



Newsletter

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Quarterly News & Updates



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From the Desk of James Parauda, CEO



Author: Cassidy Grom, Communications Director, Autism NJ

Celebrating 25 Years: Inside Suzanne Buchanan's Mission to Support the Autism Community

For many across the state, the name “**Suzanne Buchanan**” is synonymous with “**Autism New Jersey**.” Our agency’s executive director is a staunch advocate for the autism community and uses her clinical expertise, policy savviness, and organizational leadership skills to meet the autism community’s unique needs. She started working for Autism New Jersey in 2000 as the clinical director and 13 years later transitioned into her current role, where she now oversees more than 20 staff members and countless partnerships throughout the state.

With her 25th anniversary with the agency approaching at the end of this month, we thought it was time to sit down with her and take stock of everything that has happened during her tenure so far.

This interview has been condensed and edited and is the first in a series of interviews with the Autism New Jersey staff.

Cassidy Grom: You’ve been with Autism New Jersey for 25 years and the agency has made a lot of progress in the state at that time. What are you most proud of?

Suzanne Buchanan: Oh wow, there is so much that I’m proud of. I’m proud of the rock-star team I’ve built that works so well together to meet the evolving needs of the autism community. I’m proud of some major milestones: we were able to get ABA therapy covered by insurance and Medicaid, we were the lead advocacy organization behind the law requiring behavior analysts to be licensed in New Jersey and we have been working with our Law Enforcement initiative to change how officers interact with individuals with autism.

I’m also very proud that we’ve kept the helpline, conference, and ambassador program going all these years, brought back family services, and developed more robust partnerships with the State Departments of Health and Children and Families.

CG: How has the autism community and the state changed over the past 25 years?

SB: When I first started, when autism was mentioned in the popular press, my family would call me and let me know there was a new article about autism. Somewhere around 2010, that changed, and there was so much more awareness of autism.

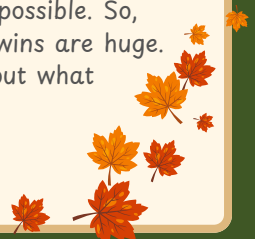
Another big shift has been the expanded definition that includes people who may have previously been considered to have Asperger Syndrome. They have different needs than individuals who would today be considered to have profound autism, those who have limited communication and may exhibit severe challenging behavior. That shift meant both expanding our services to make sure we are addressing everyone’s needs while also focusing our advocacy efforts to help those with profound autism.

CG: If you could snap your fingers and make one change to New Jersey’s autism landscape what would it be?

SB: Generally, I want to reduce suffering in any way that we can. More specifically, that there would be enough treatment professionals to meet our community’s treatment needs, so people can learn new skills, reduce their challenging behavior, and families can have peace of mind. I envision a world where people with autism are safe and valued, and communities are built to be more autism friendly.

CG: When times get tough, how do you stay inspired to do this work?

SB: Compared to what so many individuals and families face every day, my work is easy. They inspire me. It’s their resilience, their heartbreak, all of it – their whole experience makes me want to have the biggest impact possible. So, we do as many small and big things as we can. And as everyone in our community knows, those “small” wins are huge. When we connect a family with an autism-friendly dentist, that’s a win. When we teach pediatricians about what families of children with autism need, that’s a win. When we change state laws, that’s a win.



Something else that drives me is kindness — not just in the moment, but kindness that ripples out and lasts. That's why I keep coming back to this question: "What's going to reduce suffering in the long run and lead to the greatest good?" We've been able to help tens of thousands of families throughout the state, but there are always more people we can reach, and I want to create systemic change to make their lives better.



CG: How has this work at ANJ and the people you met through it impacted your life over the past 25 years?

SB: This work has been the honor of a lifetime. Having the opportunity to reduce other people's suffering while working with people I admire — I just feel like it is my calling. There are jobs, careers, and then there are callings. This is my calling.

My first introduction to autism was babysitting a kid in Flemington when I was an undergraduate. His family was really struggling. His dad took on a second job to pay for therapy. His mom was absolutely exhausted, and his brother couldn't understand why he wouldn't play with him. They changed my life and made me realize that if I can help reduce individuals' and families' suffering even just a little bit, then it is all worth it.

CG: As you look into the next decade for Autism New Jersey, what are your priorities?

SB: Funding for Medicaid programs is top of mind right now. Families need health insurance to access the therapies that help individuals with autism be safe and make progress. And adults with autism need Medicaid-funded home- and community-based services like the Community Care Program and the Supports Program. We're in an uncertain and challenging time.

We are also prioritizing our severe challenging behavior initiative to help keep people with autism and their caregivers safe. And of course, it is our ongoing goal to support families by providing them with accurate information about their rights and provide them with emotional support and opportunities to connect with each other.

Ultimately, we want to connect with anyone who could use our help.

CG: Shifting to some more light-hearted questions; what do you like about where you live?

SB: I live in Allentown, NJ and the whole town is historic. It's beautiful. I love walking down Main Street and learning about the people who came before us.

CG: I heard you eat a lot of sweet potatoes. How many do you estimate that you eat per week?

SB: About two or three.

CG: That's more than 100 a year!

SB: They are a super food!

CG: Our organization is honored to have hundreds of volunteers and ambassadors across the state. So, your son, Michael, volunteers here and I heard your other kids have, too. How have they helped?

SB: Yes, all three have. My older son, C.J., called providers on insurance company lists when we were checking network adequacy. My daughter, Lindsey, digitized our historical paper conference line ups. And my youngest, Michael, is looking into sports and leisure options around the state and how we can expand them so we can get more people involved. We're all in!

As posted in Autism NJ newsletter on 07/10/2025



Executive Director Suzanne Buchanan reflects on 25 years at the agency.

Interested in learning more? Visit <https://autismnj.org/> or [attend their annual conference](#) this October.



Youth Success Story



Maiky, a resilient youth raised by his mother in a single-parent household, faced emotional and behavioral challenges due to the absence of his biological father. At the time of his referral to **CMO**, he was using substances, experiencing suicidal ideation, and his academic performance was declining. Initially resistant to services, Maiky gradually opened up with consistent encouragement from his Care Manager.

He began working with an Intensive in Community therapist, Shantal Rybak, forming a strong connection that led to improvements in communication and reduced substance use. A parent coach supported Ms. Villar in rebuilding the mother-son relationship through better communication and trust.

With advocacy from his Care Manager, Maiky improved his grades and joined the **ROTC** program, which provided structure and motivation. His emotional regulation and behavior improved, and he became more responsible. He stopped using substances, applied for jobs, and passed his written driving exam.

Upon graduating from **CMO** services, Maiky expressed gratitude for the support he and his family received. His journey reflects the impact of therapeutic care and the strength of a young person determined to change.



Partner with us to fundraise for Tri County CMO families

—email **Deja Amos** today! damos@tricountycmo.org

Or click the button below to **DONATE directly from our Website!**

DONATE ♥



Getting to Know TCCMO

Tri County CMO (TCCMO) hosted an Open House at our new Stewartsville satellite office to celebrate the space with a Ribbon Cutting Ceremony. We invited providers from Warren and Hunterdon Counties, as well as the families we serve. Our Event Planning Committee did a fantastic job creating a warm, welcoming atmosphere to showcase our new home.

Guests enjoyed food and desserts including sweet treats baked by one of our own **TCCMO** youth, the proud owner of Soph's Bakery! It was a meaningful moment to connect with this young entrepreneur and hear how support from **TCCMO** helped them overcome challenges.

Youth and families also gathered in the collaborative area to enjoy mood-boosting crafts, provided by one of our Care Management Supervisors and the **Nurtured Heart Approach® (NHA)** Learning and Development Coordinator.

Thanks to the dedication of our staff, the day was a fun and successful celebration of community and teamwork. We appreciate everyone who helped plan, set up, lead tours, and participate!

James Parauda, Chief Executive Officer

"I believe the event went very well, with a great turnout from the community. There were many positive comments about the event, the decorations (especially the balloons), and the new space. We also received excellent press coverage from TAPinto Phillipsburg."

Lindsay Nally, Director of Care Management

"It was such a success! The turnout was great, and we really appreciate all of you who came, led tours, and spoke with families and system partners. I heard so many wonderful comments about our new space and the work we do for the community. The ribbon cutting ceremony was awesome too!"

Kevin Dyches, Learning and Development Coordinator

"A lot of people said they wished our office was theirs. They loved how big the kitchen was and were impressed with the setup for the day!"



Community Corner

Building Stronger Connections: TCCMO's Impact at Back-to-School Nights

This past September, **Tri County CMO's** Community Engagement Coordinators had the pleasure of attending over 30 Back-to-School Nights across the tri-county area. For the second year in a row, our team was honored to visit local elementary, middle, and high schools, where they connected with families and shared valuable information about the services and resources **TCCMO** has to offer.

In addition to engaging with families, the team also built strong connections with students, school staff, and community partners. Attending events like these is essential, as it ensures families know where to turn when seeking individualized, family-centered support.



Growing Greatness

Back to school time! How many of you find it challenging to get your kids back into the swing of things? We've put together an **NHA** toolkit to help make the transition successful.

Stand 1: Don't give in to negativity by pointing out everything your kids are doing wrong. Use your eraser to choose what you don't energize.

Stand 2: Notice all the little steps they're taking in the right direction. Use your highlighter to spotlight those good or neutral actions; it will keep them moving forward.

Stand 3: Give clear directions. Make a rulebook together to define expectations and don't forget to take breaks and reset when needed.

TCCMO offers small group trainings twice a month. Come find out more!

Link: [NHA linktree](#)



Pride in Partnership

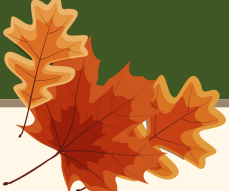
Established through legislation in 1984, the **New Jersey Youth Corps** offers young adults (ages 16–25) an alternative pathway to traditional academic completion. Participants who withdraw from high school before graduating can enroll in **Youth Corps**, where they gain the academic skills needed to earn their diploma while preparing for meaningful employment.

The program integrates community service with classroom instruction, allowing participants to address unmet community needs, strengthen academic abilities, and develop personalized career plans. Post-program transitions may include vocational training, higher education, or direct entry into the workforce.

TCCMO is proud to partner with the Youth Corps of Phillipsburg and the exceptional young adults who take part in its programs. Participants engage with our Impactful Series and the **NHA** Greatness Project initiatives designed to broaden perspectives, inspire growth, and empower them to shape their futures.

To learn more, visit the New Jersey Youth Corps of Phillipsburg.

Link: [NEW JERSEY YOUTH CORPS OF PHILLIPSBURG](#)



F Y I

National Family Caregivers Month

Every **November**, we celebrate caregivers for investing their dedication, time, energy, and empathy towards their loved ones. Caregiving takes on many roles, such as taking care of the household, driving, and attending appointments, along with making legal, financial, or treatment decisions on someone's behalf while advocating for their rights. This heartfelt responsibility can range from listening to a loved one's symptoms/struggles to managing crises. Caregivers go beyond mere obligation, involving a sincere commitment towards a positive impact, and willingness to act with compassion. It also comes with challenges and worries. Approximately 1 out of 4 caregivers have depression. It's important to acknowledge their own feelings and know that they are not alone. Caregiving isn't easy, but there are resources and support available.

Link: [Crisis Planning for Caregivers | Mental Health America](#)

Link: [Coping with Caregiving Stress | Mental Health America](#)

Domestic Violence Awareness Month article



October is **Domestic Violence Awareness Month (DVAM)**, dedicated to raising awareness, supporting survivors, and advocating for prevention. Hunterdon, Somerset, and Warren Counties each have agencies supporting survivors of domestic and sexual violence.

SAFE in Hunterdon helps victims rebuild lives and restore safety with vital resources. Call their 24/7 hotline at 908-788-4044.

Link: <https://safeinhunterdon.org>

Warren County's Domestic Abuse & Sexual Assault Crisis Center (DASACC) serves and advocates for those impacted by violence. Reach them at 908-453-4181.

Link: <https://www.dasacc.org/>

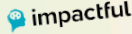
Safe+Sound Somerset offers emergency housing, counseling, legal advocacy, and education. Call 866-685-1122.

Link: <https://safe-sound.org/>

TCCMO thanks these organizations for their dedication and compassion in helping survivors heal and for working toward prevention and lasting change



Events held by TCCMO

Tri County CMO Training Department 

is offering the following IMPACTFUL film screenings to our school and community partners. Choose one or all of the social impact films in the Mental Health Trilogy to view as a community. Film Screenings will be followed by post-film community panel discussion and Q&A. Please contact the **TCCMO Training Department** @ trainingdepartment@tricitycountycmo.org if interested in learning more about this series and how to schedule a screening.

Angst
Learn more at AngstMovie.com

Angst is a film-based program that aims to raise mental health awareness and remove the stigma surrounding anxiety. The program helps young people and their families recognize when anxiety goes beyond a healthy level by providing interviews, tips, and expert advice.

RACE TO BE HUMAN
Learn more at RaceToBeHumanMovie.com

RACE to Be Human is a program that offers actionable strategies for self-reflection and awareness. It combines insights from diverse experts to empower individuals and communities to respect and honor family, dignity, and diversity. The program fosters a sense of belonging and unity across all ethnicities.

UPSTANDERS
Learn more at TheUpstanders.com

"The Upstanders" is a film-based program that explores bullying and cyber-bullying, shares proven strategies, and promotes character building. It inspires qualities such as kindness, honesty, respect, empathy, trust, and connection, and highlights the importance of modeling empathy and resilience to transform attitudes and actions.

LIKE
Learn more at TheLikeMovie.com

The LIKE is a film-based program explores the impact of social media on our lives and the effects of technology on the brain and on learning. Understanding that virtual connection is a huge part of our socialization and can have many benefits, how do we use it to best inform, educate and inspire us to self-regulate, so we can enjoy a more balanced and fulfilled life?

WANT A BETTER CONNECTION WITH YOUR KID?
THEN CHECK THIS OUT
Nurtured Heart Approach

The Nurtured Heart Approach is an essential set of strategies for transforming the most intense children:

- Transforming the Way Children Perceive Themselves, Their Caregivers, and the World Around Them
- Teaching Children They Will Receive Recognition Through Positive Behaviors
- Seeing Intensity as a Powerful Quality That, If Developed Correctly, Can Drive Children to Amazing Achievements

THIS WILL BE CONDUCTED VIRTUALLY TWICE A MONTH

Every 2nd Tuesday of the Month 6:00 PM - 8:30 PM
Every 3rd Wednesday of the Month 10:30 AM - 1:00 PM
To sign up, contact **Janet Hrehowesik** at (908) 255-5697 or jhrehowesik@tricitycountycmo.org. Or scan the QR code



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PerformCare staff are available 24 hours a day, 7 days a week to provide assessment and guidance to families facing challenges to their functioning and well-being.

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1-877-652-7624



<http://www.performcarenj.org/>

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