

For more than 50 years, ACDS has been providing much-needed services to children and adults with Down syndrome and other developmental disabilities.

The organization was founded in 1966 as The Association for Special Children by a group of enterprising parents of children with Down syndrome, who turned against the accepted wisdom at the time that had advised them to institutionalize their kids. They fought back and built the agency that would become ACDS. In 1999, the agency changed its name to Association for Children With Down Syndrome and in 2012 changed its name again to ACDS to reflect the continuum of services offered to children and adults with a wide variety of developmental disabilities.

Plainview-based ACDS now has 450 employees who provide lifetime services to more than 1,000 people with developmental disabilities and their families. It has an early childhood education center on Long Island encompassing day care, center-based early intervention and preschool special education; a special needs preschool in Westchester; eight group homes and one transitional apartment; two locations for its "Opportunities" day habilitation program without walls; a 5-plus program for recreation and respite that meets in various sites throughout the community; a sleepaway summer camp in Garrison, N.Y.; and brokerage/fiscal intermediary services for families on LI.

We recently interviewed Michael M. Smith, ACDS executive director for the past 15 years, about his organization's mission, challenges and more.



Michael M. Smith,
ACDS executive director

Q: What makes your organization special?

A: Our heritage is an organization founded by parents who had few options at the time. We continue to be guided by the vision of these founding parents as an agency that embraces quality, innovation and inclusion. We are particularly attuned to the needs of our families and offer specialized care to each individual engaged with the agency. We are unique in our lifetime array of services, in our expertise across a wide variety of developmental disabilities and

in our geographic reach throughout Long Island and Westchester. ACDS is also distinguished by a feeling people have as soon as they walk through the halls of any program. We are a rare agency that is distinguished by the expertise and innovation of our staff and the heart and family atmosphere that infuses all of our programs.

Q: What is your organization's mission?

A: ACDS is dedicated to providing lifetime resources of exceptional quality, innovation and inclusion for individuals with Down syndrome and other developmental disabilities and their families. Building on more than 50 years of service, ACDS seeks to be widely recognized as a leader in the field of Down syndrome and other developmental disabilities by its commitment to quality, innovation and empowerment.

Q: What role does technology play in accomplishing that mission?

A: ACDS has embraced technology across our agency. For individuals who are nonverbal, iPads and other communicative devices can literally serve

as their voice. Our teachers and therapists are able to update their attendance records and submit their treatment notes using laptops. We utilize iPads and SMART Boards in our classrooms to introduce children to the type of technological interaction they can expect as they move on to upper grades. We are also embracing technology in our move into electronic health, personnel, and service provision records.

Q: What's your favorite part of what you do?

A: Interacting with our clients. From a preschool student who calls me "Ho Ho" in reference to my white beard, reminiscent of Santa Claus, to group home residents who greet me with delight and whip out their phones for a quick selfie when I stop by, these interactions make the long days and many tough decisions worthwhile.

Q: What is the biggest challenge of your job?

A: Managing the size and complexity of offering a lifetime of services. We have a variety of business lines, reporting requirements, and funding sources across multiple government agencies, each with its own robust reporting, programmatic, and regulatory guidelines.

Q: What is the biggest challenge your organization faces?

A: With reimbursement rates stagnant and costs ever rising, it is a challenge to ensure we have sufficient resources to recruit and retain quality staff and invest in innovative programs. After 50 years, we are confident in our programmatic expertise. We must now build our marketing and fundraising functions to ensure that we have adequate resources to maintain our commitment to quality and innovation.

Q: What new initiatives is your organization implementing?

A: In September, we opened the doors to a new Day Habilitation Program site, in Plainview. ACDS "Opportunities" Day Habilitation (DayHab) Program Without Walls offers those individuals who are aging out of their educational placement the opportunity to partake in an Adult Day Program that enables them to volunteer in their community, develop their skills and be engaged in the community. We are proud to now have placements for nearly 200 participants. Also excitingly, after many years of discussions and negotiations, the Plainview-Old Bethpage School Board has authorized sale of the Fern Place School to ACDS. This important purchase will help secure the future of ACDS.

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