

INSTITUTE FOR DISABILITY STUDIES

ANNUAL REPORT

2024-2025



ABOUT US

MISSION

The Institute for Disability Studies (IDS) strives to positively affect the lives of Mississippians with developmental and other disabilities, and their families across the lifespan, by promoting increased independence, productivity, and community integration.

EMPHASIS AREAS OVERVIEW

COMMUNITY LIVING	EDUCATION AND CAPACITY BUILDING	FAMILY ENGAGEMENT
Community Living staff support Mississippians with disabilities and their families providing pre-employment training, skill development, housing resources, and case management, while promoting inclusive activities that foster independence and community engagement.	Education and Capacity Building staff promote quality learning experiences, adaptive sports, and collaborative volunteer opportunities for Mississippians with disabilities of all ages in many educational settings, contributing to independence and enhanced quality of life.	Family Engagement staff collaborate with families of individuals with disabilities across Mississippi to provide special education advocacy; offering education and advocacy, technical assistance to school districts; and resource navigation empowering families to actively participate in shared decision-making.



INSTITUTE FOR DISABILITY STUDIES
THE UNIVERSITY OF SOUTHERN MISSISSIPPI

OUR TEAM

Currently, IDS employs **23** full-time professional, one part-time support, and four part-time staff members. The IDS team represents multiple interdisciplinary backgrounds with expertise in developmental and other disabilities, ranging across the lifespan. Staff members' educational and professional backgrounds include, but are not limited to: adaptive recreation, adult education, art therapy, assistive technology, business, child and family development, communications, computer information systems, counseling, education, higher education administration, psychology, public health, rehabilitation counseling, self-advocacy, social work, and special education.

2024-2025 AT A GLANCE

During the 2024-2025 fiscal year, IDS successfully obtained **24** grants and contracts. A total of **24** classroom students, graduate assistants, and practicum students received over **300** hours each of preservice training. Technical assistance was provided to **1,894** individuals and **2,713** people participated in outreach training. Direct clinical services were provided to **30** individuals, and other direct services were provided to **4,377** individuals. This year, **78** new products were developed, **30** existing products continue to be used, and state, regional, national, and international conference presentations were created with more than **58,531** items disseminated.

Additionally, **26** programs were implemented across the Institute's three focus areas.

IDS LEVERAGED
\$3,139,171
IN EXTERNAL FUNDING

MATCHING CORE DOLLARS

1^{TO} 5.06



COMMUNITY LIVING



PROJECT RECOVERY HOUSING DRIVE

IDS's Community Living area focused on employment, housing, quality assurance, and community engagement.

Housing Initiatives

- Project Recovery Rapid Re-Housing
- Calm Harbor

Employment Initiatives

- Autism Employment Specialists
- Customized Employment Specialists
- Job Extravaganza
- Getting Employable Today (GET) Work Ready
- Transition of Teens to Adult Life (ToTAL)

Quality Assurance Initiatives

- Serving Together, Encouraging Peers with Opportunities and Understanding Today (STEP OUT)
- Starting Today Empowering Peers through Uniting and Participating (STEP UP) programs

Additionally, the Neuro Community Care Wounded Warrior Independence Program focused on community engagement for veterans.



SUMMER ENRICHMENT ACADEMY

The ToTAL Program delivered continuous training and technical assistance with a focus on pre-employment transition services, reaching **603** youth and young adults. Key initiatives included the Summer Enrichment Academy, Self-Determination Training Series, PEERs Neurodiverse Socialization Groups, and the Advocacy Ambassadors Program.

Matthew's Journey: An IDS Success Story



Matthew, an 18-year-old student at Mississippi Gulf Coast Community College, is a powerful example of how IDS's Transition of Teens to Adult Life (ToTAL) program helps young adults with disabilities transition successfully into employment and postsecondary education. Through participation in IDS's Summer Enrichment Academy, Matthew received hands-on employment readiness training, which included resume development, interview preparation, and workplace professionalism, all of which prepared him for a paid internship at AccuFab in July 2024.

Upon completion of his internship, Matthew was offered employment with AccuFab, transitioning from a paid internship to a part-time job position with flexible hours during the school year. Matthew has been guaranteed a full-time job after completing his associate's degree in welding.



EDUCATION AND CAPACITY BUILDING

During fiscal year 2025, Education and Capacity Building consisted of the following programs:

- Leadership in Neurodevelopmental and Related Disabilities (LEND) Southern Miss
- Preservice Enhancement for Doctoral Occupational Therapy Students
- Project Success Through Assistive Rehabilitative Technology (START) Parent and Student Supports
- Reaching, Including, Supporting, and Educating (RISE) To The Top!
- Southeast ADA Center
- Southern Miss Peer Mentoring Program

This area included eight health and wellness related projects such as Learn the Signs. Act Early, Ambassador Program; I Want to Help: Emergency Management Training; Expanding Public Health Workforce; Project START; Pathway Weavers, and adaptive sports programs for wheelchair basketball, softball, and tennis.

RISE, an inclusive postsecondary education program, continued throughout the fall and spring, with a total of **6** students: **2** juniors, **1** sophomore, and **3** freshmen.

The Special Olympics (SO) Southern Miss program engaged **76** athletes and coaches (university students) in basketball, football, and cheerleading across **57** hours of activities. IDS adaptive sports specialists provided wheelchair tennis training and support to **108** individuals, including people with disabilities, families, and professionals.



PATHWAY WEAVERS



SO COLLEGE

Training and technical assistance was delivered to **443** special education and vocational rehabilitation professionals through transition to adulthood initiatives. Additionally, over **3,300** youth, young adults, families, and service providers received support in educational and employment-related services across all education-focused projects and councils.

RISE To The Top!: An IDS Success Story

Our story starts in 2006. After many prayer-filled days, we were called to travel to St. Petersburg, Russia, to adopt a precious little boy who would not have much of a future if he remained there. A few years after being here, in his forever home, he was diagnosed with Autism. The “he” in this story is our son, Will. As you can imagine, being a special needs kid in this day and time is eventful. There are some very good days and some very bad ones. Bad days include bullying, seeing your peers invited to parties while you are left out, uncontrollable tantrums, and not understanding why these things are happening. Good days are when people go out of their way to make him feel special, allow him to live out his dreams, and special programs that make him feel like everyone else, such as RISE To The Top! at USM. Will was accepted into this program and is about to finish his first year as a college student, something my wife Kacee and I never thought possible.



Will loves all things related to audio/visual production. USM has an awesome program for this. The staff and students have been exceptional with Will. He was able to complete his first college course in this field and is enrolled to complete more next year. To see his excitement each day when he is picked up from class is the brightest part of our day. It never gets old. RISE To The Top! is a tremendous program, not just for Will, but for all of those involved, which would not be available if not for IDS at USM. He has friends, classmates, and students on campus that know his name and make him feel a part of something bigger. He has joined and volunteered to help with production at the Baptist Student Union on USM's campus. He frequents the Payne Center on campus where he enjoys swimming, diving, and working out. He was so excited about university transportation and learned how to ride the bus to get around campus. He has participated in more community volunteer opportunities than I can name. He tells us all the time how much he loves going to USM because he feels like a real person and college student.

Next year, he will even get to complete an internship working as a camera operator at USM's local television station. This is his dream come true! In three more years, our son will complete his college education and get to walk/graduate just like a regular college student. This accomplishment will allow him to enter the job workforce and pursue a career in a field that he absolutely loves (and is very good at).

Russell
(Parent)

FAMILY ENGAGEMENT

Family Engagement initiatives centered on improving quality of life and advancing special education through these key projects:

- Special Education Family Advocacy Network (FAN)
- Family and Student Support

The FAN team launched **3** regional Family Cohort Networks, designed to connect families of children and youth receiving special education services with peers in their communities. These pilot cohorts currently include **28** families, professionals, and youth with disabilities. In addition to cohort development, FAN staff provided direct support to families statewide, offering:

- Reviews of special education documents
- Accessible summaries of educational and health records
- Advocacy during Individualized Education Program (IEP) and related meetings



FAMILY ADVOCACY NETWORK

668

Hours of technical assistance

108

Families benefitted

473

Professionals trained

Through these efforts, FAN delivered **668** hours of technical assistance, helping families and professionals develop accessible, meaningful IEPs. These services benefitted **108** families and **473** professionals across Mississippi.

FAN is committed to expanding access to community-based peer support for families navigating special education in Mississippi's public schools. FAN empowers families and students to actively participate in the creation and implementation of IEPs and Behavioral Intervention Plans (BIPs).

Family Advocacy Network: An IDS Success Story

Before connecting with the advocate from the USM program, I had no idea how individualized education programs (IEPs) worked or what my rights as a parent were in the special education process. I was completely overwhelmed. The school wanted to test my son on a Wednesday and have the IEP meeting that same Friday, giving me little to no time to understand what was happening or prepare for such an important decision about my child's education.



Thankfully, I reached out to my aunt, who told me about the advocate program. She helped me get in contact with the Family Advocacy Network at USM, and from that point forward, everything changed. My advocate was phenomenal. She explained every step of the process, helped me understand what should and should not be happening, and made sure I had access to the tools and resources needed to truly understand my rights.

Because of her guidance, I learned that I had the right to receive documentation before the meeting, that certain required team members needed to be present, and that I did not have to sign anything on the spot. She helped me find my voice and empowered me to speak up when something did not feel right. Without her support, I would have walked into that meeting completely unprepared and uninformed.

My advocate also gave me the resources and knowledge to navigate this process even when she was not present. One issue we had was with the school constantly sending home important documents in my child's backpack, even after I had made a formal request for them not to do that. Things would get lost, or they'd say, "Oh, we forgot about your request." My advocate helped me stand firm and hold the school accountable for respecting my requests as a parent.

Having her support helped me fight for my child's right to receive the proper education and tools needed to help him succeed and navigate his disability. Without my advocate, I would not have known that my child has just as many rights as any other student rights that need to be honored and protected. This program has been absolutely vital for me as a first-time parent of a child with special needs, and I am beyond grateful.

Jameshia
(Parent)

DIGITAL PRESENCE

Facebook posts focused on IDS's three emphasis areas news and events, with Mondays dedicated to Education and Capacity Building, Wednesdays focused on Community Living, and Friday posts emphasized Family Engagement. Throughout fiscal year 2024-2025, IDS had a total of **2,864** Facebook followers, **316** posts, and **169** Instagram posts (linked to the IDS Facebook account). Overall, the IDS website garnered **6,700** views by approximately **4,100** individuals.



316

Facebook posts



169

Instagram posts



6,700

Website views

PRINT MATERIALS

During fiscal year 2024-2025, IDS staff members disseminated approximately **58,531** print materials and media products, in addition to brochures and rack cards.

DURING FISCAL YEAR
2024-2025

58,531

PRINT MATERIALS AND
MEDIA PRODUCTS
DISSEMINATED



FUNDERS

IDS would like to thank the following funding agencies and private donors for the 2024-2025 fiscal year.

Administration on Community Living

Association of University Centers on Disabilities

Cadence Bank

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention

Mississippi Council on Developmental Disabilities

Mississippi Department of Employment Security

Mississippi Department of Rehabilitation Services

Mississippi Home Corporation

Neuro Community Care

Pinebelt Foundation

Syracuse University

University of Arkansas for Medical Sciences

US Department of Commerce

US Department of Education (Office of Special Education Programs)

US Department of Housing and Urban Development

Volunteer Mississippi



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