

Tips for Parish Contacts
Parish Contact Meeting
October 6, 2018

1. Our Ministry

God has gifted you with a personal journey—for me personal health history gave me some experience with disability (I had JRA as a child, I've experienced a stroke, I have a daughter who lives with IA and other challenges). I believe those things were and are a part of my life for a reason: to be able to relate to others, to share my experience, to help others along their journey, and to improve systems to better aid people with disabilities.

2. Use your resources for information and referrals

Sister Kathleen- tools for parish contacts, training, other resources for special circumstances (i.e. there is always someone who knows more than you do)

Community organizations, ex. CIL, County offices, other support organizations, web sites, books (they are out there)

3. Communicate

Pastor: have an annual meeting, be mindful of other responsibilities, be patient, develop a plan (see tools mentioned above)

Parish staff and other ministry leaders, esp. new staff (receptionist is key), let them know what you do, stop in, remind)

4. Network Locally

Communicate to other ministries; be mindful of how your ministry interacts with others (ex. Health ministry, Extraordinary ministers to the sick but also distributing communion—celiac, etc)

If you are involved in other ministries, educate them—everyone is connected to disability—almost everyone has an experience of disability in their life (their own injury, a loved one, a friend, a cause they care about, (ex. Gospel Group), they are a resource to reach the people you are there to help.

5. Network Regionally

Engage with other parish contacts in your area—what programs are they running? What resources they use? Parish boundaries overlap, you may interact with some of the same individuals/families. Learn from what they do, what issues they are addressing (maybe better than you).

My township has a Disabled Persons Advisory Board, our main goal is to raise awareness about disability in the community and to be a resource reporting ADA violations in the community.

6. Parish Religious Education

Add inclusion facilitator to your role as Parish Contact. Because I have a child I wanted to enroll in my parish's PREP program, this was a natural role for me. Be available to the DRE for consultation, train PREP teachers to be sensitive to the needs of students with disabilities, how to support them, provide resources (Loyola Press Sacrament kits, etc). We've added teen student aides to help as 1:1 aides for children in PREP classes, an adult aide in class when necessary—retired special ed. teachers are terrific in this role. Encourage them that it can be done. Sister Kathleen has great resources for this! I put resources on thumb drives and gave them to all the PREP teachers, so they literally have them at the tips of their fingers. Even one teacher utilizing the resources is a victory.

7. Support Group

I host a monthly support group for Families/Caregivers supporting Children with Disabilities—this is really a regional not just a parish aspect of the ministry. This meeting provides peer support (parents helping parents) or have a speaker on various topics to educate parents: their topics drive the content. Honestly—MY needs also drive the topics. I want to know more about how to address sensory integration disorder— I have a discussion with the group. I want to develop my will, a special needs trust for my daughter—I bring in a speaker on that topic. I feel if I have a need in a subject area, others do too: these programs have been very successful when it comes to the number of people I have reached in the community. Among other things in life, interacting with the school systems is daunting. Individual Education Plans (used in schools for children with disabilities) can be great tools for advancing the skills of our children, but parents know their kids best and supporting them to learn the system of education, their rights, and how to engage successfully in the IEP process is important. I try to support parents to learn and use what they learn to provide a better educational experience for their children.

8. Reaching Families

Disseminating information from various community, state, educational organizations is a big part of the support group. Parents don't have time to do the research, I try to get them what I can. Whether it is an opportunity to learn more effective ways to run your IEP meeting, an adaptive dance, social opportunity or athletic program in the community, a state-wide initiative about programs and initiatives—you are educating families about what is out there and reiterating that you are there if they need you.

9. Profession and Passion

My ministry has also become my profession. I work part time as a Quality Monitor for recipients of County services for Intellectual Disability. This gives me the unique opportunity to learn what challenges adult persons with ID have in their lives and what lies ahead for my daughter and my husband and I for future needs. I began with this organization by editing a book for families with children experiencing developmental disability, mental illness and substance abuse needs. Again, God has gifted me skills to help others in this world of disability. His gifts have blessed me with a direction and purpose in life. I am grateful.

Maria Miller
Parish Contact
Queen of the Universe Church, Levittown, PA
215.946.1988 Home
215.791.5115 Cell/Text