



Leading the Way

Celebrating Strides Toward Independence

Message From Chief Advancement Officer Nancy Weintraub

Dear Friends & Partners,

This year marks the 25th anniversary of *Strides: Celebrating Disability Pride*, an event that brings people together in celebration of community spirit and disability identity. At Easterseals Southern California (ESSC), we believe that disability pride is about honoring each person's autonomy and lived experience, recognizing that independence takes many forms—living life on one's own terms.

In this issue of *Leading the Way*, you'll see just how that belief comes to life every day across our organization. From Living Options to customized employment support through WorkFirst, ESSC is advancing opportunities so that everyone has the tools they need to lead their own journey.

You'll also discover how innovation is shaping the future of accessibility. ESSC is exploring new ways of utilizing technology in autism services, independent living, even in employment services. Technology leads to greater community inclusion.

Many voices are represented in this issue - voices who lead with purpose and passion. Each has its own representation of Disability Pride.

Thank you so much for being a part of our ongoing journey and for sharing your own version of Disability Pride with us.



With continued appreciation,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Nancy Weintraub', written in a cursive style.

Nancy Weintraub
Chief Advancement Officer
Easterseals Southern California

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Extending Independence

Living Options Reflects Easterseals' Commitment to Choice, Dignity, and Disability Pride

At Easterseals Southern California (ESSC), we believe the pathway to independence isn't the same for everyone; it's a unique journey for each person. Our Living Options service line reflects that belief by supporting people with disabilities in choosing where and how they want to live.

"Living Options is about personal freedom," says Nancy Weintraub, Chief Advancement Officer of ESSC. "It's about making sure people with disabilities have the same choices we all value: where you live, how you spend your day, and who's in your life."

From fully supported homes to individualized living situations, ESSC ensures that each person's voice is central. People decorate their spaces, host gatherings, plan their meals, and carry the keys to homes they call their own.

These are not just housing placements—they're places of pride, belonging, and safety. And they're foundational to everything else: building relationships, pursuing health and employment, and participating fully in community life.

As Weintraub emphasizes, "Independence takes many forms, and at ESSC, we're here to support each person's unique path." ■

Learn more about how Living Options builds community and independence on Page 12.

“Living Options is about personal freedom. It's making sure people with disabilities have the same choices we all value.”

– Nancy Weintraub
Chief Advancement Officer, ESSC



“We’re helping people to be seen for who they are and to be recognized for the talents that they have.”

– Maureen Carasiti
Director of Employment Services, ESSC

Employment With Purpose Through WorkFirst

Where There's Pride in Every Placement

For Maureen Carasiti, Director of Employment Services at Easterseals Southern California (ESSC), employment is more than a job—it's a path to pride, independence, and connection. “We believe in the capacity of everyone,” she says. “If someone wants to work, we'll help them find work.”

ESSC's WorkFirst service line provides customized employment services designed to uncover a person's strengths and talents through a process called Discovery. “We ask, ‘Do I know enough about this person to find their ideal conditions of employment?’” Maureen explains. From there, her team identifies employers whose needs align with the person's skills—not their disability.

That commitment drives her leadership of WorkFirst, where she's helped grow the team from just a few job coaches to nearly 30 employment specialists focused on creating long-term, individualized opportunities.

The result? Jobs that are meaningful, lasting, and life changing.

“Employment is the bridge to life,” Maureen adds. “It's where disability pride becomes something you can see.” ■

A Job With Meaning: Jordan's Story

Turning Skills Into Opportunity and Independence

Before Jordan landed his current job at U.S. Battery Co., he was earning just \$1.38 an hour through a federal subminimum wage program for people with disabilities. Easterseals Southern California's Employment Services helped change his path toward independence.

"We learn about the individual, we learn about their ideal conditions of work. We learn what skills they have, their personal genius," said Maureen Carasiti, Director of Employment Services. "So, we landed at U.S. Battery."

After touring the factory, Jordan immediately said, "I want to work here." He now thrives in the pasting department, playing a vital role in battery production.

"I like working there because it's behind-the-scenes work," said Jordan. "Factory work is something I'm very used to."

In just one week, Jordan earned more than he had in 11 years. His mom, Tami, shared, "Jordan, I think inside, always knew that he could accomplish a lot." He once told her, "I'm not just autistic. There're other parts to me, mom." ■

**"Easterseals
found out who
Jordan was."**

– Tami, Jordan's mom





Jobs Change Lives

Debbie Ball Reflects on Employment Equity

Employment has long been a critical issue for people with disabilities, and Debbie Ball spent her 34-year-long career working to change that.

Recently retired, Debbie led the WorkFirst team in building inclusive pathways to work as former Vice President of Employment Services at Easterseals Southern California.

"Statistically, people with disabilities are more likely to be unemployed and living under the poverty level," Debbie says. "Employment gives people income, purpose, and dignity."

Under Debbie's leadership, WorkFirst expanded innovative services like customized employment, a model that costs less annually than many traditional programs while achieving far greater outcomes. It also benefits families: "When someone gets a job, their whole family's life changes."

Debbie's message is clear: supporting people with disabilities to find meaningful work isn't just good for them—it's good for our economy, communities, and collective future. ■

Why Inclusive Employment Matters



Over 70 million Americans have a disability.

Source: Centers for Disease Control and Prevention



Only 22.7% of people with disabilities were employed in 2024.

Source: U.S. Department of Labor Bureau of Labor Statistics



Inclusive companies see 28% higher revenue and 2x net income compared to peers.

Source: Accenture



Most accessibility accommodations cost less than \$500 per employee.

Source: Job Accommodation Network





Strides Turns 25

Celebrating Disability Pride, Progress, and Visibility

Twenty-five years ago, what began as a fundraising event for Easterseals Southern California (ESSC) has since scaled into a movement. Today, *Strides* is a celebration of identity, inclusion, and community.

In the early days, the event's focus was on raising money and awareness, where people with and without disabilities came together to support ESSC's mission. Over time, more and more people attending had a disability or a personal connection to disability—family members, friends, and allies, came together not just to raise funds, but to claim space, be visible, and celebrate who they are. That's when the event began to shift from a fundraiser into a movement.

“This community is here, and it matters.”

— Mark Whitley
President and CEO, ESSC

Society, too, has increasingly recognized the importance of disability inclusion, and Strides has evolved to reflect this cultural shift. In fact, the event's name was changed to *Strides*, an intentional move to center the event around the disability community.

The concept of “disability pride” wasn't always mainstream. “Those two words, ‘disability’ and ‘pride’ hadn't been seen together before,” Mark Whitley, President and CEO of Easterseals Southern California explains. “It was considered edgy. But we embraced that, as seen in our ‘Disability Is Not a Dirty Word’ campaign. Pride is about visibility, and visibility is how we build inclusion.”



Each year, *Strides* offers a space where people with disabilities, families, and allies can come together and be seen, not as an afterthought, but as the heart of the community. It's not just an event; it's an expression of identity.

Strides has grown beyond expectations. It's now a place where families bring their kids to experience a community where people with disabilities are not only present but celebrated. Corporations and community groups show up with teams and signs, demonstrating their public support for inclusion.

And last year's move to Angel Stadium took things to a whole new level.

"The visibility was incredible," Whitley recalls. "To see disability pride on the Jumbotron, loud and clear, sent a message not just to those in the stadium, but to the broader public: this community is here, and it matters."

"We've created a place where everyone can show up and be themselves with pride."

— Mark Whitley, President and CEO, ESSC

Strides is just one part of a larger strategy by Easterseals to change the way disability is seen and understood. From initiatives in media and entertainment, such as the *Reimagining Hollywood: A New Lens on Disability Inclusion* report, the Easterseals Disability Film Challenge, and the Media Access Awards, to partnerships with professional sports teams and community leaders, ESSC is working on every front to ensure that disability inclusion is a reality.

"*Strides* is where people can physically show up and be together," Whitley says. "It's how we build momentum." ■

"We're changing the way people see disability—and *Strides* is part of that story."

— Mark Whitley, President and CEO, ESSC

Q & A

A Conversation About Strides

**Mark Whitley, ESSC CEO,
Reflects on 25 Years of Growth**

Q *What was the original inspiration for Strides?*

It began as *Walk With Me*, a way to connect people to our mission and raise support. But as more people with disabilities and their families joined, it became clear this wasn't just a fundraiser—it was a community event.

Q *How has the tone shifted?*

Now it's about pride. "Disability" and "pride" weren't words you saw together before. But they belong together.

Q *What stands out about this year's event?*

Last year, we moved to Angel Stadium and that visibility was game-changing. We're building on that momentum this year.

Q *Why is this work important?*

Easterseals has been around for 106 years, and now Easterseals Southern California serves over 25,000 people annually. The services are life-changing. But beyond that, we're helping shape public perception. Inclusion. Representation. That's what this is about.



“The day makes me happy.”

– Adam Rochte, *Strides and Easterseals* participant

More Than an Event

Turning a Walk Into a 15-Year Tradition of Disability Pride

For Christie and her family, attending the *Strides* event began with navigating a deeply personal loss, but has since become a lifelong tradition.

Fifteen years ago, Christie’s son Adam, who has Down Syndrome, was attending Easterseals Adult Day Services in San Pedro when the family learned about *Strides*. That same weekend, they were also honoring the memory of her mother-in-law, a woman who lived a life of service. With extended family already gathered, they decided to walk together in her honor and ended up finding something much bigger.

“That first year, it just clicked,” Christie says. “It was such a great event, and it became a tradition. Every year after that, we show up as a team.”

Their team, called Adam Rochte #638, even has a logo and bright orange capes, designed by a friend. The event brings family together, not just physically but emotionally. “Adam just beams all day,” Christie says. “We all cross the finish line together. It’s love—pure and simple.”

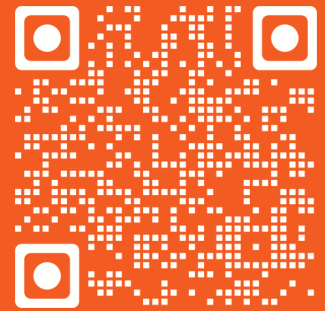
As they mark their 15th event in the 25th year of *Strides*, Christie says the biggest shift she’s seen is how the event—and society—has grown to embrace the concept of disability pride. “But now, it feels natural—and that’s because of events like this. It’s visibility. It’s representation. And it’s long overdue.”

“In the beginning, as parents, we were overwhelmed by everything we were told Adam wouldn’t be able to do,” she explains. “But being part of Easterseals and *Strides* changed that. They’ve never focused on what he can’t do. It’s always been about celebrating him as a person—his growth, his individuality, and his success.”

OCTOBER 25

ANGEL STADIUM, ANAHEIM, CA

Join us this fall for the 25th annual *Strides* celebration.
Bring your family, your team, and your pride!



Get Involved in *Strides*



Over the years, Christie's family has come to recognize the other returning teams and faces—volunteers, families, and supporters. "You might not know everyone by name, but you feel the warmth. It's like a reunion. You leave feeling uplifted."

Most of all, Christie says, *Strides* reminds her of what truly matters: being seen and celebrated for who you are. "There's no pity here, no sadness—just joy. Adam isn't labeled. He's not stared at. He's celebrated."

That celebration isn't limited to the day of the event either. Through their fundraising, the family sees real, tangible results. "When Adam's program gets something new with funds from our team, they tell us, and I pass that on to our supporters," she says. "It means something to people to see where their donations go."

Now, 15 years in, Christie reflects on what keeps them coming back. "*Strides* focuses on the individual, not the disability. It supports families in helping their loved ones live their biggest, best life. And for us, that means everything." ■

"You walk away feeling better about the world. That's what *Strides* does—it shows the good, the love, the pride."

– Christie Rochte, *Strides* participant

A Place to Call Home

How ESSC's Living Options Service Line Builds Community, Pride, and Lasting Independence

For more than 30 years, Easterseals Southern California (ESSC) has helped individuals with disabilities live on their own terms. Through its Living Options service line, ESSC has supported thousands of people's transition from institutional settings to homes filled with pride, community, and self-direction.

"When we started, people were coming out of state hospitals with no transition, no history. We just received a file," recalled Lupe Trevizo-Reinoso, Vice President of Living Options. "We'd find them housing and build support around their needs, not the other way around. From day one, the individual got to meet the staff and choose who they wanted in their life."

That model, centered on dignity and personal choice, has grown into a powerful system. Today, ESSC owns 23 residential homes and recently partnered with U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) to launch a new, innovative housing initiative. The project aims to convert a former skilled nursing facility into ten individual, affordable studio apartments for low-income adults, including those with disabilities and unhoused families. It's a bold next step that could become a national model.

"This project will allow people to live on their own, pay only a third of their income in rent, and choose whether they want services from ESSC or not," Lupe said. "We want to keep families together and build connection between generations, cultures, and abilities."

The sense of pride and community fostered through Living Options is clear. "They're very proud of where they live. They decorate their own home. They decorate their own rooms. They are in charge of what they eat. They're in charge of their menus," Lupe explained.

ESSC's team works to provide each person with stability and safety. In doing so, people often experience dramatic progress, from cooking their first meal to navigating complex health systems or finding their first job. Some residents, who were previously institutionalized for decades, now proudly carry keys to their homes and host neighbors for barbecues.

"There's a deep sense of belonging," said Lupe. "People know they're safe, and that gives them the foundation to do everything else: build relationships, take care of their health, and plan for the future."

In an era where housing insecurity and limited access to services continue to threaten individuals with disabilities, ESSC is charting a new course rooted in inclusion and the power of choice. ■





Continuing a Legacy of Compassion

"You can count on my support at the end of each year until I can't write those checks anymore."

For Carol Smith, giving is more than an annual tradition. It's a legacy of love and community that spans generations.

Her commitment began alongside her late mother, a devoted supporter of Easterseals who lived to be 104 years old. Every year, the two of them would sit down to send a donation together, a ritual rooted in their deep care for their community. "My mom believed in giving back," Carol shares. "And I always helped her write those checks. When she passed, I knew I had to keep it going."

Inspired by her mother's generous spirit, Carol not only continued the tradition but also went a step further. After receiving a modest inheritance, she researched Easterseals more thoroughly. She ultimately decided to hand-deliver a meaningful gift directly to her local Easterseals therapy center, an act of kindness that perfectly reflects her hands-on, heartfelt approach to giving. "I always do my homework," she says. "I was impressed by how Easterseals uses its resources wisely and with care. That matters to me."

Carol was born in Carmel-by-the-Sea and spent her early years in Lynwood, California. As she built a life and family of her own, she made her home in Bellflower, and eventually moved to Cerritos to be closer to her beloved "mama." She has called Cerritos home ever since, finding joy in a close-knit community of friends and neighbors.

Throughout her life, Carol has carried a strong sense of purpose. She began by selling Avon, later became a union grocery checker, and eventually took a position working directly for the union. She retired early to help run her mother's gift shop in Artesia, which they operated together until it closed in 2002.

Carol is an only child and a proud mother to one son. While she doesn't have grandchildren, her generosity has impacted countless children and families across Southern California. "I may not have grandkids," she says, "but I still want to make a difference for someone else's."

That spirit of compassion extends beyond Easterseals. Carol is also a passionate animal lover and supports a variety of animal welfare and health and human services causes.

Her story is a powerful reminder that philanthropy isn't just about writing a check; it's about honoring the values we inherit, the choices we make, and the lives we touch along the way.

Thank you, Carol, for carrying the torch and continuing to light the way for others. ■



Innovation in Action

How Technology is Reimagining Service Delivery

At Easterseals Southern California (ESSC), we believe that quality services begin with bold ideas and even bolder partnerships. Our new Center of Excellence is proof of that commitment. This 14,000-square-foot, first-of-its-kind facility will bring best-in-class therapeutic services under one roof for individuals with autism, intellectual and developmental disabilities (IDD) and co-occurring mental health conditions.

Industry's interest, especially from the technology sector, is a reflection of ESSC's cutting-edge therapeutic approach to services. "We're actively seeking partners who are not just leaders in innovation but also committed to shaping the future of healthcare," says Paula Pompa-Craven, Psy.D., Chief Clinical Officer. "Companies like Apple and T-Mobile exemplify that leadership." Together, ESSC and these types of companies are exploring how design, technology, and scalable solutions can transform care.

The Center will address a critical gap: families currently must navigate multiple systems, or even leave the state, to access complex behavior services. Too often, individuals in crisis end up in emergency rooms or with law enforcement because no better options exist. The Center changes that reality with safe, therapeutic spaces featuring smart design, wearables that track early signs of escalation, and technology that reduces administrative work so clinicians can focus on people.

“This Center will be a game-changer.”

– Paula Pompa-Craven, Psy.D., Chief Clinical Officer



Center of Excellence Renderings



Services will include applied behavior analysis (ABA), behavioral health, family support, and integrated monitoring delivered through ESSC’s whole-person, whole-family model. Importantly, the Center is designed to be replicated nationwide. “This isn’t just about Southern California,” says Paula. “The more we share what works, the more inclusive the system becomes.”

The Center also reflects ESSC’s belief in celebrating people with disabilities as whole individuals with talents, struggles, and aspirations. Donor support is essential to open the doors, and the need is urgent: ESSC has a long waitlist of individuals requiring severe behavior services.

As Paula notes, “When companies like Apple invest, not just financially, but ethically and intellectually, they help shift entire systems toward equity and respect. That’s what this center is about.” ■



Center of Excellence Renderings Legend

1. Welcome and Waiting Area
2. 24 Hour Crisis Management Center
3. Transitional Lounge



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ANGEL STADIUM, ANAHEIM, CA

A quarter-century of community, inclusion,
and Disability Pride—let's make this
milestone one to remember!

