

Legislative Awareness: #StepUp

An Awareness Initiative of The Arc of Florida



The Arc of Florida is excited to share the results from the first year of our Legislative Awareness: #StepUp Program launched in 2025 as part of our broader Awareness Initiative.

This program provided modest but meaningful support to help individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities (I/DD) and their families share their experiences directly with lawmakers. We recognize that while many companies hire lobbyists or contribute to political campaigns to make their voices heard, the community for the population we serve often does not. Instead, their stories are their currency and we are proud to invest in helping those voices #BeHeard.

The Arc of Florida will continue to serve as the fiscal agent for this initiative and is committed to helping families learn about advocacy, #StepUp into civic engagement, and drive policy change. The true experts on disabilities are those that live it every day.

Warm regards,



Summer Pfeiffer

Chief Executive Officer, The Arc of Florida

Program Overview

In 2025, The Arc of Florida launched the Legislative Awareness: #StepUp Program to strengthen the voices of individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities (I/DD) and their families in the legislative process. Our goal was to ensure that those most affected by state policies are in the room, sharing their stories, and educating policymakers.

This program supported advocacy grounded in lived experience, a core value of The Arc of Florida's mission to foster meaningful and inclusive representation. Each approved applicant received a \$300 stipend to offset the cost of travel and lodging, addressing a key barrier to participation. In return, each submitted their experience sharing what they learned and how it impacted them.

Eligibility was open to individuals with I/DD or their family members who demonstrated a commitment to advocacy and policy education. Selection was made by the Legislative Awareness: Step Up Stipend Committee which reviewed applications based on need, purpose, and available funds. These funds will support advocacy travel to delegation meetings, the state capitol during the 2026 legislative session, and other advocacy events such as Advocacy Days.

2025 Pilot Year Highlights

Participants Supported: 3

Donors: 19

Stipend Amount per Participant: \$300

Participant Requirement: Submit a summary of experience to receive a certificate

Total Contributions: \$10,952.30

Remaining Funds (April 2025): \$9,798.96

Voices in Action: Participant Impact

Their voices helped illuminate the real-life impact of proposed legislation, including concerns about waiver access, APD reforms, and the need for inclusive, trauma-informed service systems.

Melody Hearn testified at legislative hearings, met with state and local leaders, and advocated for trauma-informed systems, increased transparency, and better law enforcement education. Her reflection showed deep policy engagement and a strong connection between personal experience and public policy.

Tom and Shelby Nurse attended together to share Shelby's experience with the Agency for Persons with Disabilities (APD) and CDC+ services. Shelby spoke about how the Medicaid iBudget waiver supports her

independence and employment, while Tom raised systemic concerns during committee meetings, urging protections in Medicaid design and pilot programs.

Brian Carey, a first-time advocate, discussed his growing understanding of the legislative process and the empowering experience of seeing his testimony contribute to real-time policy discussion and bill outcomes. He expressed a renewed sense of purpose and plans to stay engaged moving forward.

Acknowledgements

This Legislative Awareness: #StepUp Program would not have been possible without the partnership and dedication of donors, volunteers, and The Arc of Florida team members.

We extend heartfelt thanks to:

Melissa Mazaeda, J&M Support Coordination Services CEO – for her vision, fundraising leadership, and direct support of families and serving on the selection committee.

Dina Justice, Vivian Pennywells, Alan Abramowitz and Dustin Goodwyn – The Arc of Florida, for their essential administrative, financial, and programmatic support.

The 19 **generous donors** for this program – for believing in family-led advocacy and providing the resources to make it happen.

Together, you helped ensure that families and self-advocates didn't just show up—they were seen, heard, and respected.

Looking Ahead

Our Legislative Awareness: #StepUp Program will continue into 2025–2026 as a platform for community-powered change. We are proud of our first-year participants and committed to expanding this opportunity to more self-advocates and families in the coming year.

For more information or to support the program, please contact The Arc of Florida.