

The Wayne RESA Roundtable Podcast S2.E3: Michigan Alliance for Families: Guidance for the Journey

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SPEAKERS

Michelle Driscoll, Beth Santer

Beth Santer 00:15

Welcome to the Wayne RESA Roundtable Podcast, a space dedicated to sharing valuable resources and insights with our educators and families. I'm Beth Santer, one of the Wayne RESA facilitators who will be joining you for this conversation. Today, we are joined by Michelle Driscoll, the policy coordinator for Michigan Alliance for Families, an organization that's dedicated to empowering parents and caregivers of children with disabilities across the state. Michelle brings a depth of experience to this role that's grounded in years of work supporting families through education, advocacy and policy guidance. Before joining Michigan Alliance for Families, she worked for the Arc, which is where I first became aware of her. And there she focused on helping individuals with disabilities and their family access resources, understanding their rights and navigating complex systems. We're going to be digging into both, and we're happy to have you here Michelle, welcome.

Michelle Driscoll 01:10

Thank you Beth. I'm very happy to be here with you today.

Beth Santer 01:13

Okay, so let's start with at the beginning. Share a little bit about your background and what brought you to your role with Michigan Alliance for Families, and maybe even go back to when you were with the Arc. What grab... made you gravitate to that and then to Michigan Alliance?

Michelle Driscoll 01:30

It's been a long journey of 40, 40 plus years supporting individuals with disabilities. And my background, my degree is.... degrees are in law enforcement, administration and psychology. So really, my path that I was thinking about as I was leaving college was supporting children in the juvenile justice system. I kind of fell into a position where I was doing vocational rehabilitation. I had planned to stay in my college town for another year and do some graduate work, and started meeting a lot of individuals with disabilities through the program that I worked with, and they were in a sheltered workshop, and I would go and observe in between doing my evaluation duties where I worked. So I just started

looking... talking with individuals and learning more about them and what their dreams and hopes were, and I often wondered why they were working in the sheltered workshop and we're not working in employment, you know, just jobs in the community like any of us have. So that was kind of the beginnings I look at as far as where I thought I might want to help people in the future. So when I left that position, I worked in another organization in Illinois, doing very similar work, and moved into a new position they were creating as a placement coordinator. So I was actually on the ground, talking with employers and helping people find work, and it really kind of set my feelings about people living and working and participating and belonging to their communities and contributing and really helping people who I had seen and met in these sheltered kind of situations move into competitive employment. Sometimes they needed extra support. They worked with job coaches. I was involved in training job coaches and doing job development, talking and meeting with employee... all different kinds of employers based on what kind of work individuals were looking for, and it really... that's where what kind of grounded me into helping people be fully included in their communities, whether it's through education, work, their housing, where they lived, where they... everything that we do, how they participated in their recreational activities, and talking about individuals being fully included. So when I moved to Michigan a long time ago I took a few years off when my children were young, and then just happened to fall into a position with the Arc in Wayne County, where I was helping people create schedules for recreational activities so we would organize some different activities in the community a couple times a week, and it eventually moved into a position of being the Director of Advocacy. So for 21 years I was there, I was attending meetings with families, helping them navigate, like you said, the complex systems, the special education system and the community mental health system and helping them just kind of navigate all those different processes. As their children... parents were working with their children, or individuals with disabilities were maybe leaving school and assisting them in applying for their government benefits and talking about transition and housing and all of all of those various parts of life after school.

Beth Santer 05:54

So it sounds like you had a lot of incredible experiences that probably led you to that opportunity for Michigan Alliance for Families.

Michelle Driscoll 06:03

Yeah, just by chance, I happened to see that the policy coordinator position was open there. I'm only the second person in this position, and I really my focus at the Arc was very broad. It was special education, it was community mental health, it was Social Security and Medicaid and future planning, and I really wanted to narrow that focus to helping families with special education issues, so anything related to special education. So I really wanted to focus more on the education piece. And this position seemed like a great fit. I love policies and laws and rules, and that was really a big interest area of mine, and a key part of the work that I did when I was supporting families and attending IEP meetings. So this was a great opportunity to kind of shift that focus to working in the area of special education laws and rules and this system.

Beth Santer 07:16

So something a little broader.

Michelle Driscoll 07:17

Yes.

Beth Santer 07:18

So I want to dig into a little bit about something that you had talked about, because you used the word sheltered workshop a lot, and that's a term that if you've been around in special education for a long

time, you've heard it, you don't hear it as much anymore. And we've had a lot of guests on the podcast that talked about inclusive employment and the importance of it. But I just want for our listeners who maybe don't understand the difference, could you kind of do a short summary of what is a sheltered workshop? Is it like an enclave? Because I've also heard that term before, and how does it compare to inclusive employment?

Michelle Driscoll 07:56

My experience with in the individuals that I observed in the sheltered workshops was they were doing, usually factory assembly type work for piece rate, not a competitive wage. And it was only people with disabilities. It was people that were in part of our organization. There were not individuals without disabilities, who they worked with. So from my beginnings in doing those observations, the first questions I was asking myself, and at that time supported employment, was starting in Illinois, and our director invited me to come and take some tours of job sites with him, and my first question was, why aren't these individuals... why don't they have the opportunity to work in those competitive settings, these job settings with individuals without disabilities? They can earn enough money to be able to support themselves and have an apartment, and, you know, take care of their needs, as opposed to working in the sheltered workshop with the piece rate? So those are the two key things that is the difference between the sheltered workshop and I think why advocates are... really want to help people get competitive jobs with living wages in the community with their peers.

Beth Santer 09:31

Yeah, I appreciate that explanation. We recently had Randy Lewis on our podcast, and he's a big proponent of inclusive employment, and he talked a lot about that when he was the vice president of supply chain for Walgreens, that he wanted a third of his employees, a number of employees in a factory in, I think it was West Virginia, to be adults with disabilities. So he had 600 employees, and he wanted his goal was to have 200 he actually beat that goal, and it ended up being half. But it was really about the spirit of your answer, which is having adults with disabilities make that living wage and doing the same jobs and making the same amount of money as their counterparts. So for listeners who may be new to the organization, how would you describe Michigan Alliance for Families and its mission?

Michelle Driscoll 10:32

So our focus is to provide information and resources to families about anything related to special education. We have disability specific information as well as any topic that you can think of. We're a statewide organization, and so we have regional parent mentors all around the state who can help families, one on one, to understand their rights, learn how to navigate the special education system. So we assist families in understanding their special education rights and protections, communicating their children's needs and finding information to help their children develop and learn. That is our focus. We help parents with the to understand the ins and outs of the special education system. We do this through personalized one on one assistance of our regional parent mentors. We are a statewide organization, so we have individuals our regional parent mentors who live all around the state, and parents can reach out directly to them for that one on one, personalized information and resources, as well as helping with any specific concerns they have about their children. We have learning opportunities that we provide on our calendar. We have a year long calendar of all kinds of trainings and workshops. We have some special things that we do that, I'm not sure others do. We have a three week IEP course, which is about 20 parents that they apply for it, and we, of course, get maybe 100 people applying. We have 20 spots each time we do it, and it's hands on information that we are giving them. It's work and conversation, it's going through their child's IEP, each part of the IEP to help them understand it. So that's kind of a unique training that we have for parents, the Empowering Parents IEP course. We also provide some and I'll talk a little bit more about this, I think but leadership, lots of opportunities for parents to build their advocacy skills, not just for their own child, but if they would like

to advocate for other children as well, so building their parent leadership skills to be able to advocate on local or state level, we do this all... all of the services that we provide are free of charge to parents. We... they're at no cost to parents, and we do this through our grant funding from the Michigan Department of Education, Office of Special Education, the Michigan Department of lifelong Education, Advancement and Potential, as well as being Michigan's Parent Training and Information Center and funding from the US Department of Education, Office of Special Education Programs. So between all of that grant funding, we are able to provide these services at no charge to parents and helpfully help be able to help them with any concerns or issues they have related to their child's education.

Beth Santer 14:23

Yeah, it's great that all those resources are free to parents. I've heard you say that you have parent mentors, but I also heard you using the word advocates. So and you were an advocate when you worked for the Arc. So, is there a difference between a mentor versus an advocate, and if there is, what's the difference?

Michelle Driscoll 14:43

Sure. So our regional parent mentors can provide information and resources. They talk one on one with parents, but they don't attend meetings with families. So we do have contracted advocates that the regional parent mentors can refer parents to contracted advocates, depending on the parents needs and the situation. And those advocates, we don't guarantee that they go to meetings, but that is something that they can do that the parent mentors don't do

Beth Santer 15:21

Okay that makes sense. Thank you for that distinction. And I know sometimes families assume advocacy organizations can take certain actions that aren't part of their role. So what are some supports Michigan Alliance does not provide, and why.. why is that?

Michelle Driscoll 15:41

Well, so like I mentioned, we don't attend meetings with families, though we get asked about that a lot. We don't attend meetings. We also don't provide legal advice or legal services. We can't give legal in... we can provide information to families about special education laws and rules and guidance, but we don't give legal advice or legal services or anything of that nature to families.

Beth Santer 16:15

Got it. Got it. And let's say you have a family that's struggling and they call Michigan Alliance. Can you walk us through what a typical first contact with a family looks like, and how do you help them determine what are next steps?

Michelle Driscoll 16:33

So the family would reach out, they can either email or call our general information line, or they can reach out directly to a regional parent mentor in their area. And we have a resource rich website, which includes a lot of information about us. We have a staff directory and a interactive map on the website so they can go to that web page and tap on their area of the state, and it will pull up the regional parent mentors in their area who serves the school districts that their child attends. So they will, let's they will either email or phone call or sometimes they will text. If they reach out directly by phone, they will be automatically routed to the regional parent mentor in their area, and the parent mentor will talk to them and get some information about their child, about their family, about, you know, what's going on, what's the reason for their call, and then they work through those situations with the family. So it could be somebody just calling about some information and resources. It could be a parent whose child is new to special education services, and they don't know maybe what an IEP meeting entails, or what

information they should prepare before they go to the meeting. So really, anything related to special education services that will help them to address the specific concern of their child. They so once the so the parent... all of our parent mentors are trained in listening and supporting. They understand special education laws and rules and the guidance that Michigan Department of Education, Office of Special Education puts out so they will listen to the parents concerns and help them to prioritize what areas you know, what, what of their concerns do they want to start addressing first? And they will help the parent develop a plan on how to address the concern. It might be helping the parent organize their information for the IEP meeting, or helping them prioritize their concerns so the parent can write a letter to the special education administrator. Whatever that parent needs the parent regional parent mentors are working with the parent where they're at. If it's a parent that's new to the special education system, then it might be a lot of giving resources and information for the parent to understand their rights and protections and what rules are regarding the issue that they're discussing. Maybe it's a parent whose young adult child is getting ready to leave the system, and they want information about transition. So it's they work with parents of children of, you know, all ages who are receiving special education services, no matter where they are in their educational journey. The other thing that I want to mention is that the regional parent mentors don't tell parents what they should or must do. They give them the options. So if a parent has a concern and they don't know how to address it, there are a lot of dispute resolution options that parents can take advantage of. They have their... they can have informal meetings, they can have facilitated meetings or mediation, or they might need down the road to file a complaint. So the parent mentors will provide all of the information to the families and talk about each option, and then parents decide for themselves what option is going to work best to serve their child.

Beth Santer 20:55

Got it. Got it. So you mentioned resources several times, and Michigan Alliance is known for providing those resources to families. And my understanding is, is that Michigan Alliance is very mindful of making sure that those resources are vetted through the Michigan Department of Education and Office of Special Education. Is that accurate?

Michelle Driscoll 21:17

Our resources are vetted through the Michigan Department of Education, Office of Special Education. There is a team of people within the Office of Special Education and Michigan Alliance for Families that do a website review. So they are year round, taking different sections of the website and reviewing information on there, making sure it's up to date, it's accurate. Sometimes guidance changes, or if there's a rule change or something, and we do our very best to make sure everything is updated. But sometimes there's other additional information or new information that comes out so that our team is constantly reviewing the website to make sure the information that we provide to families is accurate.

Beth Santer 22:10

How does Michigan Alliance for Families collaborate with school districts, ISDs, and other statewide partners to support both families and the broader special education system?

Michelle Driscoll 22:21

So we do have a large partner resource list on our website, and we partner in a lot of different ways. So from the ground level, our regional parent mentors are often doing outreach events, resource fairs for their own school districts in their own communities that they serve. And so they're they're working within their communities and the resources that they know, and they're providing them to the people in the areas that they serve.

Beth Santer 23:00

What is the typical background, or the why, of why somebody would want to work for Michigan Alliance for Families?

Michelle Driscoll 23:07

So all of the Michigan Alliance for Family staff are either a parent of a child with a disability or have a family member with a disability. So I think what draws people to this work is their experience. And people have variety of backgrounds, their previous work experience is varied, but the commonality is that they have a child or a family member with a disability. So in this role of a regional parent mentor to assist families in understanding their rights and navigating the complex special education system, that's where their experience lies with their own children, and so I think that's what draws them to this role, is they have that experience, they want to share what they learned with other families and be able to provide advice and information based on not just rules and laws and guidance and resources, but also bringing in, when appropriate, their personal experience in how they handled maybe some difficult situations or difficult conversations that they had, or maybe there was a disagreement with a school and how they addressed it and were successful in getting it resolved. So I think that is the, probably the key thing. The other thing is that all of the regional parent mentors work in the area that they live, so part of the job requirement is that you have to live in the areas that you are going to serve. So they know their community resources, they know what's available. They often know the special education administrators, they know their parent advisory committee group, and they're part of those groups. So they have a lot of knowledge that they can pass on to families in their areas, specifically, not just general statewide information, it's specific to their communities.

Beth Santer 25:23

Yeah I can see how that would be important, because the knowledge obviously is important, but that relatability and that personal connection to the topic, and then knowing that climate and culture of that community is probably what gives that knowledge life. So we've talked about the why of why somebody would come work for Michigan Alliance. But what is your why? You've talked about that you've been doing this for over 40 years. So what keeps you going?

Michelle Driscoll 25:54

So my why is to continue supporting families, and while I do that indirectly now, I don't talk directly with families. I do presentations and provide information to our regional parent mentors and advocates, and I am able to not just provide information about the rules and laws and guidance, but I support our staff and our contracted advocates, pulling from my advocacy experiences and I just, I want to continue helping families. So in this non direct way, I feel that I'm still able to do that, even though I'm not talking directly with the families I'm supporting our staff and the contracted advocates who are working with families and just continuing to help families to understand the special education system is a is a very complex system.

Beth Santer 27:04

Yeah.

Michelle Driscoll 27:05

And especially when there's concerns related to discipline and behavior and those kinds of things. And so pulling on some of the experience that I have, I feel like I can continue to contribute, as well as be able to dig a little bit deeper into the laws and rules and provide trainings and learning opportunities for families and professionals that way.

Beth Santer 27:38

That's great. I and the RESA community definitely want to thank you for joining us today and sharing all your insight. I've personally known Michelle. I don't think I've known you over 40 years, but I've known Michelle for a long time, and I've seen personally her passion and her voice for those who need it, and providing those resources to those who need it, the special education world is certainly happy to have you and Michigan Alliance supporting us and for all of our listeners, thank you so much for tuning in, and we hope you join us again for the Wayne Risa Roundtable Podcast. Thanks for being with us Michelle.

Michelle Driscoll 28:17

Thanks, Beth.