



2026 ADVOCACY GUIDE

FROM THE SC ACCESS & INDEPENDENCE NETWORK

ADVOCACY DAY

FOR ACCESS & INDEPENDENCE

APRIL 14, 2026

10 AM-12 PM

UNLOCKING BARRIERS

FOR SOUTH CAROLINIANS WITH DISABILITIES



PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES DESERVE TO THRIVE

Disability is the one identity any South Carolinian can join at any moment through aging, illness, injury, or military service. **More than one million South Carolinians live with a disability.** They are your neighbors: the small-business owner in the Upstate, the veteran in the Lowcountry, the student in the Midlands, the parent in the Pee Dee. They attend town halls, worship in churches, and vote. Their ability to live self-sufficiently is shaped directly by decisions made at the Statehouse.

For twelve years, Advocacy Day for Access and Independence has elevated the lived experiences of South Carolinians with disabilities, people who navigate these systems every day and understand firsthand where improvements are needed.

This work has produced meaningful bipartisan progress. Among dozens of successful policies, three landmark South Carolina–led laws stand out. In 2017, the Persons with Disabilities Right to Parent Act ensured parents with disabilities receive the same rights and protections as other parents in custody and family court proceedings. In 2022, South Carolina eliminated subminimum wage through the Employment First Initiative Act, affirming that work should be compensated fairly and competitively. In 2025, the state created the Department of Behavioral Health and Developmental Disabilities through S.2, restructuring services to improve coordination and access to supports.

These milestones, many of which influenced policy in other states, demonstrate **what is possible when lawmakers and the disability community work together.** Yet significant barriers to healthcare, housing, employment, and transportation remain.

At the center of both the challenge and the solution are Home and Community-Based Services (HCBS). These services provide the long-term supports that allow people with disabilities to live, work, and participate fully in their communities instead of being placed in costly institutional settings. HCBS often make the difference between independence and isolation, employment and unemployment, and community living versus institutionalization.

In December 2025, South Carolina entered into a settlement agreement with the U.S. Department of Justice requiring the state to expand access to community-based services and reduce unnecessary institutionalization. This agreement reflects longstanding civil rights protections under the Americans with Disabilities Act and the Supreme Court's Olmstead decision, which affirm the right of people with disabilities to receive services in the most integrated setting appropriate. The same services that allow the state to meet these obligations—HCBS—are also the services that enable people to work, maintain housing, and participate fully in community life.

As we gather again this year, we recognize both the progress achieved and the work still ahead. We remain committed to advancing policies that promote independence, workforce participation, and stronger communities across South Carolina. **Our lawmakers have the opportunity to continue unlocking the barriers that stand between disabled South Carolinians and true self-sufficiency.**

THE LIVED REALITIES OF PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES IN SOUTH CAROLINA

Decisions made in committee rooms and on the House and Senate floors show up in someone's kitchen, workplace, or doctor's office. Behind every statistic is someone ready to work, sign a lease, schedule their appointments, or find a reliable ride to pay their bills. When policy works, independence and opportunities become possible.

The issue areas that impact disabled South Carolinians the most are **healthcare, housing, employment, and transportation: the pillars of community living** that provide South Carolinians with disabilities the freedom to confidently contribute to their communities and the resilience to realize their full potential.

UNLOCKING THE BARRIERS TO COMMUNITY LIVING FACED BY PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES IS POSSIBLE WITH THE RIGHT SOLUTIONS.

Lawmakers can support these solutions, and unlock the barriers with these 4 keys:



UNLOCK THE BARRIERS TO HEALTHCARE:

Medicaid provides the long-term services and supports that allow people with disabilities to live and work in their communities rather than in costly, restrictive institutions. For many South Carolinians with disabilities, Medicaid is a lifeline. Yet the program remains severely underfunded, and Home and Community-Based Services (HCBS) need immediate investment.

Strengthening HCBS is also fiscally responsible. Institutional care requires 24-hour staffing, facility overhead, and significantly higher per-person costs. Community-based services, by contrast, are tailored to individual needs, meaning the state pays only for the supports required rather than the full cost of a facility placement. This approach reduces long-term spending while allowing disabled South Carolinians to remain productive and connected to their communities.

South Carolina's Department of Health and Human Services has already recognized this need. DHHS has requested \$47 million in additional federal support to maintain HCBS, address rising costs and enrollment, and ensure provider rates remain sustainable. That request reflects what families across our state already know: HCBS are essential, but the system is stretched beyond its limits.

At the same time, South Carolina recently entered into a settlement agreement with the U.S. Department of Justice requiring the state to expand access to community-based services and reduce unnecessary institutionalization. Meeting these obligations will require meaningful collaboration with people with disabilities and disability-led organizations to ensure accountability and protect the services that make community living possible. Yet South Carolina still lacks a designated Olmstead Coordinator to guide these efforts, and proposed cuts of \$27 million to HCBS funding threaten the very services needed to comply with the agreement.

When HCBS are underfunded:

- Families leave the workforce to provide care.
- Disabled individuals are pushed into costly institutional care.
- Long-term taxpayer costs increase.

Community-based services are not only a civil rights issue, they are sound fiscal policy. In South Carolina, HCBS cost roughly half as much as institutional care while supporting independence, employment, and community participation.

THE KEY:

We urge lawmakers to treat full funding of the Department of Health and Human Services' request as the minimum first step and to go further by increasing overall investment in Home and Community-Based Services. Strengthening HCBS expands freedom, supports families, promotes self-sufficiency, and uses taxpayer dollars more responsibly by prioritizing lower-cost community supports over expensive institutional care.



UNLOCK THE BARRIERS TO HOUSING:

Affordable, accessible housing allows us to fully participate in community life, maintain employment, build financial stability, and contribute productively to our families and local economies. Without affordable, accessible housing, people with disabilities are removed from the local economy, face institutionalization, and homelessness.

The cost difference is clear: nursing home care costs over 2x as much as Home and Community Based Services (HCBS). In South Carolina, nursing home care now exceeds \$110,000 annually, while HCBS (sometimes called Medicaid Waiver) costs around \$45,000 (as reported by KFF, SCDHHS, Care Scout, and Business Wire).

Despite this significant financial incentive to fund and support community living, over 41,000 people remain on HCBS waitlists, and more than 45,000 live in costly institutions (as reported by the US DOJ and SC BHDD).

Today, 35 states have formal Olmstead Plans outlining how they will comply with the Supreme Court's 1999 Olmstead decision and expand community-based living options. South Carolina still lacks an Olmstead Plan, leaving the state without a clear roadmap to reduce the cost of institutionalization and expand accessible housing and services. Without a statewide strategy, tens of thousands of South Carolinians remain stuck in segregated settings or waiting years for the supports that make community living possible.

THE KEY:

Lawmakers should look to reducing the HCBS waitlist and working to develop a comprehensive Olmstead Plan that ensures South Carolinians with disabilities can live, work, and thrive in their communities.



UNLOCK THE BARRIERS TO EMPLOYMENT:

Thousands of capable South Carolinians with disabilities are ready and willing to work, yet many remain sidelined. Our state ranks among the highest in the nation for unemployment among people with disabilities, who are twice as likely to be unemployed as those without disabilities. The issue is not ability—it is barriers. Too often, qualified individuals are overlooked because of stigma, misconceptions about productivity, or assumptions about the cost of accommodations. As a result, capable workers are passed over while employers miss out on valuable talent.

In 2022, South Carolina lawmakers took an important step to address these barriers by passing the Employment First Initiative Act, committing the state to prioritize employment for people with disabilities. The law requires the Governor to appoint members to the Employment First Oversight Commission (Section 41-5-110) to coordinate agencies, measure progress, and ensure accountability. Four years later, the commission has still not been formed.

Without this commission, there is no oversight, no accountability, no measurable goals, and no coordinated statewide strategy. Forming the Employment First Oversight Commission is not optional, it is the mechanism designed to turn Employment First from a promise into practice. South Carolina cannot claim to support workforce participation while failing to implement the very structure the law requires.

Supporting employment for people with disabilities strengthens our economy, promotes self-sufficiency, and reflects the values of productivity and personal responsibility that define our state. Lawmakers should urge the Governor to fulfill the law's intent by appointing members to the Employment First Oversight Commission.

At the same time, H. 3927 moves in the opposite direction. This bill would prohibit state and local entities, including agencies, colleges, and school districts, from establishing or promoting diversity, equity, inclusion, and access (DEIA) programs or offices. While framed as reinforcing merit-based hiring, the bill's broad language could interpret programs designed to recruit or support workers with disabilities, strategies encouraged under the Employment First Initiative Act, as prohibited "inclusion" initiatives.

Equity in employment does not mean lowering standards. It means removing barriers so qualified individuals have a fair opportunity to compete. For people with disabilities, that may include accessible hiring processes, targeted recruitment, workplace accommodations, and coordinated support systems, exactly the strategies South Carolina recognized as necessary when it passed the Employment First Initiative Act.

By prioritizing "neutrality" over the coordination required by Employment First, H. 3927 risks undermining programs that help people with disabilities enter and succeed in the workforce. South Carolina cannot afford to sideline thousands of capable workers ready to contribute to our economy and communities.

THE KEY:

Fully implement the Employment First Initiative Act by urging the Governor to appoint members to the Employment First Oversight Commission and establish a coordinated statewide strategy to increase employment opportunities for people with disabilities. Lawmakers should also ensure policies support accessible hiring practices, workplace accommodations, and programs that remove barriers to workforce participation.



UNLOCK THE BARRIERS TO TRANSPORTATION:

Transportation is the backbone of independence, productivity, and economic growth, yet South Carolinians with disabilities are twice as likely to lack reliable transportation—especially in rural communities. Without accessible transportation, people cannot work, attend medical appointments, or participate fully in community and economic life.

A coordinated, statewide transportation strategy is essential to addressing this barrier. Strengthening public transit and mobility programs—particularly in rural areas—would expand access while helping local governments maximize available federal funding. Transportation is consistently identified as one of the largest barriers to employment for people with disabilities. When individuals cannot reliably travel to jobs, interviews, or training programs, opportunities for economic independence are lost.

Medicaid programs and waivers can also support transportation for employment and other essential activities. Leveraging these supports is critical to promoting workforce participation and economic independence. Investments in public transit also benefit the broader economy; every \$1 invested in public transit generates approximately \$4 in economic return.

Protecting access to accessible parking is another important part of transportation access. These spaces allow people with disabilities to reach workplaces, healthcare providers, businesses, and community spaces safely. However, recently introduced legislation—S. 748 and H. 4768—would expand accessible parking placards to expectant parents in their second and third trimesters. While well-intentioned, these proposals risk creating a supply-and-demand crisis for already limited accessible parking spaces.

Federal ADA standards set minimum requirements for accessible parking, and most facilities provide only the number required by law. In South Carolina, 296,286 residents with disabilities depend on these spaces to access work, healthcare, and daily life. Expanding placards without increasing the number of spaces would leave individuals with permanent mobility impairments without access, increase misuse, and further strain an already limited resource.

Accessible parking is not about convenience—it is a civil right. These spaces exist so people with disabilities can safely access employment, healthcare, and community life. Importantly, individuals experiencing pregnancy-related mobility limitations may already qualify for a temporary disability placard under existing law.

South Carolina can support families without reducing disability access by:

- Creating clearly designated pregnancy parking separate from ADA disability parking
- Protecting ADA parking spaces from reassignment or reduction
- Strengthening enforcement of accessible parking laws
- Ensuring compliance with ADA parking requirements
- Adding accessible spaces in high-demand areas
- Consulting disability-led organizations when developing accessibility policies

S. 748 and H. 4768 were introduced with good intentions, but disability access is not negotiable—it is the law. South Carolina has the opportunity to strengthen accessibility by protecting ADA parking, improving enforcement, and expanding parking options without compromising the civil rights of people with disabilities.

THE KEY:

Maximizing federal transportation funding and strengthening statewide mobility systems will expand access while reducing long-term costs for South Carolina. At the same time, lawmakers should oppose S. 748 and H. 4768 unless they are amended to fully protect accessible parking, ensuring that the civil rights of the 296,286 South Carolinians with disabilities who rely on these legally protected spaces are not compromised while supporting families.



THE FOUR KEYS TO COMMUNITY LIVING:

To strengthen the four interdependent pillars of community living, lawmakers should focus on the following priorities:

Healthcare:

Fully fund the Department of Health and Human Services' request for Home and Community-Based Services (HCBS) and increase overall HCBS investment to prioritize lower-cost community supports over expensive institutional care.

Housing:

Reduce the HCBS waitlist and develop a comprehensive statewide Olmstead Plan to guide community integration and expand accessible housing and community living options.

Employment:

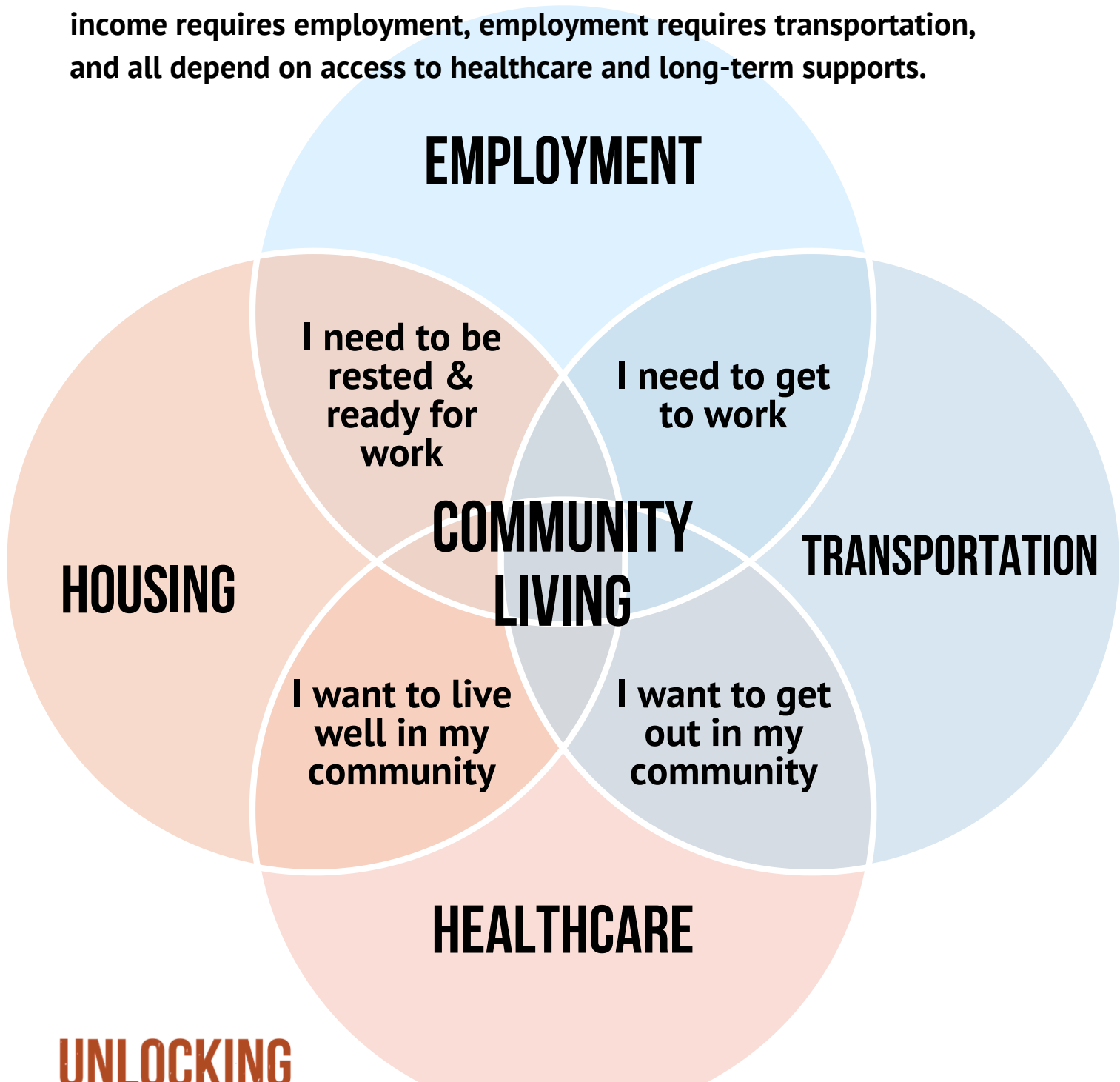
Implement the Employment First Initiative Act by urging the Governor to appoint members to the Employment First Oversight Commission and protect policies that support accessible hiring, workplace accommodations, and workforce participation for people with disabilities. Lawmakers should also oppose policies, such as H. 3927, that could undermine these efforts.

Transportation:

Develop and fund a coordinated statewide accessible transportation strategy, particularly for rural communities and protect accessible parking by opposing legislation such as S. 748 and H. 4768 unless amended to fully safeguard disability access.

Strengthening these four systems together will promote self-sufficiency, increase workforce participation, reduce long-term state costs, and ensure South Carolinians with disabilities can live, work, and participate fully in their communities.

Community living and economic participation depend on healthcare, housing, employment, and transportation working together. When one system fails, independence unravels: housing requires income, income requires employment, employment requires transportation, and all depend on access to healthcare and long-term supports.



If South Carolina wants disabled residents to live independently, work, and contribute to their communities, **these systems must be strengthened together**. Now is the time to move from discussion to action and turn these commitments into real outcomes for South Carolinians with disabilities.

ADVOCACY DAY FOR ACCESS & INDEPENDENCE 75 + ORGANIZATIONS STRONG!

The image displays a collection of logos for various organizations, including:

- able SOUTH CAROLINA**
- AccessAbility A BRIDGE TO INDEPENDENCE**
- ACLU South Carolina**
- AgrAbility South Carolina**
- BABCOCK CENTER**
- Barbara Stone FOUNDATION**
- beginnings WHERE BELONGING BEGINS FOR DEAF & HARD OF HEARING CHILDREN**
- Beyond BASIC**
- BILLION STRONG A GLOBAL DISABILITY MOVEMENT**
- BRAIN INJURY ASSOCIATION OF SOUTH CAROLINA**
- BRIDGED AWARENESS • CONNECTION • INCLUSION**
- CarolinaLIFE College of Education UNIVERSITY OF SOUTH CAROLINA**
- ClemsonLIFE COLLEGE OF EDUCATION**
- COLLEGE of CHARLESTON R.E.A.C.H. PROGRAM**
- CoastalLIFE UNIVERSITY**
- COLUMBIA COLLEGE 1854**
- Columbia Urban League, Inc.**
- THE COMET CATCHTHECOMET.ORG**
- COVER SC BUILDING OUR HEALTH, BUILDING OUR ECONOMY**
- CYPRESS FUND GROWING PEOPLE. POWER IN THE CAROLINAS**
- DANCE COLLABORATIVE**
- Disability Next Door SOUTH CAROLINA**
- DISABILITY RIGHTS SOUTH CAROLINA**
- EASE Equal Accessibility & Support Everywhere**
- equip**
- Family Connection SOUTH CAROLINA**
- GRAND STRAND MIRACLE LEAGUES**
- Gullah Geechee Chamber of Commerce "Makin' Somethin' from Not"**
- HARRIET HANCOCK CENTER FOUNDATION**
- HEALTHY LAUGHTER LAUGHING YOUR WAY TO A HEALTHIER LIFE**
- HEART AN INCLUSIVE ARTS COMMUNITY**
- HIRE ME SC**
- THE hive COMMUNITY CIRCLE**
- I.M.P.A.C.T. S.C. INDIVIDUALS MOBILIZING PEOPLE TO ACHIEVE CHANGE TOGETHER IN SOUTH CAROLINA**
- LIMITLESS COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT**
- LIONS VISION SERVICES**
- McGuireWoods CONSULTING**
- MIAA Mental Health America**
- NAMI National Alliance on Mental Illness**
- NATIONAL FEDERATION OF THE BLIND**
- MS National Multiple Sclerosis Society**
- NECEC**
- PAALS PALMETTO ANIMAL ASSISTED LIFE SERVICES**
- Palmetto Council of the Blind South Carolina**
- PASOs Educate. Connect. Advocate.**
- Project SEARCH**
- SOUTH CAROLINA appleaseed LEGAL JUSTICE CENTER**
- South Carolina ASSISTIVE TECHNOLOGY PROGRAM CENTER FOR DISABILITY RESOURCES UNIVERSITY OF SOUTH CAROLINA SCHOOL OF MEDICINE COLUMBIA**
- SCAD EST. 1911**
- South Carolina DEPARTMENT OF MENTAL HEALTH DMH**
- South Carolina DEPARTMENT ON AGING**
- SOUTH CAROLINA Developmental Disabilities Council**
- SCIPSEC SOUTH CAROLINA INCLUSIVE POSTSECONDARY EDUCATION CONSORTIUM**
- NAACP South Carolina State Conference**
- SC Spiritual Cord Injury ASSOCIATION**
- South Carolina Statewide Independent Living Council**
- South Carolina Tenant Union**
- VR Vocational Rehabilitation Let's go to work**
- thrive upstate Redefining ability**
- Together SC ALLIES FOR GOOD**
- UPSTATE SC LGBT+ CHAMBER**
- United States Attorney's Office District of South Carolina**
- USCA LIFE**
- Aphasia Laboratory**
- Center for Disability Resources SCHOOL OF MEDICINE UNIVERSITY OF SOUTH CAROLINA**
- CTRL UNIVERSITY OF SOUTH CAROLINA**
- UofSC Delta Alpha Pi**
- School of Medicine Columbia UNIVERSITY OF SOUTH CAROLINA**
- WALTON Options Resources for Independent Living**
- WINTHROP UNIVERSITY WinthropLIFE**
- WORK IN PROGRESS**
- WREN Women's Rights & Empowerment Network**
- YLF SOUTH CAROLINA YOUTH LEADERSHIP FORUM**
- the Y YNCA**
- YORK can Strengthening Community for Individuals with Disabilities**