

QUARTERLY INFORMER

January, February, and March 2026 Edition

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A New Year of Possibilities

As we welcome 2026, I'm reminded that every step forward—no matter how small—is a victory. Parenting a child with a disability has taught me that progress often comes in quiet moments of courage and hope.

One parent shared, *"Resilience isn't about never falling—it's about finding the strength to rise every single time."*

This year, let's focus on possibilities. Together, we can turn challenges into opportunities and continue building a community where inclusion and understanding thrive. Connect with our programs, join our upcoming webinars, and participate in the LaCAN Legislative Roundtable to make your voice heard. Together, we can advocate for meaningful change and make 2026 a year of action and impact.

A heartfelt thank you to all our sponsors and donors who supported Families Helping Families of SWLA throughout 2025. Your generosity makes this work possible, and we look forward to partnering with you in the year ahead!

Who we Are ... What we Do!

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FHF SWLA Mission:

Our mission is to enable and empower individuals with disabilities and their families by providing information, referral, education, training, peer support, and advocacy skills.

Like Us On Facebook

Want to keep up to date with
FHF of SWLA?

Like our Facebook page!! You will receive event information and other bulletins about what is going on in the SWLA region!

www.facebook.com/fhfswla/

REALISTIC RESOLUTIONS FOR PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES

New Year's resolutions allow us to achieve personal growth throughout the year.

1. Start Working Out

Working out more is a common goal for people as the new year kicks off. But for people with disabilities, working out is especially important. Nearly 41.6 percent of adults with a disability are obese, while only 29.6 percent of adults without a disability are. Due to mostly sedentary lifestyles, you may be at increased risk of health complications such as heart disease or diabetes.

Establishing a regular gym routine can boost your physical and mental health. But, at the same time, it can be hard to go to a traditional gym. I'd like to point out that you may need a gym tailored to your needs.

2. Try a New Hobby

Hobbies are known to reduce stress and improve your overall well-being. Plus, these realistic resolutions provide an outlet for increasing social engagement in your life. The new year is the perfect opportunity to incorporate a new activity into your schedule.

Some fulfilling hobbies for you to consider include:

Caring for plants
Cooking or baking
Painting
Reading
Learning to play an instrument
Playing an adaptive sport

Alternatively, you could use your free time to explore public policies affecting our community. By keeping yourself up-to-date on policies, you can advocate for policies enhancing accessibility in your community or raise awareness for issues not being addressed.

3. Make New Friends

Research shows that high-quality friendships protect against mental health issues such as depression or anxiety. But as an adult, lasting friendships are hard to come by. You must be intentional with your time to foster new friendships, going to the same places and talking to those you come across.

Though this is one of many realistic resolutions, it can be hard to exert yourself every day. Many people try to establish a routine to help them make friends in the new year.

We recommend attending established social engagements, such as support groups or classes, to see the same people consistently. Bare minimum, seize at least one moment each day to talk to someone new and create a connection. With enough effort, you'll establish connections with a few people in your daily routine and find that you have things in common.

4. Build Your Confidence

Confidence is the start of countless memorable experiences in our lives. It's common to struggle with self-confidence, so the new year is a great time to use realistic resolutions to your advantage.

You can build your confidence by:

- Improving your hygiene. As the common saying goes, "Look good, feel good." Taking care of yourself is a valuable first step to building your confidence — even if it's as simple as a haircut.
- Practicing positive self-talk. Confidence starts with you — be kind to yourself and practice positive affirmations such as "I am worth it."
- Push yourself out of the box. Take the initiative to try new things, whether that's going to a local social engagement or traveling to a new destination. Consistent exposure to the unknown will help you believe in your abilities and realize the world isn't as scary as you make it out to be.



Protecting Children from Lead: What Families in Southwest Louisiana Should Know

Lead exposure can affect a child's growth, learning, and behavior, and many common sources are found in and around the home.

Common Sources of Lead

- **Older homes:** Lead-based paint was banned in 1978, so homes built before then may contain lead. Peeling paint and the dust it creates are the most common sources of exposure in Louisiana.
- **Soil:** Lead from old paint, industrial activity, or past use of leaded gasoline can linger in soil.
- **Water:** New lead pipes and plumbing fixtures were banned in 1986, so older plumbing may contaminate drinking water.
- **Household items:** Imported toys, ceramics, jewelry, and spices may contain lead.

Reducing Exposure

- Clean floors, windowsills, and other dusty surfaces regularly with a wet cloth or mop.
- Encourage children to play in grass or a sandbox, not dirt, if the soil may contain lead.
 - Wash hands and toys often.
- Use cold water for drinking and cooking, and flush pipes if unused for six or more hours.
 - Feed children a healthy diet rich in iron, calcium, and vitamin C to help reduce lead absorption.
 - Have children tested for lead.

Testing and Reporting Requirements

State law requires that all children be tested for lead:

- Once by age 1
- Again by age 2

Physicians are required to report all blood test results to the Louisiana Department of Health, regardless of value.

These screenings are simple, safe, and essential for catching exposure early. If your child has not been tested, talk with your pediatrician about scheduling a blood lead test.

How Our Program Can Help

The Louisiana Childhood Lead Poisoning Prevention Program (LCLPPP) offers:

- No-cost resources and guidance to help families reduce lead hazards at home.
- Care coordination and case management for families whose children have been exposed to lead.
- No-cost home environmental investigations for families whose children have elevated levels ($\geq 5\mu\text{g/dL}$).
- Education for parents, caregivers, and community members about lead prevention.

Protecting children from lead starts with awareness, testing, and implementing simple prevention measures at home. Together, Southwest Louisiana families can make a big difference in keeping kids safe and healthy!

For more information, please visit the LCLPPP website, call us at 888-293-7020 or email us at leadinfo@la.gov.



Social Security Announces 2.8 Percent Benefit Increase for 2026

October 24, 2025 • By Social Security Administration

Social Security benefits and Supplemental Security Income (SSI) payments for 75 million Americans will increase 2.8 percent in 2026. On average, Social Security retirement benefits will increase by about \$56 per month starting in January.

Over the last decade, the cost-of-living adjustment (COLA) increase has averaged about 3.1 percent. The COLA was 2.5 percent in 2025.

Nearly 71 million Social Security beneficiaries will see a 2.8 percent COLA beginning in January 2026. Increased payments to nearly 7.5 million people receiving SSI will begin on December 31, 2025. (Note: Some recipients receive both Social Security benefits and SSI).

“Social Security is a promise kept, and the annual cost-of-living adjustment is one way we are working to make sure benefits reflect today’s economic realities and continue to provide a foundation of security,” said Social Security Administration Commissioner Frank J. Bisignano. “The cost-of-living adjustment is a vital part of how Social Security delivers on its mission.”

Some other adjustments that take effect in January of each year are based on the increase in average wages. For example, THE MAXIMUM AMOUNT OF ERRORS THAT ARE RELATED TO THE SOCIAL SECURITY TAX (TAXABLE MAXIMUM) IS SET AT \$184,500 from \$176,100.

Social Security begins notifying recipients about their new benefit amount by mail starting in early December. Those who have a personal my Social Security account can view their COLA notice online, which is secure, easy, and faster than receiving a letter in the mail. You can set up text or email alerts when a new message—such as your COLA notice—is available in your my Social Security account.

You will need to have a personal my Social Security account by November 19 to see your COLA notice online. To get started, visit www.ssa.gov/myaccount.

Information about Medicare changes for 2026 will be available at www.medicare.gov. For Social Security beneficiaries enrolled in Medicare, the 2026 benefit amount will be available via my Social Security’s Message Center starting in late November. Those who do not have an online My Social Security account will receive their COLA notice by mail in December.

The Social Security Act provides for how the COLA is calculated. The Social Security Act ties the annual COLA to the change in the Consumer Price Index for Urban Wage Earners and Clerical Workers (CPI-W) as determined by the Department of Labor’s Bureau of Labor Statistics. You can find more information about the 2026 COLA [here](#).





FHF office will be closed
February 16 - 17, 2026 in
Observance of
Mardi Gras



SPREAD THE WORD TO END THE WORD

www.r-word.org



How We Are Spreading Inclusion

By taking the Spread the Word pledge, you are stepping into the role of a leader committed to shaping a more inclusive world. Your pledge signifies a powerful stance against derogatory language targeted at individuals with intellectual disabilities. Your commitment calls for change, inspiring others to follow suit and join the collective effort to eliminate discriminatory language. Together, we can create a society where everyone is valued, celebrated, and free from the impact of harmful stereotypes.

Spread the Word Day: March 4, 2026



WORLD DOWN SYNDROME DAY

Did you know that **21st March** is World Down Syndrome Day? This day was created to celebrate the lives of people with Down syndrome and to make sure they have the same freedoms and opportunities as everybody else.

21st March (21/3) matches the 3 copies of chromosome 21. This is unique to people with Down syndrome.

World Down Syndrome Day has been an official part of the United Nations calendar since 2012.

You can read the full history of World Down Syndrome Day at the bottom of this page.

On 21st March each year, Down Syndrome International calls everyone to action with a theme to ensure the human rights of people with Down syndrome. It works with members to organize worldwide activities and discussions.



Make Today
AMAZING

THE ABLE AGE ADJUSTMENT ACT FACT SHEET

What is the ABLE Age Adjustment Act?

The ABLE Age Adjustment Act amends Section 529A of the Achieving a Better Life Experience (ABLE) Act to allow more individuals who have a disability to become eligible for an ABLE account, effective January 1, 2026. The age of eligibility expands to allow individuals who have a disability that began before age 46 (instead of before the age of 26) to be ABLE-eligible. The ABLE Age Adjustment Act extends opportunities of financial empowerment for people with disabilities.

[DOWNLOAD FACT SHEET](#)

Why is this Important?

Millions of individuals with disabilities, including Veterans, whose disability began between the ages of 26 to before age 46, were previously excluded from opening an ABLE account. The increase in the age of disability will allow additional people to:

- Save money in a tax-advantaged account.
- Maintain eligibility for crucial public benefits while building assets.
- Gain financial independence and security.

Key Benefits of an ABLE Account

1. **Tax Advantages:** Investment growth is tax-free, and withdrawals for qualified disability expenses are not considered income by MEANS-TESTED benefit programs;
2. **Asset Protection:** Up to \$100,000 of savings in an ABLE account is not counted toward the Supplemental Security Income (SSI) resource limit. Any amount of ABLE savings up to the ABLE plan's limit is not a countable resource for FAFSA, HUD, SSDI, SNAP, Medicare, or Medicaid.
3. **Financial Flexibility:** ABLE accounts can be used for a broad range of expenses, including housing, education, transportation, healthcare, employment support, and more.

New ABLE Eligibility

Beginning January 1, 2026, individuals who meet the following criteria can open an ABLE account:

1. **Disability Onset:** The disability must have occurred before age 46 and
2. **Severity of Disability:** The individual must have a severe disability that meets the Social Security Administration's (SSA) criteria, defined as resulting in marked functional limitations which have lasted or can be expected to last for at least 12 months. An individual does not have to be receiving nor previously received benefits to be eligible. Employment status and income HAVE no effect on eligibility for an ABLE account.



Prepare Now

1. **Verify Your Eligibility:** Check that your disability onset occurred before age 46. If you have not received a benefit based on disability from THE Social Security Administration since before age 46, you must request that your doctor sign a disability statement indicating that the disability began before age 46. You may use this sample ABLE Account Disability Certification Form for this purpose. Keep this documentation in your records.
2. **Research State ABLE Plans:** Use the three ABLE National Resource CENTERS comparison tools to learn about and compare ABLE plans. Many plans allow non-residents to enroll in their plan. Explore your state's ABLE plan first with the Select a State Program tool and use the State Plan Search tool to compare plan features such as fees, investment options, and state-specific tax benefits to find a plan that best meets your needs.
3. **Select An ABLE Plan:** Only one ABLE account may be opened per individual. Visit How Do I Choose a Plan to learn more about choosing a plan that best meets your needs. Most accounts are opened online. ABLE plans allow authorized representatives to assist people with their ABLE account, although the person with the disability is always the ABLE account owner. An ABLE account may be opened at any age.
4. **Compile Information:** To facilitate an easy online enrollment process, visit How Do I Open An Account. The ABLE account is always opened in the name of the person who has the disability. Gather information such as account owner's date of birth, mailing address, email address, social security or tax identification number, mother's maiden name, your primary disability, and, as applicable, identify who you want to designate as an authorized representative (if any) and know the status and type of your social security benefits, if you receive them. You can start the online enrollment process by filling out a portion of your ABLE plan application, but wait to click submit until January 1, 2026.
5. **Open Your ABLE Account:** As millions of people are ringing in the new year on January 1, 2026, you can celebrate your new opportunity for financial stability by submitting your online application and opening your new ABLE account. ABLE account owners report that the enrollment process is simple and takes less than 15 minutes to complete.



“We can never
achieve greatness
alone”

Developmental Disabilities Awareness Month

March is Developmental Disabilities Awareness Month

Orange is the official color of Developmental Disabilities Awareness Month. It was chosen because it symbolizes positivity and energy, aiming to reflect that people with disabilities are a meaningful, active part of society. It promotes the message that disabilities are not inherently negative experiences.

The color symbolizes energy and positivity. Encourage your friends, families, and coworkers to wear orange to show your support and spread awareness. Wear Orange!



Louisiana Regular Legislative Session
will begin on



Monday, March 9, 2026, at noon,

180 Free Lunch Box Jokes to
Brighten Your Child's Day.



Early Childhood Education

Louisiana's Early Childhood Education Month is annually observed in **February**, a statewide initiative led by the Louisiana Policy Institute for Children (LPIC) to highlight the importance of high-quality early care and education for children from birth to age four. The purpose is to raise awareness about the crucial role of early education in brain development, workforce readiness, and long-term student success.





National Alliance on Mental Illness

nami Southwest Louisiana



National Alliance on Mental Illness

nami Family-to-Family

SPRING 2026

01.

NAMI Family to Family is a free 8 session education program for family and friends of a loved one experiencing symptoms of a mental health condition. It provides information about various diagnoses, treatment options, and paths to recovery.

02.

Led by trained peer facilitators, this program helps participants discover new problem-solving techniques, apply effective coping strategies, and develop the communication skills necessary to de-escalate situations arising within the family dynamic during a mental health crisis.

03.

It also offers the lived experiences of others who successfully advocated for services through the mental health system.

**To register call Deborah Anderson
337-515-4464**

**Thursdays · March 5 - April 23, 2026
5:30 p.m. - 8 p.m.
Location revealed at registration.**

How Federal Budget Changes Will Financially Impact People With Disabilities

While the new federal budget will impact many people's lives, the disability community will likely need to navigate additional adjustments as various parts of the new bill are put into place. People with disabilities need to be aware of all of the potential changes coming their way, so they can best prepare and make necessary changes to try to maintain financial stability.

Disability Is a Spectrum

Before we dive into the changes coming that might impact people with disabilities, it's important to understand that not every person with disabilities will be impacted by every change mentioned. There is a huge spectrum of disabilities that result in different access needs, daily impact, required resources, and support. This guide is meant to provide generalized support for people who are more likely to be affected by the upcoming federal budget changes.

Medicaid

The new federal budget bill includes nearly \$1 trillion in cuts to Medicaid and changes to qualifications like work requirements, eligibility, and administrative processes. While disabled people are not explicitly mentioned in the changes, many disabled people rely on Medicaid coverage for medications, care, and services. As the Center for American Progress and The Arc lay out in a recent joint article, some people with disabilities may experience a loss in coverage, and many will experience increases in their costs for medical care due to rising copays and fewer benefits, and out-of-pocket costs being covered.

Work Requirements

Work requirements have become stricter with limited exemptions. This means people with disabilities and caretakers are more likely to lose coverage. According to The Arc of Massachusetts, most Medicaid recipients who can work are already working. Those who aren't working generally want to but struggle to find suitable jobs due to a lack of support and other barriers to employment. While there are some exemptions to the work requirements, exemptions are often burdensome and challenging to prove. Some people may lose coverage simply for not being able to keep up with paperwork.

Administrative Hurdles

Similar to the work requirement changes, there will also be changes in eligibility redeterminations, which will now occur twice a year instead of annually. The verification requirements will also be stricter. Together, these changes will cause more opportunities for errors and missed deadlines, which will likely lead to many people inadvertently losing access to their Medicaid. Limited resources will also have to be allocated to implementing these requirements, which means that there will be even fewer resources for Medicaid programs and benefits.

Home and Community-based Services

One of the biggest direct impacts for people with disabilities that advocates are particularly worried about is the impact on home and community-based services (HCBS) that usually provide disabled people and older adults with daily assistance for tasks such as eating, dressing, using the bathroom, and getting to work.

HCBS includes:

- Personal care attendant programs
- In-home nursing care
- Therapies
- ...and much more

In a letter to senators, disability organizations noted that 86% of optional Medicaid spending is used for services and support for people with disabilities and older adults, more than half of which is for HCBS. Without these services, people with disabilities who rely on this assistance will lose some of their independence, may have a harder time making it to their jobs, or could require a family member to step in as a caretaker, affecting more people's ability to work and, therefore, have access to services like Medicaid.

There is already a huge waitlist for these services, but cuts to funding will make it even harder for people who need support to receive these services.



SNAP

In addition to the cuts to Medicaid, there will be \$200 billion in cuts to the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), also known as food stamps. Many of the provisions added to Medicaid, like work requirements and eligibility changes, will apply to SNAP as well.

During a time when food insecurity is already a pressing challenge due to rising grocery costs and economic instability, this change could have a detrimental impact on the livelihood of many Americans, particularly low-income communities, communities of color, and disability communities. It is estimated that these cuts will impact 4 million non-elderly adults with disabilities who rely on SNAP.

Between the cuts to Medicaid and the cuts to SNAP, people with disabilities and caretakers who rely on both services could end up having to choose between feeding their families and purchasing life-saving medications.

Higher Education

The new bill imposes stricter caps on student loans, particularly for grad students and parents. Because people with disabilities often experience a higher cost of living and could require special living or transportation accommodations to attend graduate school, caps on student loans could inadvertently prevent more people with disabilities from pursuing a higher education by making the financial burden too overwhelming for them to consider. This could also have a cyclic effect of then making it harder for people with disabilities to become employed throughout their lives.

Resources

While these budget cuts will impact many disabled and low-income communities, there are resources to help prepare affected individuals with additional support and options: Disability advocates like The Arc, The American Association of People with Disabilities (AAPD), and Disability Rights Education & Defense Fund (DREDF) are hard at work keeping communities updated with resources, pertinent information, and support.

Protection and Advocacy (P&A) systems were established to safeguard the rights of individuals with disabilities. If you need legal representation, advocacy, or advice, each state has an agency you can turn to.

Independent living centers and other local nonprofits are likely available in your area to provide support, housing help, and skill-building.

Many community-focused credit unions offer services that can help you make good financial decisions, even in uncertain times. We offer free financial coaching, affordable loans, and options like money market accounts and term certificates to help you grow your savings. With the new federal budget bill comes uncertainty and a potential hit to financial stability and independence for many people with disabilities. At Self-Help, we believe in ownership and economic opportunity for all, which means we are here to support underserved communities in building wealth and making responsible financial decisions.



**FHF office will be closed
Monday, January 19, 2026 in
Observance of MLK Day**



Understanding Extended School Year (ESY) Services in Louisiana

For many children receiving special education services, the summer break can bring more than just a gap in school — it can threaten hard-won progress. That's where Extended School Year (ESY) services come in. ESY provides special education and related services beyond the regular school year for eligible students with disabilities. ([Justia](#))

In Louisiana, law requires each public school system to make ESY services available when necessary to provide a “free appropriate public education” (FAPE), in line with a student's Individualized Education Program (IEP). ([Justia](#))

Who Qualifies — And How It's Decided

Not every student with a disability qualifies for ESY — eligibility is decided on an individual basis by the child's IEP team. ([Justia](#))

The decision hinges on whether the student is likely to experience “significant regression” in critical skills over a break from school, and whether those skills are not recovered within a reasonable time once the regular year resumes. ([Pro Bono Desk Manual](#))

Critical skills may include academic skills, self-help or life skills, social or communication skills, or vocational/transition-related skills (for older students). ([fhfogn.org](#))

ESY is not meant to be “summer school” for enrichment or a catch-up for missed general-education work. Rather, ESY is targeted, strategic support to keep essential skills. ([GreatSchools.org](#))

What ESY Services Look Like

If a student qualifies, the IEP team will draft an ESY-IEP. This includes which IEP goals will continue during ESY, the services to be provided (special instruction, therapy, support services, etc.), the schedule, and the location. ([Legal Information Institute](#))

Services are provided at no cost to parents. ([Justia](#))

ESY may take place in a variety of settings — sometimes at the student's regular school, sometimes in community or home settings, depending on the least restrictive environment appropriate to the child's needs. ([leads13.doe.louisiana.gov](#))

Transportation must be provided if needed for the child to benefit, just as during the regular school year. ([Legal Information Institute](#)). Parents need to know that ESY isn't optional enrichment or just extra hours — it is legal support to prevent regression when the loss of skills would substantially affect a child's ability to progress or function. ([GaDOE Special Education](#)).

What Parents Should Do — Be Prepared, Be Informed

- Ask for ESY during your child's IEP meeting. If your district doesn't bring it up, you have the right to request a discussion of ESY. ([Katy Independent School District](#))
- Share observations and data. Talk to teachers, therapists, or aides about how your child performs after breaks — especially whether you observe losses in skills, behavior, communication, or independence.
- Understand it's individualized. No two children are the same. ESY services are tailored to the student's needs — some may need just therapy, others small-group instruction, still others multiple services over several weeks. ([cdns5-ss4.sharpschool.com](#))
- Even if ESY was provided in prior years, it's not automatic. The IEP team must re-evaluate each year to decide if ESY is still needed. ([leads13.doe.louisiana.gov](#)).

Why ESY Is Important — And What Parents Should Know

For many students, long breaks cause regression. Some may lose academic, communication, or social skills; others may lose self-help or behavior routines. Waiting until the regular school year starts again slows progress. ESY closes that gap. ([Pro Bono Desk Manual](#))

Especially for students with significant cognitive disabilities, communication challenges, or major transitions (such as moving toward independent living or vocational training), ESY can make a critical difference. ([fhfogn.org](#))

As a parent in Louisiana — whether in Lake Charles or elsewhere — being aware of ESY gives you a real chance to support your child's progress even when school is out. By understanding what ESY is (and what it isn't), preparing for IEP meetings, and advocating for what your child needs, you can help make sure that summer doesn't undo the hard work from the school year.

Written By: Mylinda Elliot

Riddle

What common English verb becomes its own past tense by rearranging its letters?

Answer is on the last page



Spring Begins...



Friday, March 20, 2026

DYSLEXIA CORE ASSESSMENT SUPPORT PROGRAM

If your child was recently identified as at risk for dyslexia through a school screening, the Louisiana Department of Education (LDOE) offers support to help families pay for next steps.

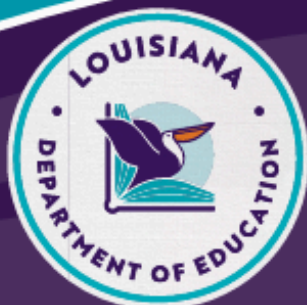


- Families may receive up to \$500 per student, per year toward the cost of a Dyslexia Core Assessment
- The assessment must be completed by an LDOE-approved provider
- Providers set their own pricing; families may be responsible for any costs above \$500
- Approved providers are paid directly through the program

WHAT IS A DYSLEXIA CORE ASSESSMENT?

A Dyslexia Core Assessment is a more in-depth evaluation that helps determine whether a student has dyslexia or needs additional literacy support. The assessment may include:

- ✓ Reading and language skill checks
- ✓ A review of academic performance
- ✓ Word reading and decoding activities
- ✓ A brief family interview



To learn more or begin the process, families may visit the LDOE Dyslexia Support for Families webpage.

Scan the QR code for:

- Step-by-step guidance
- Access to the secure application portal
- A list of approved providers



Signs point toward a bad flu season ahead. Here is what you need to know.

This year's influenza variant is spreading in the United States earlier than usual, while the United Kingdom is bracing for a "once-in-a-decade" flu season. The two indicators may predict a nasty flu season in America.

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, flu season typically occurs in the fall and winter. While influenza viruses spread year-round, most flu activity peaks between December and February.

New this year, the University of Virginia has created a [public-facing flu tracker](#) for the community. It is updated on Mondays.

UVA Today spoke with two doctors at UVA Student Health and Wellness, which, for the third consecutive year, topped Princeton Review's "Best Colleges" ranking of top student health services. Dr. Meredith Hayden is the department's chief medical officer, and Dr. Michael Patrizio is the associate director for acute care.

This year's strain

"The new strain that's being talked about in the media right now is something that they're calling 'subclade K,' which is a strain of the H3N2 influenza A virus," Patrizio said. "This strain emerged at the tail end of the Southern Hemisphere flu season and has really started to cause early outbreaks of the flu in places like the United Kingdom and Japan."

"What the United Kingdom is reporting is really a much earlier, more robust wave of influenza than they are used to seeing at this time of year."

How to protect yourself

"Right now, what we know is that the influenza vaccine is still very important. Although the data is, albeit, limited, it still looks like the vaccine is protecting against severe disease," Hayden said.

"We still would advise all eligible people to get the flu vaccine. It's readily available. It takes about two weeks to take effect, so it's good to get it now and not wait for the peak of the flu season," she added.

People can also order a nasal flu vaccine called FluMist.

"That can be an option for people who don't like getting shots," Hayden advised. "The other new thing is over-the-counter flu tests. Especially for students, I think it gives them more information so that they're not getting each other sick, not going to class when they've got flu or COVID, versus a cold."

What to do if you get the flu

"Otherwise-healthy people, particularly college students, can probably manage the symptoms at home, making use of over-the-counter medications – things like acetaminophen or ibuprofen for the fevers and body aches," Hayden said. "They can use over-the-counter cold medicines for some of the nasal symptoms and cough." For people at risk for a more severe case of the flu, like those with a weakened immune system, who are pregnant or have chronic lung disease, she recommends seeing a doctor and getting on a prescription antiviral medication.

"Antiviral medications are most effective if you start them as early as possible in the course of your infection, ideally in the first 48 hours," Hayden said.

How effective is this year's vaccine?

"That's tough to answer because this subclade K is emerging, and we don't know if that is going to take hold in the United States and how much of the illness that might be responsible for," Patrizio said.

"Generally speaking, in an average year, the flu vaccine is between 30% and 60% effective. Right now, some very early data out of the United Kingdom suggests that this year's vaccine has an effectiveness of about 30% to 40% against the subclade K, but that's really early data. And I think there are some questions about what that might look like as this evolves."

What are the symptoms of flu, and how contagious is it?

"Symptoms of influenza are typically going to be fevers, chills, body aches, and those often associated with the typical cold symptoms as well – so cough, congestion, runny nose, sore throat, headache," Hayden said. "Flu typically comes on very quickly. People describe it as 'getting hit by a bus.'"

People can catch the flu from someone else who has it and may be coughing and sneezing.

"Flu can live on hard surfaces for 24 to 48 hours," Hayden said. "So, that would be things like doorknobs, and then softer surfaces like clothing or paper, and linens, for 12 hours."

MORE INFO

Calcasieu Parish Head Start



HEADSTART ROUND UP - 3 YEAR OLDS

2025-2026 Guidelines:

- Must be three (3) years old on or before September 30, 2025
- Child's certified birth certificate
- Child's social security card
- Child's up-to-date immunization record
- Proof of income
 - 2024 Income Tax Form (1040), SSI Income, Unemployment Benefits, TANF, Child Support
- Court orders or legal documentation of guardianship
- Calcasieu students with disabilities are eligible for services
- Must adhere to attendance guidelines

Eligibility criteria apply providing guidelines are met.

By law, Calcasieu Parish School Board Head Start must provide services to families with a family income at or below the federal poverty guidelines including homeless and/or foster care.

Students with disabilities:

Students with an IFSP and/or IEP are accepted in the program.

Transportation Opportunities:

If you are in need of support with transporting your child to and from school, contact Calcasieu Transit at (337)217-4040.

PRE-K ROUND UP - 4 YEAR OLDS

2025-2026 Guidelines:

- Must be four (4) years old on or before September 30, 2025
- Child's certified birth certificate
- Child's social security card
- Child's up-to-date immunization record
- Family's income must be 200% below the federal poverty guidelines
- Must provide verification of income
 - Two (2) consecutive check stubs for each parent/caregiver in the household
 - SNAP or SSI documentation with child's name
 - foster care agreement
- Court orders or legal documentation of guardianship
- Must provide proof of address
 - i.e. current electricity statement
- Must adhere to attendance guidelines
- **Out of Zone Permits are not required**
 - Priority is given to students who live within the school's zone.

Transportation:

Refer to the CPSB website -www.cpsb.org- for specific guidelines regarding transportation information as well as before/after school enrichment.

CPSB SCHOOLS & CHARTER SCHOOLS

To learn more about Calcasieu Network Early Childhood programs, please visit www.cpsb.org.



To learn more about Early Childhood Programs, please visit www.louisianaschools.com or scan the QR Code.

How to Apply Online:

Go Online: Visit www.calcasieu4all.com to start your application for the Calcasieu Parish Network, which includes Head Start.

Create Account: You'll likely need to create an account to track your application.

Check Your Portal: Look for messages and emails in your account for next steps, especially for interviews.

OFFICE INFORMATION

Monday - Friday | 8 AM to 3 PM

J.F. Kennedy ELC - Early Childhood Department
2001 Russell Street, Lake Charles, LA, 70615
(337)217-4210 ext. 2802

Jake Drost Head Start
1100 N. Crocker Street, Sulphur, LA, 70663
(337)217-4510 ext. 1174



Lake Charles Event Center
(Exhibition Hall)

For more information please call
337-475-3100

Community Mardi Gras Dance
January 22, 2026
6 PM - 8:30 PM



LEAP 2025 Testing in Louisiana: A Guide for Parents of Children with Disabilities

If your child receives special education services in a Louisiana public school, you'll hear a lot about LEAP 2025. State testing can feel stressful, especially when your child has a disability, but understanding the basics—and knowing what supports are available—can make the process much smoother.

What is LEAP 2025?

LEAP 2025 (Louisiana Educational Assessment Program) is the statewide test given each spring in grades 3 through high school. It measures how well students are learning Louisiana's standards in English language arts, math, science, and social studies. ([Jefferson Parish Schools](#))

Most students take the general LEAP 2025 tests, usually online in grades 4 and up (grade 3 may be online or paper, depending on the school). All LEAP tests are timed, and extra time is only allowed if a student has a documented extended-time accommodation in an IEP or 504 plan. ([Default](#))

Students with the most significant cognitive disabilities may be eligible for LEAP Connect, an alternate assessment aligned to the Louisiana Connectors, which are adapted standards based on the regular Louisiana Student Standards. ([Default](#))

Your child's IEP team decides whether your child takes LEAP 2025 or LEAP Connect according to the Louisiana Department of Education criteria, and which accommodations and accessibility features are appropriate.

Accommodations and Supports for Students with Disabilities

Louisiana provides a detailed Accommodations and Accessibility Features User Guide for LEAP 2025. It explains three levels of support:

- Features for all students (like highlighting tools, answer eliminators, etc.)
- Designated supports (available when a need is identified, such as small-group testing)
- Accommodations (for students with documented disabilities, such as extended time, read-aloud, or braille). ([Default](#))

LEAP Connect also includes accessibility features so that students with significant cognitive disabilities can participate meaningfully in the assessment. ([Default](#))

As a parent, you have the right to ask:

- Which accommodations are in my child's IEP/504 for classroom work and tests?
- Will those same supports be used on LEAP 2025 or LEAP Connect?
- Has my child had chances to practice with those tools during regular instruction?

Practical Test-Taking Tips for Children with Disabilities

You can't (and shouldn't) turn your home into a test-prep boot camp, but you can make testing feel more predictable and less scary.

1. Practice with the real tools

Use the state's LEAP 2025 practice tests so your child can see what the screens, question types, and tools look like. Practice tests are available for grades 3–8 and high school subjects online, and some paper versions exist for younger grades. (aep.latech.edu)

If your child uses text-to-speech, a screen reader, or a calculator accommodation, ask the school to let them practice using those supports before test day.

2. Rehearse the routine, not just the content Error! Hyperlink reference not valid.

Many students with disabilities struggle more with changes in routine than with the test itself. A week or two before testing:

- Create a simple visual schedule or checklist for "testing days" (wake up, breakfast, bus/car, test, lunch, break, etc.).
- Talk about what the room will be like: fewer decorations, desks spread out, quiet voices.

Use social stories or role-play for kids with autism or anxiety: "What I can do if I feel worried during the test."

3. Build in sensory and focus supports
Ask about allowable supports such as:

- Small-group or individual testing
- Preferential seating (away from noise or distractions)
- Short movement or sensory breaks if written into the IEP.
- Noise-reducing headphones (without music)

Even at home, you can practice short “focus times” followed by brief, planned breaks to build stamina.

4. Teach simple self-advocacy and calming tools
Give your child a few “test-day tools”:

- A calming strategy (slow breathing, squeezing a stress ball if allowed, silently counting to 10).
- Simple phrases they can use, like:
 - “I need a break, please” (if breaks are in the IEP), or
 - “Can you read the directions again?”

Remind them that it’s okay not to know every answer—they just do their best and move on. LEAP 2025 and LEAP Connect are just one measure of your child’s progress. For students with disabilities, the most important thing is that the test reflects what they know—not their anxiety, sensory overload, or lack of access to supports.

Stay in close contact with your child’s IEP team, ask questions, and use the state’s parent guides and practice tools. When home and school work together, testing becomes less about fear and more about the information we can use to help your child grow.

Written By: Mylinda Elliot

LACAN
LOUISIANA COUNCIL'S ADVOCACY NETWORK

FHF Bunny Stop & Hop

Easter Event for an Individual with
Disabilities & Their Families

SAVE THE DATE

FHF will be hosting our Bunny Stop & Hop Trunk or Treat! Instead of having a typical Easter egg hunt; we'll be inviting friends, family and the community. The idea is that parents could simply park (“stop”) and kids could “hop” from trunk to trunk gathering information from local community partner agencies and collecting goodies along the way. Each participant should bring a basket.

The Easter Bunny is at the event and available for pictures. Standing Pics only. Bring your camera.

MARCH, 2026



Understanding Social Security Disability and Taxes

The old saying goes, “nothing in this world is certain except death and taxes.” This statement holds even for Social Security disability. While no one wants to pay taxes, it is important to understand your tax liability. No one wants to get in trouble with the IRS. Specifically, different tax rules depend on the type of disability you receive: Supplemental Security Income (SSI), Social Security Disability Insurance (SSDI), or a lump sum back payment.

Supplemental Security Income

If you receive SSI, then your benefits are not taxable. Importantly, you are not obligated to file taxes if you have no taxable income or you make less than \$12,950 per year. NOTE: If you are working and receive SSI, it is beneficial to file taxes to ensure you receive all your work credits for SSDI eligibility.

Social Security Disability Insurance

If you receive SSDI, then you may have to pay taxes based on your yearly income and marital status. Fortunately, you will not be taxed on your benefit unless your total income is over these amounts:

★ Social Security Taxes ★	
Tax Amount	Status
\$25,000	Single, head of household, or qualifying surviving spouse.
\$25,000	Married filing separately and lived apart for entire year.
\$32,000	Married filing jointly.
\$0	Married filing separately and lived together during the year.



However, your tax liability does not start until you reach the tax minimum. This means you will not be taxed on your benefits until your income reaches \$25,000 or \$32,000, based on your filing status. You can opt into tax deductions to reduce the amount you owe on your yearly tax return.

This is especially helpful if you anticipate owing taxes at the end of the year.

Additionally, you will receive an SSA-1099 so you can report the taxable portion of your benefits when completing your yearly tax return. You can find more detailed information [here](#).

Lump Sum Back Payment

If you only receive SSI, your back pay is not taxable. If you receive SSDI, your back pay is taxable. This means a large lump sum back payment can cause concern for tax liability. Fortunately, the IRS allows you to assign back pay benefits to the year they should have been received. This method is called the “lump-sum election” method and you can read more [here](#).

MORE INFO





LaCAN Membership & FHF Advocacy Training Webinar

**THURSDAY
JANUARY 22, 2026
AT 10 AM**

Why You will love it:

- Meet Other Advocates for People with Disabilities
- Learn About LACAN's Advocacy Efforts
- Pick Up Tips on How to Advocate on State Level

**DON'T MISS THIS OPPORTUNITY TO
EMPOWER YOURSELF AND OTHERS!**

REGISTER NOW!

Link to Register:

<https://tinyurl.com/LMAT012226>

SCAN ME!



For more information:
contact Families Helping Families
of Southwest Louisiana
337-436-2570 • 1-800-894-6558
info@fhfswla.org • www.fhfswla.org



First, Wheelchair User Set To Go To Space

An upcoming Blue Origin flight will mark a first for people with disabilities.

The company said its next mission will include Michaela "Michi" Benthaus, an aerospace and mechatronics engineer at the European Space Agency who uses a wheelchair.

Benthaus will be one of six passengers on Blue Origin's New Shepard rocket, which will travel above the Kármán line, the internationally recognized boundary of space. Benthaus has used a wheelchair since a 2018 mountain biking accident left her with a spinal cord injury.

"I'm beyond excited," Benthaus said in a social media post. "I thought my dream of going to space had ended forever when I had my accident. But over the past few months, I've been working with an amazing and supportive team to make it possible for a wheelchair user to take part in a suborbital flight, something that's never been done before."

Previously, Benthaus has flown on a Zero-G research flight and participated in an analog astronaut mission, which simulates a space mission. The upcoming mission will be the 37th for Blue Origin's New Shepard, a fully autonomous vehicle. The 62-mile trip lasts 11 minutes, allowing travelers to experience "several minutes of weightlessness" and see "life-changing views of Earth," the company said. "We're thrilled to welcome Michi on board New Shepard. Our mission is to make space accessible to everyone, and this is a meaningful step towards that future and an inspiration for others to see what's possible," a Blue Origin spokesperson told Disability Scoop.

No date has been announced for the flight.

"This feels like an important step since space travel for people with disabilities is still in its very early days," Benthaus said. "I might be the first, but have no intention of being the last."

READ MORE

**Functional Behavior
Assessment:
What is this (FBA)
All About? Webinar**

**11 AM
Friday, January 23, 2026**



Join us for this free webinar where we will discuss Functional Behavior Assessment (FBA) and how it may be able to help students with IEPs who experience challenging behaviors at school.

Link to Register: <https://tinyurl.com/FBA012326>



**For More Information Contact Mylinda at
(337) 437-2570 ♦ 1-800-894-6558
info@fhfswla.org**

**Top Tips for Effective IEP
Meetings Webinar**

**Friday
January 30, 2026
11 AM**



Join us for this free webinar as we go over some of the best IEP tips for organizing yourself for an effective IEP meeting. We will break them down into three steps – before, during, and after the IEP meeting. Implementing our top 5 tips in each of these steps should result in an effective IEP meeting.

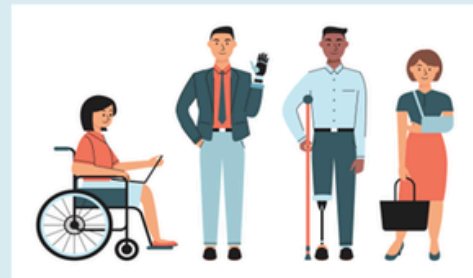
Link to Register:
<https://tinyurl.com/IEPTopTips13026>



**January 2026 Virtual Family
Support Group
For Parents & Caregivers**

*Hosted by Families Helping Families
of Southwest Louisiana*

**Tuesday, January 27, 2026
12:00 PM – 1:00 PM
Zoom (link provided upon registration)**



Being part of a family with a member who has a disability can bring unique joys and challenges. This group offers a safe, supportive space where parents and caregivers can connect, share experiences, and encourage one another. Join us to talk about the stresses, celebrate the wins, and build friendships with others who truly understand.

Link to Register: <https://tinyurl.com/VFSG012726>

Scan Me



For more information, call Families Helping Families of Southwest Louisiana at 337-436-2570

Registration is Now Open for 2026 Louisiana Youth Leadership Forum - Apply Today!



Louisiana Youth Leadership Forum (YLF) is a five-day, overnight leadership program for high school students with disabilities. As an YLF delegate, you'll learn about leadership, advocacy, disability history, and disability pride. You'll also connect with other youth who have similar experiences and build skills to become future leaders.

Program Details

Date: July 8 – 12, 2026

Location: LSU Eunice in Eunice, LA

Free lodging, meals and accommodations

Lodging, meals, and accommodations are provided at no cost

1 staff member per delegate

2 nurses on site 24/7

All speakers are mentors with disabilities

Who Can Apply as a Delegate?

You can apply if you:

Are in 10th, 11th, or 12th grade

Have a disability

Want to learn about the disability community and its history

Want to use your voice to make positive change

Can attend the full program July 8–12, 2026 in Eunice, Louisiana

If this sounds like you, click [HERE](#) to apply.

Need Help or More Information?

Contact: Lillian DeJean, Program Coordinator

Email: lidejean@fhfacadiana.org

Phone: (337) 205-2504



Have you heard about PRIME, a new McNeese State University program for students with intellectual disabilities?



The McNeese PRIME Program is a two-year program that helps students with intellectual disabilities learn functional academics, independent living skills, social and leisure skills, and health and wellness skills, while focusing on career development in a university setting. This program provides students with the tools they need to become as self-sufficient as possible, offering a college experience that enriches their lives.

The PRIME program focuses on gainful employment, social skills, independent living skills, and quality of life.

Students admitted into the program will complete PRIME coursework, audit academic courses offered by the university, and complete internships related to their career interests. During fall and spring commencement exercises, students will receive a certificate of completion, indicating that they have completed the necessary PRIME requirements as well as career readiness training, and social/community integration.

For more information, contact: prime@mcneese.edu

Link for application: <https://www.mcneese.edu/wp-content/uploads/2025/12/PRIME-Application.pdf>

Link to McNeese PRIME: <https://www.mcneese.edu/prime/>

Source: [McNeese PRIME website](#) and [McNeese PRIME Facebook page](#)



Caring for Children with Medical Complexities

Necessary and appropriate care for children with medical complexities is often difficult for families to access due to well-documented workforce shortages. Without this care, children with medical complexities are at higher risk of emergency room visits, hospitalization, and moving into institutional or residential settings.

Children with medical complexities represent less than 1% of all significant, specialized, and long-term health care needs.

- Children with medical complexities have one or more chronic and/or complex medical conditions that result in functional limitations and/or dependence on in-home nursing support and medical devices.

- The national home care workforce shortage is leaving families of children with medical complexities struggling to find the right care.

When families can't find providers for their children, family members are forced to leave the workforce to fill the gap, often without compensation.

Related Discussion

- The impact of Family CNA programs on the health and well-being of children, their caregivers, and families
 - Opportunities to expand access to the model to reach more families
 - Successful implementations and learnings from existing federal and state programs



Family Certified Nursing Assistant (CNA) Model

To help keep these children at home and improve outcomes, a growing number of state Medicaid programs are adopting programs like the Family Certified Nursing Assistant (CNA) model. The Family CNA model trains and pays family members to provide low-acuity in-home medical tasks to children, alongside a team of healthcare professionals and under the supervision of a home health agency.

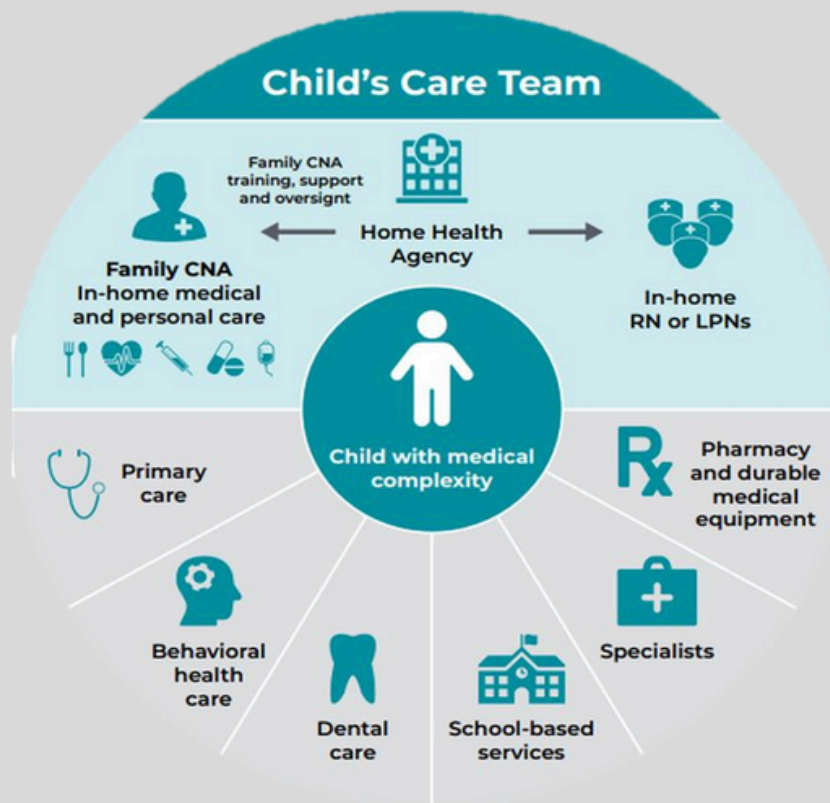
- Parents/Family members of children with medical complexities who qualify for private duty nursing services are trained as a CNA. Training is at a minimum equivalent to the training that other CNAs receive.

- Employed and paid by home health agencies
 - Work closely with other homecare professionals
 - Address critical home care workforce shortages
 - Improve the continuity and quality
 - Support financial security
- Offer technical skills and support they need to provide person-centered care.
 - Reduce the likelihood of ED visits and inpatient hospitalizations.

Opportunities to expand the model:

- State:
 - Ø Build a coalition of key constituencies
 - Ø Leverage Medicaid authorities available
 - Federal:
 - Ø Issue guidance to states on a standardized definition, training, coding, and billing
 - Ø Invest in family caregiver training
 - Ø Give technical assistance to states





Mardi Gras Break

Allen Parish - February 16-17, 2026
 Beauregard Parish - February 16-17, 2026
 Calcasieu Parish - February 16-18, 2026
 Cameron Parish - February 16-19, 2026
 Jeff Davis Parish - February 16-18, 2026

Invest in Families Helping Families of Southwest Louisiana.

FHFSWLA is a 501 (c)3 nonprofit agency that relies on donations to meet the needs of our agency's mission and vision. By donating to FHFSWLA you are investing in the lives of

people with disabilities and their families. If passion paid, we would be the richest nonprofit in SWLA. Unfortunately, passion alone does not fully support our organization.

Please consider making a contribution so families who are touched by disability can be assured this one of a kind, family directed resource center is always here when they need us.

Contributions can be made to:
Families Helping Families of Southwest Louisiana
P O Box 1627
Lake Charles, LA 70602

FHF is funded in part by a contract
from the Louisiana Developmental
Disabilities Council.



Families Helping Families It's Who We Are! It's What We DO!

Riddle Answer: Eat

Families Helping Families of Southwest Louisiana

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