

**The guest speaker at the November 6, 2016 General Membership Meeting of the Home and School Association was Lauralyn Lewis, Director of Advocacy for CT DDS Families First.**

Families First is a nonprofit advocacy organization led by families whose loved ones receive DDS services or are eligible for services. She is the DDS Regional Advisory and Planning Council Vice Chair – South Region. Her twenty-five year old son has Down syndrome and is a client of DDS.

Lauralyn gave a brief summary of how Families First was founded. The leadership had been active with other advocacy groups at the Capitol in previous years and felt a new approach was needed. She has been active in advocacy, at the state level, since 2012 when \$30 million was cut from the Department of Developmental Services.

Families First is in Hartford frequently educating legislators on the needs of those who have intellectual and developmental disabilities (I/DD). Ms. Lewis stressed the importance of families meeting with their legislators to share their stories. She has seen firsthand what a difference that makes, but more families need to get involved.

Families First worked with legislators to write and pass Senate Bill 294 in the 2016 session. This bill requires DDS to inform families of the existence and function of the Regional Advisory and Planning Councils (RACs). These councils were originally put into statute by the legislature in 1973. The function of the councils affords families a scheduled forum to communicate the needs of the I/DD population with the DDS regional directors in the three regions. Unfortunately, the statute didn't mandate that DDS share this information with families and few families knew they existed. Lauralyn and others feel that, had families been actively engaged since 1973, DDS might not have suffered the level of funding cuts we have seen (currently there are approximately 2,100 individuals on the residential waiting list, 100 individuals on a first ever day services waiting list and funding for high-school grads is becoming less certain each year).

There are different groups advocating for the best care and services for the I/DD population. While the various groups have the same goals, each group has a different perspective on how to achieve their goals. Lauralyn has been interested in bringing all groups together to work in partnership since 2013. She currently sits on the Council of Developmental Services subcommittee whose task it is to find the common goals of the various groups. The hope is that the legislature will hear a unified message in the 2017 legislative session.

Discussions took place with Lauralyn and the General Membership. Lauralyn urged all to contact their Legislators, let them know your story. It's important that our message is heard by as many legislators as possible.