internet: www.familyvoices.org • www.fv-ncfpp.org • www.familyvoices.org/facebook

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