



Governor's Advisory Council for Exceptional Citizens (GACEC) 516 West Loockerman St., Dover, DE 19904
302-739-4553 (voice) 302-739-6126 (fax) <http://www.gacec.delaware.gov>

FY2026 Budget Statement – November 12, 2024

Good afternoon, Director Cade and Office of Management and Budget Representatives:

My name is Pam Weir, and I am the Executive Director of the Governor's Advisory Council for Exceptional Citizens, also known as the GACEC. Our Council Chair, Ann Fisher, expressed her regrets that she could not join us today.

The building that houses the GACEC, Massey Station, continues to receive needed maintenance. The Office of Management and Budget (OMB) and the Division of Facilities Management (DFM) teams have been an amazingly diligent, hard-working group. We are very grateful for their attention to preserving the building's history and maintaining a safe and pleasant work environment for Massey Station occupants.

The technology needed to support the work of the GACEC has been updated and enhanced. The Department of Technology and Information (DTI) continues to diligently support GACEC staff and Council with all requests needed to adapt to the ever-changing needs of persons with disabilities and exceptionalities. We are very grateful for OMB and DTI's investment in this community.

The GACEC has been in existence since 1972. We serve as the State Advisory Panel for the State of Delaware under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). In that role, we monitor services and make recommendations for students with exceptionalities to the Governor, General Assembly, Secretary of Education, and the State Board of Education. In 1977, the State of Delaware enhanced the role of the GACEC to include advising and advocating on the unmet service needs of all citizens with exceptionalities from birth to death. That change expanded our role to provide advice and information to other agencies such as the Department of Health and Social Services (DHSS), the Department of Transportation (DeIDOT), the Department of

Services for Children, Youth and their Families (DSCYF), the Delaware State Housing Authority (DSHA) and other advocacy organizations across the State. Since the passage of Senate Bill 20 in 2014, the Council is also mandated to meet annually with representatives of the Delaware Department of Education (DOE) and the Department of Corrections (DOC) to discuss the operation of the joint prison education program.

This past year, the GACEC worked on several critical pieces of legislation, including 22 bills and 34 regulations. Several were passed and signed this past legislative session. I want to highlight a few that impact individuals with disabilities and children qualifying for special education services.

House Bill No. 263, Meal Debt Restrictions on Student Participation in Extracurricular Activities. Council supported this legislation as it enables children to participate in extracurricular activities regardless of their family's financial status and will prohibit schools from excluding a student from participating in a school-sponsored extracurricular activity because the student has an outstanding debt for unpaid school meals. Extracurricular activities are defined to include band, clubs, homecoming, interscholastic sports, prom, student government and graduation ceremonies. The Governor signed the bill on August 2, 2024.

House Substitute 1 to House Bill No. 293, Accessible Polling Places. Council supported this legislation that requires the Department of Elections to ensure that polling places are fully accessible. The Governor signed the bill on October 23, 2024

Senate Bill No. 309, Uniform Healthcare Decisions Act. This legislation updates the Delaware Code concerning healthcare decision-making. It includes better definitions of capacity, adds advanced mental healthcare directives, and rewrites the Delaware health surrogacy code. Council collaborated with Senator Gay to provide feedback to the sponsors of this legislation prior to its release, which led to various discussions and changes. The bill was signed by the Governor on September 30, 2024.

Senate Concurrent Resolution 119 established the Student Behavior and School Climate Task Force. Council contacted the resolutions' sponsors about including the GACEC as Delaware's mandated State Advisory Panel under the IDEA. After much discussion with the Resolution sponsors, the Council was invited to provide feedback as part of the general public but, unfortunately, was not added to the list of task force members.

The GACEC performance measures are different from those of other agencies because we do not provide direct client services. In response to our first performance measure, Council sent over 1,300 letters to the General Assembly, the Department of Education, DHSS, and other agencies in this past year. Through our correspondence, the GACEC assists these agencies with their understanding of the implications of regulatory and legislative changes on the lives of individuals with disabilities.

Council members and staff are fully committed to improving the lives of Delawareans with exceptionalities through collaboration with other stakeholders. The Council and staff are honored to work with our Governor, Lieutenant Governor, legislators, cabinet secretaries, state agencies, and nonprofit organizations. To address our second performance measure, Council members and staff participate on over 60 advisory boards, committees, or taskforces, including the Center for Disabilities Studies Community Advisory Council, the LIFE Conference Planning Committee, the State Council for Persons with Disabilities, and other stakeholder groups formed by the Department of Education or General Assembly.

The Council continues to educate the public and the disability community on disability issues and services related to children, youth, and adults through various presentations, workshops, newsletters, and conferences. The Council advises and provides recommendations to agency heads and legislators for systemic change activities. Through our efforts, individuals with disabilities and their families can provide input into the design and provision of needed community services.

Our third performance measure tracks individuals contacted via outreach and awareness activities. Since the pandemic, the GACEC has provided information to the public utilizing hybrid, in-person, and virtual formats to meet the needs of members, constituents, and stakeholders. Council has connected with over 2,881 individuals through various online and in-person conferences and workshops on issues relevant to the disability community. This year, the GACEC has participated in several outreach events and has many more on the calendar for the coming months. The GACEC is working collaboratively with the Parent Information Center of Delaware (PIC) to provide training and in-person mentorship opportunities to enhance family training and advocacy. Additionally, I am pleased to report that, for the second year, the GACEC has partnered with the YMCA of Delaware to convene resource fairs, share resources, and highlight Disability History and Awareness Month.

In 2021, we finalized the newest upgrades to the Delaware Disability Hub (DeIDHub) transition website and are continuing to make the GACEC website more ADA-accessible. The DeIDHub transition website provides information and resources for transitioning youth, their families, and educators around the State. The DeIDHub received over 20,291 hits with over 13,124 unique visitors from September 2023

through September 2024- up from last year's totals of 17,597 and 12,233 during the same period. I noted in last year's report that we planned to organize a DeIDHub Advisory Committee to ensure the information provided within the website is as current and effective as possible. I am happy to report that the committee was formed, met 9 times, developed marketing materials, and informed several updates and additions to the site. Plans for this year are already underway and include enhanced marketing efforts and in-person classroom training.

Navigating the post-Covid world continues to be a challenge for all of us. Our community has seen much change as cherished staff and friends across this field have retired after many years of invaluable service or decided to exit for other reasons. While these losses have created a great void, they have ushered in new faces and future allies. This time of change provides an excellent opportunity. While the GACEC is a small agency with a small budget, we always try to do our part and be mindful in times of crisis. Our Governor-appointed volunteers and staff will continue to do our best with the resources we are provided to monitor and provide advice and advocacy on behalf of individuals with exceptionalities. We need to continue investing in our children, and we particularly know how important it is to invest in children with disabilities.

Our only requests for this fiscal year are the funds allocated for us for the SEUS (Secure End User Services). We were directed to add 16.0 to our base budget for FY26 for the DTI SEUS billing and 25.1 as our allotment of the FY2025 contingency funds for increases in personnel costs. We are still researching costs for a project that we hope to bring to your attention next year and will request additional funding for that activity at that time. In the meantime, we will continue to work towards fulfilling our mission and using the funds we are provided as effectively and efficiently as possible.

Thank you again for this opportunity to share our budgetary information with you. I wish you well.

In Service,

Pam Weir

Executive Director

[Governor's Advisory Council for Exceptional Citizens \(GACEC\)](#)