

My name is Trisha Cooper, I am a Stay at Home Mom of three teenagers, 2 daughters, and a son. Our son has Autism. I serve as President of the Board of Directors for the EPU Children's Center here in Fresno, where our staff provides services and education to children born with extraordinary medical and parenting challenges, developmental delay and their families. Our center has served this community for over 41 years and sees over 900 children and families each week, preparing them for a life that is rich and fulfilled. At the EPU Children's Center we have six integrated programs providing these services.

Our Assessment Center for Children provides assistance to parents and caregivers, who have concerns about their child's development, learning, socialization, or behavior. These concerns may be across multiple areas. Families typically reach out to our Assessment Center if they are experiencing difficulty obtaining services or getting help for their child. We do this through care coordination, referrals to other community agencies, clinical developmental assessments, and direct treatment and intervention. Our one Call for Kids Line serves as an entry point for these services and works in collaboration with Help Me Grow Fresno County.

The Family Resource Center at EPU serves as an umbrella of programs for parents and children with disabilities and other special needs. This program is staffed with parents and close family members of children with disabilities. Our services include Parent to Parent groups, Advocacy and Parent Education, that supports parents and assists them in navigating the educational, social, recreational, and medical needs of their children. These services are provided in English, Spanish, and Hmong.

Our Infant Family Program offers services for children 0-3. These services are based on the unique needs of each child and family. It provides a wide range of services such as home visits, developmental assessments and parent groups, as well as center-based services including Speech, Occupational, and Physical Therapies, and Transition assistance when the child reaches age 3 and is ready to move into another Early Childhood Program.

The Learning About Parenting program is a comprehensive, culturally-responsive program that utilizes a multi-disciplinary team approach to provide family-centered services to overburdened families facing extraordinary life challenges which place their children at risk for abuse and neglect. This program provides home visitation, parenting classes, parent/child interactions groups (PCI), support groups, interactive play groups and advocacy for families needing linkages to additional services. The program targets teen parents, parents in recovery from substance abuse, and parents with developmental delays and their children from birth to twelve years of age.

The Play and Grow Program provides play groups for families who are currently participating in any of our programs. These enrichment groups help children to socialize with peers and build relationships. We know that infants and toddlers learn best when they are interested, supported and nurtured. Play and Grow provides positive interactions and play opportunities to help infants and toddlers build relationships with other children and adults.

EPU provides an outstanding foundation and support system for children birth to age 22 and their families. But in order for our children with special needs to become successful adults, the community must collaborate to ensure there are programs to support that journey.

My son has taken advantage of early childhood intervention, as well as community and school-based programs. As a parent and advocate, I am deeply concerned with prospects for his future as an adult, and the opportunity or lack thereof to find employment, where his work is both valued and fairly compensated. I am also concerned about the availability of affordable and safe housing opportunities for my son to live independently of our family with a community of support, fully accessing an active, vibrant, stimulating adult life within the community.

Housing for adults with special needs poses a unique challenge here in Fresno for most families. Some of the housing options allow for the individual to live at home with family with the hope that the family qualifies for IHSS, to supplement the SSI payments. Another option is to live in a Mentor Home, where a regular or host family is certified to take in 1-2 individuals. Some may be fortunate enough to live in an apartment with supports set in their Individual Person Plan created by CVRC with input from the adult person and their caregiver. Lastly, when space is available Group Homes are an option. Unfortunately, persons living with Learning Disabilities or Mental Health issues have a more difficult time. Seldom does someone with a Learning Disability qualify for any services. So, they must rely on themselves with possible support from family. If someone has severe mental health issues they may qualify for IHSS or they may be placed in a group home setting, but that is rare.

As a family we have dedicated so much of our lives learning, and growing alongside my son, in the hopes that he will lead a happy, healthy, and full life. We recognize that raising a child with Autism comes with many challenges, and because of these challenges we cannot do it alone. I am asking that you collaborate with us as a community partner to foster and promote adult programs that allow EVERYONE, regardless of ability, to imagine and lead a fully productive, safe, and happy adult life.

Thank you for your time and consideration, and for allowing me to be a part of this panel.