

# Leading The Way

Nurturing Bright Futures







Message from  
Chief Advancement Officer  
**Nancy Weintraub**

Dear Friends & Partners,

Spring is a season of growth and fresh possibilities—a time when we are reminded of the incredible potential in the children and families we serve. At Easterseals Southern California (ESSC), this spirit of renewal is at the heart of our work, especially in our Child Development Centers, where we provide early intervention, educational support, and family wellness programming for children ages 0-5.

This issue of *Leading the Way* highlights our impact, including new grants expanding our reach to innovative, outdoor spaces at the facility in Ventura, early intervention's vital role in shaping a child's future, the importance of mental health resources for families, and the power of community events to unite people.

We are deeply grateful for the partnerships and support that make this work possible. Together, we are planting the seeds for lifelong success—ensuring that every child will reach their full potential.

Thank you for being part of this journey. We invite you to celebrate the season of hope and renewal with us, whether by engaging with our programs, attending our upcoming events, or simply sharing the joy of the progress we are making together.

With continued appreciation,

Nancy Weintraub

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# A New Era of Learning

## Child Development Services: Innovation & Community

We look forward to introducing a newly renovated facility in Ventura County, a cutting-edge space designed to serve 200 children and their families. This state-of-the-art center will feature expansive outdoor learning spaces, gardens, and interactive STREAM (Science, Technology, Reading, Engineering, Art, and Math) areas that promote curiosity and hands-on learning.

With a focus on play and exploration, the outdoor classrooms and gardens will encourage children to engage with nature while learning essential skills. Families will benefit from expanded services, including education, mental health support, and wellbeing resources. Community events will bring connection between children, families and neighbors and opportunities to learn together. As ESSC looks ahead in 2025 and beyond, the vision is clear: expanding early childhood programs, improving mental health resources, and ensuring that families most in need receive services.







Through our presence at events like The Festival of Human Abilities, we're building a stronger, more inclusive community—one that sees, supports, and celebrates every individual's abilities.

— Linda Glasco, ESSC's Director of Community Engagement

## Limitless Possibilities

### Celebrating and Building Community

Every January, the Festival of Human Abilities at the Aquarium of the Pacific celebrates the creativity and talents of people with disabilities through sharing resources, performances, art, and interactive activities.

This year, we engaged festivalgoers with an information booth featuring a spinning wheel and our Autism Therapy Robot, Hans. Leading our presence at the festival is Linda Glasco, ESSC's Director of Community Engagement. Passionate about people, Linda fosters connections, brings community members together, and spreads Easterseals' mission of inclusion and empowerment.

Events like these allow the public to witness firsthand how individuals with disabilities thrive. From dance groups like Straight Up Abilities to artists creating masterpieces with wheelchairs, the festival proves that disability does not limit potential.



## Hollywood Inclusion

### Leading the Way in the Entertainment Industry

At the 2025 Sundance Film Festival, the documentary *Marlee Matlin: Not Alone Anymore*, directed by Shoshannah Stern, premiered, portraying Matlin's career as a Deaf actress.

Following the premiere, ESSC's Nancy Weintraub and Easterseals Disability Film Challenge (EDFC) founder Nic Novicki discussed disability representation in a panel hosted by TheWrap, a renowned industry news source. During the festival, they also announced the 2025 Easterseals Disability Film Challenge, encouraging filmmakers to create short films that showcase talent with disabilities.

Building on this momentum, ESSC released the report, *Reimagining Hollywood: A New Lens on Disability Inclusion*, spotlighting the state of disability representation in entertainment. Uplifting the importance of authentic representation in the media is an essential way to show what's possible when everyone has the opportunity to thrive.

Through events like Sundance, the Easterseals Disability Film Challenge, and our *Reimagining Hollywood* report, we're leading the way in shifting perceptions and ensuring disability inclusion remains a fundamental part of the entertainment industry."

— Nancy Weintraub  
Chief Advancement Officer, ESSC



Enjoying the Sundance Film Festival are (left to right): Mark Whitley, ESSC President & CEO, Nancy Weintraub, ESSC Chief Advancement Officer, Marlee Matlin, Actress, Shoshannah Stern, Film Director, and Brynne Jones, ESSC Senior Director, Partnerships.



The 2024 school year began with the grand opening of ESSC’s **Child Development Center (CDC) in Encinitas**, expanding early education opportunities for children and providing comprehensive family support services.

The center features nine spacious classrooms, an inclusive outdoor learning area, a prep kitchen, a garden, and an observation room for parents. It will initially offer Head Start and Early Head Start programs for children ages two to five.

Community support played a vital role in bringing this vision to life. ESSC is especially grateful to corporate partner PNC Bank, which contributed books, learning kits, and teacher gift cards.

Beyond education, the new CDC supports families with nutrition assistance, parent resources, and advocacy programs thanks to the CEK Foundation. In partnership with the Neighborhood House Association, the Center ensures children receive fresh, multicultural meals.



## New Beginnings in Encinitas

Welcoming Families to Our State-of-the-Art Center

We are thrilled to offer families a beautiful space where children can learn, grow, and thrive. With more classrooms and multi-use spaces, we are able to better serve our community.

— Karen Rojas, Regional Director of Child Development Services



Parents also have access to a Family Service Worker and a food pantry.

Through this facility, ESSC can support the most critically underserved populations and their children in North San Diego.



## Early Childhood Impact

### How ESSC’s Programs Help Families Thrive

ESSC provides comprehensive early childhood education and family support for children from birth to age five through Head Start programming.



From 2022-2023, ESSC served **1,313** children across San Bernardino, Ventura, and North San Diego counties.

In San Bernardino, children meeting developmental benchmarks grew significantly (percentage growth) in **approaches to learning (88%)**, **social-emotional development (74%)**, and **language and literacy (63%)** from the first to the third assessment.





## Building Bright Futures

### Child Services Director Liz Mulligan's Mission to Support Young Learners

For Liz Mulligan, being ESSC's Area Director of Child Development Services for San Bernardino County is more than a lifelong career—it's a calling. For 21 years, she has dedicated herself to ensuring every child and family that comes through their doors receives the highest quality care, setting them on a path to lifelong success.

Mulligan's journey in early childhood education began in 2003 when she wanted to gain experience in teaching after graduating college. She became a Head Start teacher just a year after ESSC received its first Head Start grant, drawn in by their commitment to supporting low-income families and children with disabilities. Since then, she has witnessed children she once supported entering high school and college and thriving in the workforce.

"What keeps me passionate is seeing the transformation—not just in children but in families," Mulligan says. "We help parents build a strong foundation, gain education, and become better caregivers. That impact lasts a lifetime." From birth to age five, the early years are

crucial for brain development, social-emotional growth, and learning. At ESSC's centers in San Bernardino, San Diego, and Ventura counties, a holistic approach ensures children and families receive the support they need. Programs include:

- **Individualized Learning:** Tailored curriculum to meet developmental milestones.
- **Mental Health & Behavioral Support:** Licensed counselors and partnerships for additional resources.
- **Health & Nutrition:** Screenings, immunizations, and food vouchers for nutritious meals.
- **Family Engagement:** Workshops and initiatives to strengthen parent involvement.

Mulligan is committed to ensuring children are ready for kindergarten, providing them with a safe, nurturing space to explore, build relationships, and develop essential skills.

Recent funding is expanding ESSC's ability to serve more children and families:

- **\$2.7 Million Expansion Grant:** Supports 96 additional children (ages 0-3) in center-based care.
- **Outdoor Classrooms & STREAM Learning:** Integrating science, technology, reading, engineering, arts, and math into hands-on experiences.
- **Parent Engagement Initiatives:** Increasing family participation in early education.
- **Food Assistance:** \$15,000 in food vouchers to help families access healthy groceries.

Mulligan is also working on securing additional funding for transportation, a food pantry, mental health services, and access to medical care. One of her most memorable moments came when a parent—who previously had a child in the program—returned to ESSC as a staff member, sharing how those early experiences shaped their life.



"We are changing lives, one child and one family at a time," Mulligan said. "When I see children thriving and families becoming stronger, I know we're making a real difference."

As ESSC continues to grow, Mulligan remains focused on her mission: giving every child the opportunity to learn, play, and succeed—starting from the very beginning.







# Protecting Essential Services

## Medicaid Provides Lifelines for Millions With Disabilities



Medicaid, a joint federal-state program, provides critical healthcare and support services for individuals with disabilities and those with limited income. In California, this program is known as Medi-Cal. These programs benefit individuals and families to live safely and to the fullest alongside their families in their homes and communities.

Easterseals services help people thrive, from early childhood through adulthood. Just ask Raquel, whose son Dominic defied expectations. “Doctors told us Dominic would never walk, but he’s running now! Without Easterseals, I don’t know what I would have done.”

Medi-Cal is a primary source of funding, ensuring access to vital Easterseals services, including:

- Adult Day Services
- Child Development & Autism Services that help kids like Dominic reach milestones.
- Living Options to promote independence.
- Employment Services that create economic opportunities.



With 15 million Californians relying on Medi-Cal, ensuring access to funding is more important than ever. Make your voice heard, visit the QR code to learn more.

# Free Mental Health Support

## New Virtual Resources for California’s Youth

California families now have access to two free virtual youth mental health resources.

**BrightLife Kids** supports parents in helping children ages 0-12 manage emotions, social challenges, and family relationships, and offers access to coaches with experience supporting a range of communities and educational videos and podcasts to build confidence and structure at home.

**Soluna** provides a confidential space for teens and young adults ages 13-25 to chat with professional coaches, access interactive tools, and engage in peer forums, and includes digital journals, stress management activities, and resources to boost emotional resilience.

These tools are free to all California residents, regardless of income, insurance, or immigration status—no insurance or referrals needed. Visit [calhope.org](http://calhope.org).





Seeing this partnership come to fruition during this game was truly so special... It was a testament to the team's genuine investment in our shared mission to make Orange County more inclusive for all. And we're just getting started!

— Brynne Jones, Senior Director of Partnerships



## Breaking the Ice Together

### Anaheim Ducks & Easterseals Team Up for Disability Inclusion

ESSC and the Anaheim Ducks celebrated their new partnership with Disability Inclusion Game Day at the Honda Center, bringing together more than 300 ESSC participants, families, and staff for an exciting inclusive evening.

Guests were welcomed with a fun giveaway of beanies, along with information about resources and services. To kick things off, the Ducks honored ESSC with their Community Hero Award, presented to Matthew, an ESSC Living Options resident, and Andres Rojas, Residential Administrator.

The celebration continued with Autism Services graduates Samantha and Jack, who joined DJ Jojo for a high-energy hype moment, while another graduate, Vihaan experienced the thrill of a Zamboni ride. The Ducks truly showcased their commitment to inclusion throughout the event, and this is just the beginning of their efforts.

With in-arena signage and sponsorship of the San Diego Ducks Sled Hockey Team, the Ducks and ESSC will continue to create more opportunities for children and families to experience the joy of movement, teamwork, and community—on and off the ice.



## Teamwork and Community in Times of Crisis

When wildfires threatened Easterseals' Living Options homes in Pasadena, the strength of the community became apparent. As the flames approached, staff and residents faced an urgent evacuation. Through resilience and collaboration, they transformed a crisis into an opportunity for care and connection.

### Acting Fast: A Safe Evacuation

On the evening of January 7, ESSC's Residential Administrator Sandra Sahagun received a notification that a rapidly spreading brush fire had ignited in nearby Eaton Canyon.

While Sandra coordinated evacuation efforts at one house, Living Options Director Ernesto Vasquez rushed to the second house.

For many residents, routine is vital, and the sudden need to evacuate was frightening. Despite the pressure, staff remained calm and supportive, guiding residents as they gathered essential items.

After arriving safely at a vacant Living Options home outside the evacuation zone, staff quickly assessed each resident's needs. Colleagues from another nearby Living Options home pitched in, providing everything from meals and supplies to emotional support. Shortly thereafter, some residents relocated to homes in La Verne and Covina to ensure everyone had a safe place to stay. Throughout the relocation process, Sandra traveled around to ensure the residents settled in. "It was a true team effort," she noted.

### Supporting Every Individual

Joan, a client in ESSC's Independent Living and Supported Living Services (ILS/SLS) program, also needed to evacuate. Life Skills Coach Teresa Dejongh had already packed Joan's belongings, which helped ease the transition. Though Joan initially resisted leaving, Teresa's calm reassurance helped Joan throughout the process.



Joan's 24-hour support remained uninterrupted, ensuring a sense of continuity and safety.

### Helping with Recovery

To support the emotional well-being of the residents who evacuated, Sandra reached out to Megan Schiff, a Board Certified Behavior Analyst (BCBA), who developed a guide for staff to support stressed residents. Megan also created a storyboard to visually explain the evacuation process, helping residents process what had happened.

As the crisis unfolded, ESSC team members came together to help. And behind the scenes, many people worked tirelessly to prepare for the safe return of residents to their homes. By the end of the second week, the homes were prepared, and the residents could settle back in.

"They were so happy to be back," Ernesto shared. "It was wonderful to see."

"This experience revealed the strength of our team and the resilience of our community," said Lupe Trevizo-Reinoso, Vice President of Living Options.

So many ESSC team members truly went above and beyond to protect residents throughout the crisis, demonstrating the power of teamwork, compassion, and community. We are truly stronger together.



# Inclusive Play on Screen

## Children's Shows That Celebrate Disability

Children learn about the world through stories, and representation in media shapes their understanding. Yet only 16 percent of children's programming features characters with disabilities, leaving many children without on-screen role models who reflect their experiences.

Despite this, there are some standout animated television shows that portray disability with care and authenticity.

In collaboration with ESSC's Autism Services Team, *Thomas and Friends: All Engines Go* introduced Bruno, an autistic brake car. *Bluey*, another popular show, features Dougie, who communicates using sign language, and Jack, a pup with ADHD. *Daniel Tiger's Neighborhood* also has two notable characters with disabilities: Chrissie, who has cerebral palsy, and Max, who is autistic. And the series *Hop* embraces differences by featuring multiple characters with disabilities having playful adventures.

By celebrating disabilities, these programs foster understanding among young viewers and promote the importance of including everyone.



# Waves of Possibility

## Surf Therapy Creates Confidence in Kids

Easterseals partnered with A Walk on Water (AWOW) to host Autism Walk on Water, a surfing therapy event for children with autism.

Surfing is more than just a sport—it's a pathway to confidence. For children with autism, new experiences can feel overwhelming. Expert instructors guided participants safely through one-on-one surfing lessons, building up their self-esteem and ensuring they felt safe and supported as they rode their first waves.

This event reminds us that growth happens when we go beyond our comfort zones, and that all children should have opportunities for joyful ways to thrive.







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RETURN TO SENDER



## Give Joy. Change Lives. Be the Difference.

Spring is a time of growth, possibility, and new beginnings—just like a child's first five years. At ESSC, we ensure that every child gets the strong start they deserve through early education, vital resources for families, and more.

When you give to Easterseals, you're investing in more than early childhood development—you're shaping brighter futures.

**Be a joy maker.  
Be a difference maker.  
Give today.**

