

## **NLMFF Featured Grantee Julia Landau, Esq, Massachusetts Advocates for Children**

Julia Landau:

With the generous support of the Nancy Lurie Marks Family Foundation. MAC launched his autism center in 2002. We launched the center because our helpline was overwhelmed with the skyrocketing numbers of calls from parents who had children with autism and weren't able to obtain some of the most basic services for their kids. We know that children and adults with autism can learn, can thrive, and can be contributing members of our society, but for almost all the families who are calling our helpline, they share a characteristic which is that their children experience lowered expectations and stigma because of their autism. Discriminatory assumptions about their limited potential because of their differences, their behavioral differences, behavioral challenges, their limited capacity to communicate. Still in 2019 there are too many parents who have kids who are nonverbal and are told that their children just have a limited capacity to learn and to give up on the hope of them learning to read.

Julia Landau:

Our autism center was launched to address these lowered expectations and barriers. We know that adults with autism have some of the highest rates of social disengagement and isolation, and are the least engaged in jobs and higher education. So we launched our autism center to advocate for the services, the opportunities, the education the children need so that they can thrive and learn to their potential. And our center particularly focuses on the needs of children who face inequities and barriers because of their race, because of their economic status, because of their immigration status, and because of the primary language.

Julia Landau:

Our center relies on three advocacy strategies to accomplish our goals. First, we help as many individual children and families as we can, one at a time, as they call our helpline, advocating to get the services so essential for their development. Services such as communication devices, behavioral therapies, training for social skills development, job training, specialized programs, and inclusive services. All are the range of things that some kids need so that they can thrive.

Julia Landau:

Second, we also provide workshops for parents as well as for medical professionals and educators focused on not just the rights in the law, but specific strategies and tools that they can use to make sure that their children or that the families and children they're working with can obtain the services so essential for them to move forward into and thrive.

Julia Landau:

The third advocacy tool is one that we use to address system-wide barriers and obstacles that we identify by working in the trenches with these individual families. And then when it's necessary, we will mobilize and advocate for new laws and policies to make sure that kids have the opportunities they need or will mobilize to enforce the existing laws.

Julia Landau:

Over the years since we've launched a center, we've been able to successfully advocate for a range of new statutes, creating access to services such as communication devices, anti-bullying protections, access to higher education, and a range of other opportunities essential for children to help level the playing field.

Julia Landau:

Our hope as we move forward is to expand our capacity to meet the unmet needs of the parents and families who need our support from the autism center. We want to expand the depth and the breadth of our work with immigrant families and reach families who have children with autism in a wider range of immigrant communities. We plan to increase our focus on the racial justice issues, really focusing on developing the tools to ascertain the racial disparities and then effectively address the racial inequities faced by many children with autism. And in addition, we plan to focus even more intensely on how to make changes to school cultures and policies to more fully include children with autism.

Julia Landau:

There's a lot of work for us all to collectively continue to do, and we truly look forward to the opportunity to continue to collaborate with our partners, disability, educational, medical parent organizations, as we advocate together to ensure that all children and adults with autism have the opportunities they need to thrive and reach their potential.