

SPAN's Policy re: Technical Assistance and In-Person Support and Advocacy

The SPAN Parent Advocacy Network is New Jersey's "one-stop" for families. Our mission is to empower families and inform and involve professionals interested in the healthy development and education of children. Our foremost commitment is to children and families with the greatest need due to disability or special health/mental health needs; material poverty or financial instability; discrimination (race, sex, language, immigrant status or homelessness, etc.); involvement in the foster care, child welfare, or juvenile justice systems; geographic location; or other special circumstances.

We house the Parent Training and Information Center (PTI), Family to Family Health Information Center (F2F), and many other projects that enable us to educate and support parents. SPAN provides statewide training and technical assistance for families of children birth to 26 with and without special needs.

I. SPAN encourages parents to become educated in order to effectively advocate for their own children and family. Toward this end, SPAN offers telephone and e-mail technical assistance (TA), workshops, printed materials, access to an award-winning website, and a biannual conference. Every parent, regardless of any of the above criteria, how many times they contact us, or their state service choice(s), is provided with the following information:

- a. Their rights and the rights of their child(ren) under the relevant education, health, child welfare, human services, or other laws;
- b. Any research-based best practices, if relevant, that might assist the parent in making decisions (i.e., for a child with challenging behavior, the research demonstrates conclusively that positive behavior supports is a more effective strategy than aversives, restraint, or seclusion);
- c. How to navigate the relevant system (i.e., how to go up the chain of command);
- d. Other relevant resources including, if requested, our list of free and fee-for-service attorneys as well as resources from national centers funded by the US Department of Education, US Department of Health and Human Services, etc.

Because we explain to parents how the procedures under the law and state regulations work, if a parent contacts SPAN demanding our assistance in helping them advocate for a particular choice of services in any system, we will let them know how the process works and give them information on effective strategies to begin a conversation with that service system. It is not part of our job as the PTI or F2F to tell a parent what to do to get a particular service they want; rather, it is to inform them of their rights, the proper processes/procedures, partnership and advocacy strategies, relevant research, and other resources. That is what we try to do with every parent, but that is not always what every parent is looking for.

II. While PTIs and F2Fs are not required to provide more intensive, in-person assistance, SPAN sets aside funding in several grants (including our PTI and F2F grants) to help parents with more intensive needs and/or with limited resources. Because we receive

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many more requests for in-person TA than we can accommodate, we prioritize our in-person TA based on several criteria:

1. Family's limited capacity to advocate on their own behalf due to limited literacy, limited English proficiency, and/or disability of the parent;
2. Extent of harm or potential harm being caused to the child (for example, a child out of school for a long period of time due to suspension, or a child being subjected to harmful restraints and aversives);
3. Known intractability (stubbornness) of the school district or other agency; and/or
4. Circumstance related to a major policy focus of SPAN.

Most of the in-person TA is actually provided based on the first two criteria.

III. Because our goal is to help families learn to advocate on their own behalf, SPAN generally *does not* accompany parents to IEP meetings, mediation conferences, or due process hearings *except in extraordinary circumstances*. In addition, SPAN has insufficient financial and personnel resources to accompany significant numbers of families to meetings.* For example, we received well over 30,000 telephone calls last year from families seeking technical assistance. Many of those families requested support at their IEP meetings, mediations, and/or due process hearings. SPAN's funding sources do not enable us to provide this service to families except in limited circumstances and only under certain projects, including:

- ***Family Resource Specialists*** — serves through Special Child Health Services as the single point of entry into the state case management system for children with special health care needs and disabilities. SPAN Family Resource Specialists housed at these Case Management Units and funded under our PTI and Family WRAP grants provide education and health-related case management and support for families whose children are registered with the SCHS Case Management Unit and who are referred to them for assistance by SCHS Case managers.
- ***Family to Family Health Information Center*** — provides intensive, wrap-around support to underserved families of children and youth with special healthcare needs, including immigrant/limited English proficient families, families of color, and low income families.
- ***Military Family 360 Support Project (MFS 360)*** — provides intensive, wrap-around support across systems to military families who have children with special needs.
- ***SPAN Resource Parent (SRP) Volunteer Program*** — provides trained individuals who volunteer to help families located in their own communities. SRPs *may* accompany parents to meetings, based on their level of expertise, or work schedule and other commitments. The majority of SRPs provide telephone TA only. (*Most SRPs work full-time and have their own children with special needs*).

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IV. Families who receive intensive in-person TA generally have two or more of the following features: immigrant or limited English proficient; parent with limited literacy or a disability; child involved in multiple systems (education, health, mental health, child welfare, juvenile justice); and/or low-income. *These examples translate into a relatively small number of families who are able to access in-person support by SPAN staff or volunteers at meetings, mediations, or hearings. SPAN's website provides multiple resources, and SPAN workshops are conducted throughout the state to support families.*

V. **SPAN employees are *NOT* attorneys and *DO NOT* provide legal advice.¹ SPAN'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.**

¹ Although several of SPAN's staff, including one of its Executive Co-Directors, *are* attorneys, they do not function in the capacity of an attorney in their SPAN work with families. The agencies federally funded to provide representation to families include Disability Rights NJ (800-922-7233 or 609-292-9742) and the Education Law Center (973-624-1815). Each agency has specific eligibility requirements.