

Volume 26 Issue 3- SUMMER 2026



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From The Desk Of Nanette Forte-Gerst



Dear Friends,

Summer is a wonderful time to reflect on the progress we've made together and look ahead to the exciting opportunities still to come. Thanks to your continued support, 2026 has already been a remarkable year for the Spina Bifida Resource Network.

Our Walk for Empowerment was a tremendous success, bringing together nearly 90 participants to celebrate community, raise awareness, and support SBRN's mission. Every participant, volunteer, sponsor, and donor helped make the day special, and the funds raised will allow us to continue providing programs and resources that make a meaningful difference in the lives of individuals and families living with spina bifida.

We are also excited by the early success of our new **Unstoppable Teen Program**. After two engaging teen meet-ups, we're already seeing friendships form and confidence grow. We look forward to expanding this program while also exploring the addition of a Parent Support Group, creating even more opportunities for families to connect, learn, and support one another.

Education and advocacy remain at the heart of everything we do. This year we've continued to offer educational programming, including our Wealth Management presentation, while strengthening our public policy efforts to ensure the voices of people living with spina bifida are heard where decisions are made.

I am also proud to congratulate our Board Treasurer, **John Keith**, on receiving an NJBIZ Leadership Award. This well-deserved recognition reflects his outstanding leadership and unwavering commitment to SBRN and the communities we serve.

As our programs continue to grow, so does the need for community support. Whether you participate in an event, volunteer your time, make a donation, or simply help spread awareness, your involvement allows us to expand our reach and ensure that individuals and families have access to the resources, education, and connections they deserve.

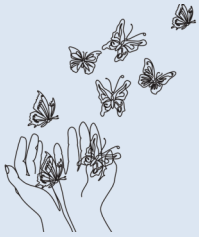
Thank you for being an important part of the SBRN family. Together, we are building a stronger, more connected community and creating new opportunities for people living with spina bifida to thrive.

Wishing you a safe, healthy, and enjoyable summer!

Warmly,

Nanette Forte-Gerst
Executive Director





WALK FOR EMPOWERMENT 2026



SBRN's Annual *Walk for Empowerment* was held on May 31st at Roosevelt Park in Edison, NJ, bringing together individuals, families, friends, and community partners for a day filled with connection, support, and celebration. *(See photos from the event below.)*

We extend a heartfelt **THANK YOU** to Wegmans of Woodbridge, Costco, and ShopRite of Flemington for their generous in-kind donations that helped make the day even more special.

Participants enjoyed a variety of activities throughout the event, including a creative craft table where children and adults colored and decorated inspirational rocks, as well as a station featuring a variety of fun temporary tattoos. Amanda Trott led an interactive wheelchair warm-up that encouraged participants to stretch, move, and get energized for the day ahead. The demonstration created a fun, inclusive atmosphere and helped everyone prepare for the walk.

We are deeply grateful to our sponsors, participating businesses, volunteers, and every individual who contributed to supporting our mission and services for children, adults, and families living with spina bifida and other disabilities. Special recognition goes to our top fundraising teams—**TEAM Millie** and **TEAM Ossi**—for their outstanding efforts and dedication.

Thanks to the incredible generosity of our community, the event raised **\$13,200** to continue expanding programs, resources, and advocacy efforts.

The turnout was wonderful, the energy was uplifting, and most importantly—everyone had a fantastic time.

Thank You to our Sponsors

"Empowerment Champion" Sponsor



Melissa May, APN, author of "Second Son"

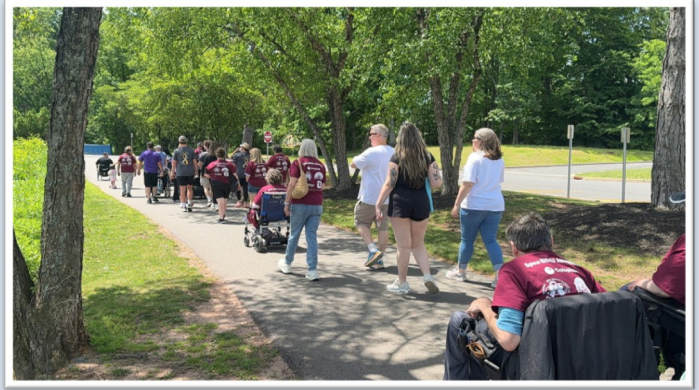
SBRN "Ally" Sponsor



SBRN "Friend" Sponsor

The Liu Family





We look forward to seeing everyone next year!



Congratulations to SBRN Board Treasurer John Keith!

The Spina Bifida Resource Network (SBRN) is proud to congratulate **John Keith**, our dedicated Board Treasurer, on being selected as a **2026 NJBIZ Board Leadership Awards Honoree**.

John was nominated by SBRN in recognition of his many years of exceptional leadership, unwavering commitment, and generous support of our organization. As Board Treasurer, John has played an instrumental role in strengthening SBRN's financial stewardship while serving as a trusted advisor and champion for our mission. His expertise, thoughtful guidance, and genuine passion for helping others have helped position SBRN for continued growth and long-term sustainability.



John's commitment extends well beyond the boardroom. Whether sharing his financial expertise, mentoring fellow board members, volunteering his time, or supporting strategic initiatives, he consistently goes above and beyond to ensure SBRN can continue empowering individuals and families affected by spina bifida throughout New Jersey.

The **2026 NJBIZ Board Leadership Awards** recognize outstanding nonprofit and corporate board members who demonstrate exemplary leadership, governance, and dedication to advancing the organizations they serve. We are thrilled to see John's contributions recognized alongside other distinguished leaders from across the state.

The awards celebration will be held on **Tuesday, August 4, 2026, at The Marigold in Somerset, New Jersey**. Family, friends, colleagues, and supporters are welcome to attend.

Interested in joining us to celebrate John's achievement? Tickets are available through the NJBIZ event website. We encourage anyone who would like to recognize John's well-deserved honor to attend this special evening.

Congratulations, John, and thank you for your years of leadership, generosity, and unwavering dedication to the Spina Bifida Resource Network. We are incredibly grateful for all you do and proud to celebrate this well-deserved recognition!

The SBRN Community Fund: Emergency Assistance for New Jersey Residents

THE SBRN COMMUNITY FUND



Financial
Support
for
Necessities

info@theSBRN.org
www.theSBRN.org



Life can be unpredictable, and unexpected expenses can create added challenges for individuals and families living with spina bifida. That's why the **SBRN Community Fund** is here to help.

Formerly known as the DERA Fund, the SBRN Community Fund provides **one-time emergency financial assistance** to New Jersey residents with spina bifida who are experiencing an immediate financial need related to their disability. The fund is intended to be a **last resort resource** when other sources of assistance are unavailable.

What Can the Community Fund Help Cover?

Eligible expenses may include:

- Medical supplies, such as catheters, wound care supplies, and incontinence products
- Adaptive equipment, including the purchase, repair, or replacement of wheelchairs, braces, orthotics, and other specialized equipment
- Healthcare services and medical expenses (excluding insurance co-pays)
- Prescription medications
- Home or vehicle accessibility modifications
- Other essential needs related to an urgent disability-related situation

Who Can Apply?

You may be eligible if:

- You or your child has spina bifida.
- You are a New Jersey resident.
- You have an immediate disability-related emergency need.

Awards are based on demonstrated need and available funding. The maximum award is **\$300**, and assistance is available **once per calendar year**.

How to Apply

To apply, please submit:

- A completed Community Fund application
- Documentation supporting the need (such as a physician's note, prescription, bill, or other explanation)
- An invoice, estimate, or receipt for the requested item or service (payment to recipients is made after a receipt is received; vendors may be paid directly with an approved invoice)

Every application is reviewed individually, and funding decisions are made based on the urgency of the need and funds available.

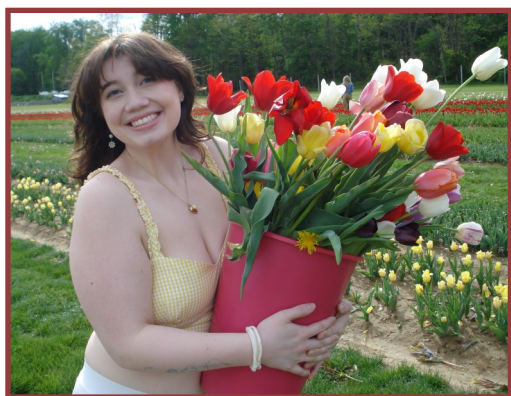
If you or someone you know could benefit from the SBRN Community Fund, we encourage you to reach out. We're committed to helping members of our New Jersey spina bifida community access the resources they need during difficult times.

For more information or to request an application, please contact the SBRN office or visit our website at www.theSBRN.org

Volunteer Spotlight: Isabella Montalban Hamm



Since November 2025, Isabella Montalban Hamm has been a creative and compassionate presence within the SBRN community. With a background as a freelance brand designer, Isabella brings both artistic talent and a strong sense of purpose to her volunteer work—helping us strengthen awareness and connection through meaningful visual storytelling, including contributing to Walk for Empowerment t-shirt design.



Isabella's passion for disability advocacy is deeply personal. Having grown up seeing her grandfather and aunt live with paralysis due to spinal injuries, she witnessed firsthand the everyday barriers that exist in a world not always designed for accessibility. She also carries the memory of a family connection to spina bifida—her father's nephew—whose life continues to inspire her commitment to honoring his legacy through service. These experiences have shaped her belief in the importance of accessibility, awareness, and dignity for all individuals.

What stands out most is Isabella's perspective on community. She values the opportunity to meet new people and learn from experiences different from her own, grounded in the belief that while every life is unique, shared humanity connects us all. That spirit was evident at her first Walk for Empowerment this year, where she not only contributed creatively but also enjoyed being part of the day—connecting with participants and helping amplify the mission of inclusion and empowerment.

Outside of volunteering, Isabella continues to express her creativity through freelance design work. She enjoys dancing and powerlifting, and at home she shares her life with Maisie, a rescued pet rabbit she adores. She also has a fun passion for collecting figurines and pendants—especially Skullpandas and Sonny Angels.

When asked what motivates her involvement, Isabella shared the heart of it simply: *"Everybody's life is different, but we are all people, and it's important to recognize that in your daily life."*

We are grateful to have Isabella as part of the SBRN community, sharing her talents, energy, and perspective in support of greater awareness and inclusion.

SBRN Summer Guide: Staycations & Accessible Travel Tips

Summer is a great time to rest, recharge, and explore new experiences—whether at home or on the go. With thoughtful planning and attention to accessibility, both staycations and travel can be comfortable, enjoyable, and low-stress.

Staycations: Make Home Feel Like a Getaway

Create a “vacation base” at home by setting up a comfortable, easy-to-access space for rest and relaxation. Small changes—like a favorite chair setup, shaded outdoor area, or dedicated quiet space—can help shift your routine into “time off” mode.

Tips for a Smoother staycation:

- Plan one main activity per day
- Build in rest breaks, naps, and downtime
- Adjust activities based on energy levels
- Keep hydration and supplies within easy reach

Explore Accessible Local Activities

You don't have to travel far to enjoy something new. Look for:

- Accessible parks with paved paths and seating
- Museums with elevators and mobility access
- Libraries with summer programs
- Community events with ADA accommodations

Call ahead or check websites for accessibility details when possible.

Stay Safe in Summer Heat

Hot weather can impact energy and comfort levels, so plan ahead:

- Keep water available at all times
- Schedule indoor breaks during peak heat hours
- Prepare medical and mobility equipment before outings
- Build care routines into your daily schedule

Adaptive Activities at Home

Staycations are a great time to enjoy accessible hobbies:

- Adaptive gaming or virtual experiences
- Arts, crafts, or creative projects
- Cooking or baking with accessible setups
- Virtual museum tours, concerts, or travel experiences

Connect in Comfortable Ways

Social time doesn't need to be overwhelming.
Consider:

- Short in-person visits
- Virtual hangouts
- Small, accessible group gatherings
- Online support communities or program check-ins

Simple Accessible “Mini-Adventures”

If you head out, keep it low-pressure and nearby:

- Local coffee shop with accessible seating
- Scenic drive with a picnic stop
- Boardwalk or waterfront visit with benches
- Farmers market with flat, easy pathways



Accessible Travel Tips

Plan Ahead

Contact airlines, hotels, and attractions directly to confirm accessibility details (wheelchair access, elevators, roll-in showers, seating, etc.).

Request Accommodations Early

Ask for assistance when booking—such as wheelchair support, priority boarding, or equipment handling.

Pack a Comfort & Essentials Bag

Include medications, chargers, adaptive equipment, snacks, a change of clothes, and medical information.

Allow Extra Time

Plan for additional time during check-in, security, boarding, and transfers.

Use Available Assistance

Airports and train stations often offer free mobility and navigation support services.

Keep a Backup Plan

Bring printed copies of confirmations, accessibility requests, and emergency contacts.



Resources

- U.S. Department of Transportation – Disability Air Travel Rights
<https://www.transportation.gov/airconsumer/disability-and-air-travel>
- Air Carrier Access Act (ACAA Information)
<https://www.transportation.gov/airconsumer/passengers-disabilities>
- TSA Cares—Airport Assistance Program
<https://www.tsa.gov/travel/passenger-support>
- AccessibleGO—Accessible Travel Planning
<https://accessiblego.com>
- Wheelchair Travel Resources
<https://wheelchairtravel.org>

Advocacy & Public Policy Update

New Jersey Welcomes New Disability Ombudsman

Governor Mikie Sherrill has appointed **Lisa Montalbano** as New Jersey's new **Ombudsman for Individuals with Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities and Their Families**, effective May 29. She succeeds **Paul Aronsohn**, who was appointed by former Governor Phil Murphy as the first person to serve in this important role.

Ms. Montalbano brings more than 20 years of experience advocating for individuals with disabilities. Most recently, she served as Chief Executive Officer of Employment Horizons, where she spent the past three years leading the organization's mission to help individuals with disabilities achieve meaningful employment opportunities.

The Office of the Ombudsman serves as an independent resource for individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities and their families by:

- Helping individuals and families navigate New Jersey's system of care.
- Identifying opportunities to improve services and supports.
- Ensuring the voices of individuals and families are heard in decisions and policies that affect them.

If you or your family need assistance, you can contact the Office of the Ombudsman by:

Phone: 609-984-7764

Email: disability.ombudsman@treas.nj.gov

Online: Submit a request for assistance through the office's website.

For more information or to access resources, visit the [New Jersey Office of the Ombudsman for Individuals with Intellectual or Developmental Disabilities and Their Families](#)



Did You Know! SBRN's Online Resource Directory is Available 24/7

Whether you're newly diagnosed, raising a child with spina bifida, transitioning to adulthood, or looking for support as an adult living with spina bifida, finding reliable information can sometimes feel overwhelming. That's why the **SBRN Resource Directory** was created—to connect you with trusted resources all in one place.



Our online Resource Directory can be found at www.thesbrn.org and features information organized by category, making it easy to find the support and services you need. Resources include topics such as:

- | | |
|--|--|
| * Medical and healthcare resources | * Transportation |
| * Financial assistance and benefits | * Advocacy and legal resources |
| * Education and transition planning | * Caregiver and family support |
| * Employment and vocational services | * National and community organizations |
| * Accessible recreation and summer camps | * And much more! |
| * Housing and independent living | |

Whether you're searching for a local service, looking for educational materials, or exploring new opportunities for yourself or a loved one, our Resource Directory is a valuable tool designed to help you navigate every stage of life.

Need More Information?

Can't find the resource you're looking for? We're here to help! Contact the SBRN office at **908-782-7475** or email info@thesbrn.org.

Our team is happy to help connect you with resources, answer your questions, and point you in the right direction.

SBRN Summer Activity Corner

Unscramble the Summer Phrase

Unscramble these:

- EMMURS NUF
- AHCEB YDA
- CECI MAERC
- NUS ENIHSSH
- PNICIC NIKSBTAE

Summer "This or That"

A light-hearted activity.

Which would you choose?

- Beach ☐ Lake ☐
- Ice Cream ☐ Popsicle ☐
- Sunrise ☐ Sunset ☐
- Camping ☐ Hotel ☐
- Lemonade ☐ Iced Tea ☐

Summer Fun - Beach Day - Ice Cream - Sunshine - Picnic Basket

Answers to Summer Phrase Puzzle

Summer Word Search

Find the following summer words hidden in the puzzle. Words may appear horizontally, vertically, or diagonally.

Y	N	O	L	E	M	R	E	T	A	W	F	E	I	S	H	H
O	L	O	O	P	I	H	O	A	P	O	N	Q	R	E	S	G
Q	L	J	P	L	G	K	O	Y	M	I	Y	S	G	U	P	L
P	E	T	V	L	N	K	S	A	K	C	C	N	N	S	B	F
P	N	F	O	E	I	N	W	T	C	Y	N	S	T	P	J	K
K	N	G	N	H	P	D	I	G	A	P	H	I	O	G	X	D
V	A	R	U	S	M	K	M	B	Y	O	I	A	P	C	Y	N
W	I	H	T	A	A	G	M	V	R	N	S	A	S	M	Q	H
W	V	C	H	E	C	V	I	D	E	E	I	X	T	D	D	X
K	E	V	Q	S	T	S	N	M	O	C	Y	I	G	S	Z	R
R	O	C	E	A	N	R	G	S	L	D	X	Z	A	Z	V	C
X	P	T	B	L	G	G	I	E	N	H	Q	E	H	S	N	C
E	R	I	F	N	O	B	B	A	A	P	J	V	N	Y	B	W
A	V	K	F	D	J	B	S	W	A	O	V	N	O	O	E	R
R	V	J	L	C	S	U	N	F	L	O	W	E	R	W	O	A
K	F	W	X	J	F	A	I	J	V	V	X	T	L	L	R	C
K	L	E	M	O	N	A	D	E	I	U	R	W	S	A	C	H
J	Q	A	H	O	X	T	C	H	S	F	R	M	F	Z	I	C

- | | | |
|------------|--------------|-------------|
| • SUNSHINE | • WATERMELON | • BREEZE |
| • BEACH | • PICNIC | • SUNFLOWER |
| • OCEAN | • POOL | • SWIMMING |
| • SAND | • SEASHELL | • SAILBOAT |
| • LEMONADE | • CAMPING | • POPSICLE |
| | • BONFIRE | |