

# THINKING DIFFERENTLY

## *Molinaro to Highlight Special Needs Initiatives in State of County Address*

Everyone approaches life a little differently. That is what makes people and the communities we live in unique and vibrant. For those with special needs though, some of the things that make them unique can also keep them on the sidelines; separate from the fun, separate from understanding. Sometimes we don't always know how to connect with someone who has special needs, creating unintended barriers. As part of his 2015 State of the County Address, Dutchess County Executive Marcus J. Molinaro will discuss how Dutchess County is THINKING DIFFERENTLY to assist those individuals with special needs and their families, partnering with great people and organizations to make our community more inclusive for individuals of all abilities.



*County Executive Molinaro with Nathan, a participant at the 2014 Special Needs Picnic.*

County Executive Molinaro explains, "For those with special needs that initial contact can define everything - we seek to make Dutchess County better prepared to communicate with, provide for and support those living on the Autism Spectrum and with special needs."

County Executive Molinaro has directed Community Development Block Grant (CDBG) funding each year to support great community projects that expand recreation accessibility for children. In 2012 and 2013, CDBG funding totaling \$150,000 went toward the **Wappinger Challenger Field**, a handicapped accessible baseball field where disabled youth ages 5 – 18 can participate without obstacles, thanks to smaller, synthetic infield, as well as handicapped

accessible dugouts, parking and restroom facility. The County is also pleased to partner with **Julie's Jungle**, a 4,000 sq. ft. regional handicapped accessible playground which will begin construction this spring in the Town of East Fishkill. This will be a playground where all children can play, no matter their abilities, ages, or interests. Julie's Jungle will feature specialized equipment such as ramps, a rubberized surface, short stair height, Braille play panels and sensory garden amps enabling children with physical, visual, hearing and cognitive disabilities as well as able-bodied children enjoy a fun day at the playground. Dutchess County provided \$100,000 in CDBG funding in 2014 and will do so again in 2015 with an additional \$100,000 to help make Julie's Jungle a reality.



Dutchess County event programming has been expanded to connect people with opportunities and services including our **Special Needs Picnic**, a highlight of our summer picnic program, scheduled for August 18th. This year, look for our "**Movie Day**" event - an opportunity to enjoy a family-friendly film in a safe and warm environment, where the lighting and sound is adjusted and there is flexibility to dance, sing or walk around during the movie allowing families to feel relaxed and comfortable to enjoy the movie experience together. These events offer special needs families a great chance to socialize, have a great time and be connected with important resources offered by Dutchess County Government. To stay up to date about Dutchess County events, [sign up for calendar notifications through Dutchess Delivery](#).

County Executive Molinaro noted, "Families across America confront challenges big and small when raising these special children and we hope we can offer some relief that in an emergency our career

and volunteer responders are prepared to help and in businesses across our county staff and customers more understanding and ready to serve.”



As part of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) requirements, Dutchess County Public Safety Dispatchers (911) currently train twice a year to better serve those with disabilities, learning to understand individual needs such as the needs of those who are hearing or speech impaired or those with developmental disabilities. This year, the Dutchess County Department of Emergency Response will take

advantage of grant funding provided by the NYS Developmental Disabilities Planning Council to broaden the training for our 911 dispatchers to better assist people across the disability spectrum, including those on the Autism Spectrum. This “Train the Trainer” course provides responders with greater sensitivity and awareness of the challenges individuals with disabilities face and provides important interaction skills to deal with difficult or unfamiliar behaviors. This training will then be offered to our dedicated local firefighters and emergency medical services (EMS) who are the ones on the scene during an emergency to help them recognize signs of various disabilities, learn how better understand the traits these individuals may exhibit and how to best accommodate them in an emergency where time is of the essence.

Dutchess County Senior Public Safety Dispatcher Patricia Mensler said, “Being able to relate to the caller and the situation is critical for a dispatcher during an emergency. Disability awareness training offers a broader view and insight about the types of behaviors or traits individuals with disabilities such as Autism may exhibit and provides tools to better assist in those unique situations. It can be as simple as the dispatcher slowing down questions or instructions for a caller who may need extra time to process the information or finding out any behavioral triggers that the emergency responder on the scene may need to be aware of to best help the individual.”



Dutchess County Government is also proud to support Anderson Center for Autism’s *Autism Supportive Environment* program – a partnership through which local businesses and their staff can learn how to better understand, serve and support individuals on the Autism Spectrum as well as their families. The program includes how to make simple changes to the physical environment as well as provides staff training to make establishments more welcoming for those with Autism and their

families. This program is already paying dividends for local businesses by expanding their customer base ([check out this podcast](#) featuring John Coppola, Owner of Coppola’s Ristorante, the “pilot” project for Autism Supportive Environment). We are excited to help Anderson Center spread the word about this important resource. If your business would like to learn more about Anderson’s Autism Supportive Environment program, call [\(845\) 889-9616](tel:845-889-9616).

Anderson Center for Autism’s Consulting Coordinator Lisa Lawrence said, “We continuously hear from parents of children on the spectrum that they are unable to enjoy community outings as a family; it is our hope that we can increase opportunities for those families to visit and enjoy their community offerings through our Autism Support Environment program.”

Join County Executive Molinaro on Wednesday, February 25th at 5pm in The Culinary Institute of America’s Marriott Pavillion to learn about these programs and other County initiatives as part of the 2015 State of the County Address. The event is open to the public and all are welcome. Please RSVP online at [www.dutchessny.gov/RSVP](http://www.dutchessny.gov/RSVP).

