



TREES NETWORK May 2026 Newsletter

Student Advocacy 101 Meeting Parent and Family Meeting

Monday, May 4, 2026 7 PM - 8 PM Monday,

Join us virtually on **Monday, May 4, from 7:00–8:00 PM** for our monthly Parent and Family Support Meeting. In May, Melissa Skiffen, Coordinator of Individual Advocacy and Supported Decision Making, will be joining us to discuss advocacy. She will talk about what advocates do, when it is time to call in an advocate, what information an advocate may need to know, and general tips when working with advocates. Anyone interested in attending can register by contacting Vicki Donne at donne@rmu.edu, Deanna Hiltz at hiltzd@rmu.edu, or by completing the Google Registration form (<https://forms.gle/nwqQGBubkVACk3TJ8>) Upon registration, registrants will be sent a Google Meets calendar invitation.



Important Update: Summer Pause, Continued Support

We will be taking a break from parent and family support meetings from June through August. During this time, the Trees Network will remain available to provide support and resources. If you need assistance, please contact Vicki at donne@rmu.edu or Deanna at hiltzd@rmu.edu. As we look ahead to the upcoming school year, we welcome your input. Please feel free to email us with ideas for future meetings or topics you would find helpful.



SAVE THE DATE! Upcoming Special Education Conference

On Monday, October 12, 2026, the RMU Trees Network will host its annual Special Education Conference. This year's event will be held virtually to encourage greater participation from special educators, administrators, paraprofessionals, and related service staff seeking professional development on key topics in special education. We hope you can join us!

Trees Assistive Technology Device Center Open Lab Day

The Trees Network operates an Assistive Technology (AT) Device Center for students and families. Assistive Technology includes any item, equipment, software, or product system that helps increase, maintain, or improve the functional abilities of individuals with disabilities (IDEA, 2004). AT devices can range from low-tech items, such as pencil grips, to high-tech solutions, like speech recognition software.

Please note that the AT Device Center will be closed for Open Lab Days beginning Monday, May 4, and will reopen at the start of Fall 2026. The lab is still available by appointment.

Featured IEP Resources - Parent Participation

Each month, we will highlight one key component of the Individualized Education Program (IEP) and share resources to support understanding and implementation. These monthly spotlights are designed to break the IEP into manageable parts, clarify roles and responsibilities, and provide tools that can be immediately applied in classrooms and meetings. By focusing on one detail at a time, we aim to strengthen collaboration, improve consistency, and ensure IEPs are meaningful support for students. This month's spotlight is on **Parent Participation**.

Parent participation is a foundational requirement of the IEP process and a key factor in student success. Under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), parents are equal members of the IEP team and have the right to be involved in all decisions regarding their child's special education services.

When families are meaningfully involved:

- Students show stronger academic and social outcomes
- IEP goals better reflect real-life needs and priorities
- Services are more consistent across home and school
- Trust and communication between teams improves
- Compliance and accountability are strengthened

Effective participation goes beyond attendance at meetings. It includes:

- Being invited early and provided adequate notice of meetings
- Having opportunities to ask questions and share concerns
- Being involved in developing present levels, goals, and services
- Participating in progress monitoring discussions
- Receiving updates on student growth and challenges throughout the year

Families can support their participation by:

- Writing down questions or concerns before meetings
- Sharing observations from home (strengths, challenges, patterns)
- Requesting clarification when something is unclear
- Keeping copies of all IEP documents and progress reports
- Communicating regularly with teachers or case managers
- Bringing a support person or advocate if helpful

Parent participation is not a single moment in the IEP process. It is an ongoing partnership. When schools and families work together, IEPs become more than compliance documents; they become plans that support student growth and success.

Upcoming Events Around the Area

The RMU Trees Network is a member of the Special Needs Consortium, a group of amazing service providers in the Pittsburgh area. The consortium exists to provide a forum where all service providers can network and opportunities can be shared, promoted, and advocated for to increase awareness of resources available to the community. For a full listing of member events, visit their [website](https://www.specialneedsconsortium.org/upcoming-events) (<https://www.specialneedsconsortium.org/upcoming-events>). We hope you will find some of these highlighted events of interest to you.

May Events and Experiences Calendar at Always B Smiling

https://calendar.google.com/calendar/u/0/embed?src=experiences@alwaysbsmiling.org&ctz=America/New_York

Band Together upcoming events:

- **May 7th at 6PM - Music Therapy**
Moondog's, 378 Freeport Rd, Blawnox, PA
Register: <https://bandtogetherpgh.org/event/music-therapy-moondogs-11/>
- **May 10th 2:00PM - 5:00PM - Open Mic**
Moondog's, 378 Freeport Rd, Blawnox, PA
Register:
<https://bandtogetherpgh.org/event/live-autism-friendly-open-mic-band-together-clubhouse-41/>

May 9th and June 6th from 10AM-11AM - Bridge's Adaptive Field Hockey at Brookline Rec Center

Bridges Adaptive Field Hockey, a new adaptive, disability-inclusive field hockey team serving the greater Pittsburgh area. Bridges is the first adaptive field hockey team in Western PA and the Great Lakes Region. Lydia Smeltz is the founder and head coach of the team.

Individuals can participate for one date or all three. More details are included in the sign-up: https://glrfieldhockey.playbookapi.com/programs/more_info/class_package/62507/

May 29, 2026, 10:00 AM – 11:30 AM - Family Medical Support Assistance (FMSA) Webinar for Individuals and Families - PA Department of Human Services

In 2022, the Office of Developmental Programs (ODP) created a new waiver service, Family Medical Support Assistance (FMSA). ODP is scheduling webinars to explain what this service entails, how it works, and who it applies to. ODP is encouraging individuals and families to attend this webinar to learn about this waiver service. There will be time during the webinar for questions to be asked directly to ODP.

<https://register.gotowebinar.com/register/6015881568769026652>

The Woodlands Teen/Young Adult Summer Camps

Occurring from 3:30PM on Sunday through 11:00AM on Friday, these inclusive camp experiences are designed for individuals ages 13–24. Participants are served dinner on Sunday, all three meals Monday through Thursday, and breakfast on Friday. All programs may also be attended as day-camp experiences, with daily check-in beginning at 9:45 AM and pick-up as late as 8:30 PM.

- **June 7-12:** Teen/YA Camp Woodlands: (General camp experience)
- **June 21-26:** Notes from the Heart (music camp)
- **July 12-17:** Maker Camp: (where science, creativity, and teamwork come together)
- **August 2-7:** Camp Bloom: (Transition/life skills based camp)

The Woodlands accepts out of pocket or private pay, ESY, and waiver funding. They also have a scholarship program called the “Wonderfund” to assist with cost, available upon request. PPS Students may utilize CCS Hours. Registration : mywoodlands.org

June 23rd - June 25th from 9AM - 12PM - Inclusive Summer Camp at Hilltop Horizons

Our Summer Camp offers participants the opportunity to connect with horses through a blend of mounted and unmounted activities, designed to build confidence, coordination, teamwork, and joy all in a supportive barn environment. Each camp day may feature:

- Mounted riding activities focused on balance, coordination, following directions, and confidence-building
- Un-mounted horse activities such as grooming, tacking, leading, and horse observation
- Barn-based games and group challenges that encourage teamwork and communication
- Hands-on learning experiences including basic horse care, barn routines, and safety awareness
- Creative activities and movement breaks to support sensory regulation and engagement

All activities are adapted to meet participants where they are and are led by our experienced, PATH Intl. staff and trained volunteers. [Inclusive Summer Camp | Hilltop Horizons](http://hilltophorizons.org/inclusive-summer-camp)

July 7th-9th and July 14th-16th -AAC Adventures with Hilltop Horizons

The program designed for kids ages 4-12 emphasizes a total communication approach, honoring all modalities while consistently supporting AAC as a primary system. Caregivers may also be included through coaching sessions to support carryover into home and school environments. Group facilitators model AAC throughout the day, focusing on: core vocabulary in meaningful contexts, expanding utterances (from single words to phrases), initiation and turn-taking, social communication with peers, and functional communication (requesting, commenting, protesting, directing). <https://hilltophorizons.org/aac-adventures>

July 8th - August 12th THRIVE Wellness Group at Hilltop Horizons

THRIVE for Teens (ages 13-17) will be guided by a licensed occupational therapy practitioner and experienced equine specialist. Participants will engage in ground-based experiences with horses such as grooming, leading, observing herd behavior, and reflective exercises that promote mindfulness, emotional regulation, confidence, and communication skills, supporting positive routines and meaningful daily participation. Each week will focus on one of the following themes:

T – Trust– *Developing safe, meaningful relationships with horses and peers, supporting social connection and daily participation*

H – Humility– *Recognizing personal limits, embracing learning, and fostering adaptive coping strategies*

R – Resilience– *Strengthening the ability to recover from challenges and maintain participation in valued activities*

I – Insight– *Building self-awareness, emotional regulation, and understanding of personal strengths and challenges*

V – Vitality– *Enhancing motivation, energy, and engagement in meaningful daily routines and activities*

E – Empowerment– *Increasing autonomy, choice-making, and confidence to actively participate in life roles*

July 26th through 31st - Camp HERO 2026

15–25 amazing counselors join campers for this immersive, activity-filled overnight experience. Camp HERO is guided by a dedicated board of directors with experience working with Deaf and hard-of-hearing individuals. Their Camp Director oversees day-to-day operations, supported by an on-site Camp Nurse and certified sign language interpreters are available 24/7 to ensure everyone feels safe, supported, and included. Registration for 2026 is now open! <https://www.gocamphero.org/>

July 28th - July 31st - AAC Summer Camp

ICAN Talk AAC Summer Camp is a 3.5 day program of interactive, fun-filled activities designed specifically for children and adults who use alternative and augmentative communication (AAC) systems to communicate. Our program gives these individuals opportunities to communicate with other AAC users, develop their language skills, and use their AAC devices in new and exciting ways. The camp includes an AAC training seminar for parents, excursions to local attractions, and optional one-on-one consultations with clinical experts in AAC. For additional information, contact Christine at clepore@aacinstitute.org

DON'T FORGET TO THINK OF YOUR LOCAL LIBRARY FOR EVENTS

- **Allegheny Library Association Programs & Events**
(<https://aclalibraries.org/explore/library-programs-and-events/>)
- **Beaver County Library Systems**
(<https://www.beaverlibraries.org/system-wide-events>)
- **Butler County Federated Library Systems** (<https://www.bcfls.org/libraries>)
- **Washington County Library Systems** (<https://www.washlibs.org/>)
- **Westmoreland County Libraries** (<https://www.wclibraries.org/>)

Council Events

- The Pittsburgh/Allegheny County Local Interagency Coordinating Council (LICC) is a group of families, professionals, and community members who work to improve the delivery of Early Intervention services for young children with developmental delays and disabilities. Their next meeting will be held on Tuesday, May 26, 2026 at 9AM. To register, email strocheck@afit.org.
- The Allegheny County Local Task Force will meet on Wednesday, May 6, 2026. To join, visit <https://www.ltf3.org/meetings>

Resources for Parents and Educators

The Network provides resources for parents and teachers and these resources can be found at the [RMU Trees Network Website](https://donne94.wixsite.com/rmu-trees-network) (<https://donne94.wixsite.com/rmu-trees-network>). Information on the Network and the previous newsletters are posted on the RMU website <https://www.rmu.edu/academics/provost/trees>. In each newsletter we provide links to resources related to the topics discussed in our parent meetings and workshops as well as other information that may be helpful to families, schools, and the community. **Below are the links to the summer camps and programs, which was our topic covered by each of these amazing organizations at our April 6th meeting.**



- **The Woodlands Teen/Young Adult Summer Camps-** Occurring from 3:30PM on Sunday through 11:00AM on Friday, these inclusive camp experiences are designed for individuals ages 13–24. Participants are served dinner on Sunday, all three meals Monday through Thursday, and breakfast on Friday. All programs may also be attended as day-camp experiences, with daily check-in beginning at 9:45 AM and pick-up as late as 8:30 PM. The Woodlands accepts out of pocket or private pay, ESY, and waiver funding. They also have a scholarship program called the “Wonderfund” to assist with cost, available upon request. PPS Students may utilize CCS Hours. Registration : <https://mywoodlands.org/programs/summer-camps/>
- **AAC Adventures at Hilltop Horizons** - AAC Adventures is a play-based, enrichment program designed for children who use Augmentative and Alternative Communication (AAC) systems (e.g., speech-generating devices, communication boards). Led by Speech Therapist, Maureen O’Brien, MS, CCC-SLP, and integrating equine interactions and the outdoor environment, children participate in structured and semi-structured activities such as grooming, leading, barn routines, and collaborative games - all embedded with intentional communication opportunities. The program emphasizes a total communication approach, honoring all modalities while consistently supporting AAC as a primary system. Caregivers may also be included through coaching sessions to support carryover into home and school environments. <https://hilltophorizons.org/aac-adventures>
- **Thrive for Teens at Hilltop Horizons** - THRIVE groups are 90-minute weekly equine-assisted wellness groups designed specifically for different age groups (e.g. pre-teens, teens, young adults, etc.) that focus on six core themes of social-emotional growth. This unique program combines evidence-informed practices with the therapeutic benefits of horses to help participants build emotional resilience, self-awareness, coping strategies, and meaningful life participation skills in a supportive, nature-based setting. <https://hilltophorizons.org/thrive-groups>
- **Inclusive Summer Camp at Hilltop Horizons** - Summer Camp offers participants the opportunity to connect with horses through a blend of mounted and unmounted activities, designed to build confidence, coordination, teamwork, and joy all in a supportive barn environment. All activities are adapted to meet participants where they are and are led by our experienced, PATH Intl. staff and trained volunteers. Information and Registration: [Inclusive Summer Camp | Hilltop Horizons](#)
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Information: [Upcoming events - ICAN™ Talk Clinic of the AAC Institute](#)
- **Always B Smiling** - Always B Smiling is an organization located in the South Hills of Pittsburgh that provides inclusive support, resources, programs, and gathering spaces for families of children and young adults with disabilities and health challenges. From community outreach to seasonal events, from activities at ‘B Town’ to trail rides on

adaptive bikes, we provide opportunities in safe environments that are welcoming and comfortable. Created by Dean and Kristin Huibregtse, Always B Smiling has become a living legacy of their late son Bennett, whose ever-present smile is now evident in all those touched by the organization. Information about the organization: [Always B Smiling Inc - Home](#)

- **Camp HERO** - Camp HERO (Here Everyone Really is One) was founded on the belief that every child deserves a camp experience without communication barriers. Each summer, 35–65 children and teens who are deaf or hard of hearing come together for a week of adventure, friendship, and fun at Camp Victory in Millville, PA. Our campers enjoy all the classic camp activities of swimming, climbing, crafts, campfires, while connecting in a community that celebrates all forms of communication. Camp HERO is guided by a dedicated board of directors with experience working with Deaf and hard-of-hearing individuals. Our Camp Director oversees day-to-day operations, supported by an on-site Camp Nurse and certified sign language interpreters are available 24/7 to ensure everyone feels safe, supported, and included.
[About Us — Camp HERO](#)

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[RMU Trees Website](https://donne94.wixsite.com/rmu-trees-network) (<https://donne94.wixsite.com/rmu-trees-network>)

[RMU Facebook](https://www.facebook.com/RMUtrees/) (<https://www.facebook.com/RMUtrees/>)

