

MIAMI-DADE COUNTY COMMISSION · DISTRICT 7

Florida Neuroinclusion Toolkit

A practical roadmap for counties, cities, and public agencies

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Miami-Dade County Commission, District 7

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Executive Summary

WHAT IS NEURODIVERSITY?

Neurodiversity is the concept that neurological differences, including autism, ADHD, Down syndrome, dyslexia, epilepsy, Tourette's, dyspraxia, dysgraphia, and other neurological variations, are a natural part of human diversity. While these differences are often categorized as intellectual disabilities, they are also intellectual variations that come with unique strengths, challenges, and ways of experiencing the world.

The neurodivergent brain processes information differently compared to a neurotypical brain. These differences can be strengths, such as pattern recognition, focus, and creativity, and challenges, such as social communication and sensory processing. A neuroinclusion lens shifts the focus from “what’s wrong with them” to “what supports can help individuals thrive.”

In the examples above, neurodiversity is a condition combined with developmental delay. In the case of dementia and Alzheimer's, it can present as a developmental decline that frequently causes significant sensory processing problems. Currently, sensory impairments affect over 70 percent of older adults who struggle with brain degeneration. For all neurodivergent individuals, overstimulation often leads to confusion, agitation, and disorientation. It is estimated that between 15 and 20 percent of the world's population is neurodiverse, meaning neurodivergent residents are not an edge case in any Florida community. They are already there, in significant numbers, using public services every day.

WHY IS NEUROINCLUSION IMPORTANT?

Neuroinclusion is important because neurodivergent people are already part of every community, school, and workplace. Systems designed for only one way of thinking or learning leave many people behind, not because they lack ability, but because the environment creates unnecessary barriers. Neuroinclusion shifts the focus from fixing individuals to improving systems so people with different brains can participate, contribute, and succeed.

It also makes practical and financial sense. Neuroinclusive practices, including clear communication, flexibility, and sensory-aware spaces, reduce crises, improve outcomes, and unlock talent that is too often overlooked. Neuroinclusion is not about lowering standards or offering special treatment. It is about physical access, opportunity, and building communities that work better for everyone.

WHY SHOULD FLORIDA LEAD?

Florida has led the nation in protecting and prioritizing the welfare of children and older adults. Neuroinclusion is the next necessary step, one that gives neurodivergent residents and their families access to Florida's renowned quality of life. Communities across Florida want to welcome and integrate neurodivergent children and adults. The challenge is not awareness, acceptance, political will, or resources. It is knowing where to start.

This toolkit exists to help local governments answer that question.

Over the last several years, Miami-Dade County has implemented a comprehensive, practical approach to neuroinclusion. The work spans training, public safety, advisory structures, sensory-friendly public spaces, transportation, airports, government services, and employment pathways for neurodivergent adults. Every initiative passed unanimously. Every initiative leveraged existing systems rather than creating costly new ones.

The lesson is simple: neuroinclusion works best when it is embedded into how government already operates.

This toolkit is designed for policymakers, specifically elected officials, city and county managers, and department heads, who are ready to move from wanting to help to actually helping. It provides clear explanations of each policy initiative, the problem it addressed, how neuroinclusion was advanced, and how other jurisdictions can adapt the model to their own size, needs, and resources.

From training first responders to creating sensory-friendly public events, from improving access to identification to opening doors to internships and employment, the initiatives outlined here move communities from awareness to acceptance, and from acceptance to meaningful participation in civic life.

This work is not theoretical. It is operational. And more importantly, it is scalable, achievable, and transformative.

About the Author: Commissioner Raquel Regalado

Commissioner Raquel Regalado is a member of the Miami-Dade County Board of County Commissioners and a former two-term member of the Miami-Dade County School Board. She has built a legislative record focused on access, neuroinclusion, and practical policy solutions that improve daily life for residents and visitors.

Raquel is the parent of two neurodivergent adults, Isabela (Bela), 22, and Sebastian (Sebas), 21. Like many families in this space, her advocacy began not from ideology, but from lived experience. Navigating schools, public spaces, transportation systems, and government services revealed how often well-intentioned systems exclude neurodivergent individuals and their families.

Rather than creating standalone programs, Commissioner Regalado focused on changing how existing systems operate. Her work has included countywide neurodiversity training in partnership with the University of Miami–Nova Southeastern University Center for Autism and Related Disabilities (UM-NSU CARD), public safety initiatives to improve trust between families and first responders, the creation of advisory boards and task forces to move advocacy into policy, sensory-friendly public spaces and events, neuroinclusive government services, and changes to employment and internship policies to expand workforce access for neurodivergent adults.

All of these initiatives were adopted with broad bipartisan support and minimal fiscal impact.

Commissioner Regalado's approach is grounded in a simple principle: neuroinclusion should not depend on extraordinary effort from families and advocates. It should be built into the everyday operations of government.

This toolkit reflects that philosophy and provides a roadmap for communities across Florida that are ready to move from wanting to help to actually helping.

Section 1. The Miami-Dade Model

Miami-Dade County's neuroinclusion work did not begin with a study, a resolution, or a new program. It emerged from lived experience, sustained advocacy, and a deliberate decision to treat neuroinclusion as a core function of local government rather than a special initiative.

As a parent of two neurodivergent young adults, Bela and Sebas, now in their early twenties, I spent two decades navigating schools, public spaces, transportation systems, and government services. Over time, a pattern became clear: systems designed with good intentions often failed neurodivergent children and adults at the point of interaction. The gaps were not philosophical. They were operational.

When I transitioned from the School Board to the County Commission, my focus shifted from early intervention and education to adulthood. Many supports fall away at age eighteen or twenty-two, just as individuals are expected to navigate the most complex systems on their own. Employment, transportation, public safety, identification, and access to public spaces all became priority areas because they directly impact independence and quality of life.

The Miami-Dade model is defined by five core principles.

SYSTEMS MATTER MORE THAN STATEMENTS

Rather than launching standalone programming, Miami-Dade focused on embedding inclusion into existing departments and services. Libraries, parks, transit, police, fire rescue, emergency management, airports, and government service counters were prioritized because these are the places residents and visitors interact with government most often.

TRAINING IS ESSENTIAL

Before introducing new programs or designating spaces as sensory-friendly, the County invested in training the people delivering services. Neuroinclusion cannot succeed if frontline staff are not prepared to recognize neurodivergent behaviors, understand sensory sensitivities, and respond appropriately under stress. Training also creates awareness that stays with employees beyond their job, reaffirmed by many shared examples of how training allowed staff to better support others in their own lives.

EXPERT PARTNERSHIPS REPLACED NEW BUREAUCRACY

Miami-Dade relied on established partners, particularly the University of Miami–Nova Southeastern University Center for Autism and Related Disabilities, to provide training, technical assistance, and tools. This allowed the County to scale efforts quickly and consistently, without creating new administrative structures or significant fiscal impact. The CARD structure and expertise are available to all Florida counties and cities, supporting uniform statewide practices.

ADULT NEUROINCLUSION WAS INTENTIONAL

While many communities have made progress supporting neurodivergent children, adults are often expected to adapt without support. Miami-Dade addressed this gap directly through employment pathways, access to identification, transportation initiatives, and supported independent travel.

FEEDBACK LOOPS, NOT ONE-TIME ACTIONS

Advisory boards, task forces, voluntary programs such as the Occupant with Autism decal, and ongoing partnerships provided continuous insight into what was working and where adjustments were needed, and commissioned research and surveys by Urban Impact Lab were used as one input to validate priorities, but data was never a prerequisite for action.

Every initiative described in this toolkit passed unanimously or with overwhelming support. When neuroinclusion is framed as access, safety, and effective service delivery, it is not controversial. It is good government.

Section 2. Training as Infrastructure

Training is the foundation of effective neuroinclusion. Without it, policies remain symbolic and well-intentioned programs break down during real-world interactions. Miami-Dade County approached training as infrastructure, recognizing that public services are only as effective as the people delivering them.

Rather than relying on optional workshops or one-time awareness sessions, the County prioritized ongoing, practical training for staff who interact with the public during everyday moments and high-stress situations alike. This approach treated training the same way we treat physical infrastructure: consistent, scalable, reinforced over time, and embedded across departments.

Rather than create new positions or bureaucracy, the County partnered with the University of Miami–Nova Southeastern University Center for Autism and Related Disabilities (UM-NSU CARD). This partnership provided evidence-based training, technical assistance, and implementation support, ensuring consistency across departments while allowing flexibility based on operational realities.

Training focused on practical skills, not diagnosis. Employees learned how neurodivergent behaviors may present under stress, how sensory overload affects communication and compliance, and how small adjustments in tone, pacing, and expectations can dramatically change outcomes. Autistic adults participated directly in training, grounding instruction in lived experience.

PUBLIC SAFETY AND FIRST RESPONSE

Public safety is one of the most consequential environments for neuroinclusion, because interactions with law enforcement and first responders often occur during moments of fear, confusion, or crisis, precisely when misunderstandings are most likely to escalate.

For neurodivergent adolescents and adults, behaviors such as avoiding eye contact, delayed responses, repetitive movements, limited verbal communication, or reliance on earbuds or headsets can be misinterpreted as defiance or noncompliance. Without training, well-intentioned responders may inadvertently escalate situations.

By embedding neurodiversity training into standard law enforcement and first responder education, Miami-Dade reframed these encounters. Officers and responders were trained to slow interactions when possible, recognize self-regulation strategies, and adjust communication styles without compromising safety or enforcement standards.

The purpose of this training was not to lower expectations or limit authority. It was to improve outcomes and reduce unnecessary arrests, inappropriate use of the Baker Act, and physical escalation that puts everyone at risk.

The same principle extended to the juvenile justice system. In 2022, Miami-Dade passed legislation creating a program for neurodivergent youth to participate in Teen Court, an alternative to traditional prosecution that emphasizes accountability and skill-building over punishment. The program recognized that standard court processes are poorly designed for individuals who may struggle with verbal communication, eye contact, or processing instructions under stress. Routing eligible youth through Teen Court rather than the traditional system reduces the risk of unnecessary criminalization and creates a more appropriate pathway for accountability and support.

Between 2021 and April 2024, UM-NSU CARD conducted 92 training events for Miami-Dade first responders. In 2021, 131 police recruits were trained across three events. In 2022, 29 events covered 121 recruits, 690 officers, and 8 fire rescue personnel. In 2023, 31 events trained 76 recruits and 885 officers. Through April 2024, an additional 29 events trained 599 more first responders, bringing the cumulative total to more than 2,500 police and fire personnel trained since the program launched.

Neurodiversity training also benefits individuals experiencing neurodelay and neurodecline, including Alzheimer's disease and dementia. As Florida's population ages, this overlap has become an increasingly critical component of public safety preparedness.

DECALS AS A TRAINING EXTENSION AND SAFETY TOOL

Miami-Dade implemented a voluntary "Occupant with Autism" decal program for vehicles and homes, with a clear, direct message on the decal itself: Special Needs — May Not Respond to Verbal Commands. The decal communicates before any verbal interaction begins, giving first responders immediate context to adjust their approach from the moment they arrive. Miami-Dade recommends displaying the decal at the front door of a home and on vehicles.

Other communities have implemented decal programs, but Miami-Dade launched its program after first responder training, not before, and that sequence was intentional. Families and caregivers needed to feel confident that the officers and responders who would see the decal already understood what it meant and how to respond. Visibility without preparation does not build trust. Miami-Dade prioritized preparation first so that when families chose to identify themselves, the system was already ready to meet them.

Accompanying the decal is a voluntary registration, and the registration is where the program's real depth lies. While training gives first responders general knowledge about how neurodivergent individuals may present, the registration gives them specific information about the individual they may encounter, provided directly by the caregiver who knows that person best. The registration captures whether the occupant is verbal or non-verbal, details about their ability to communicate, known triggers, and de-escalation strategies that have worked with that specific individual. That

information is made available to all first responders and to 911 operators who dispatch them, so that the people responding to a call arrive with more than general awareness about neurodiversity. They arrive with knowledge about a specific person.

The decal and the registration are independent of each other, and families may choose either, both, or neither. Some choose to display the decal and complete the registration. Others complete the registration without displaying the decal, preserving privacy while still ensuring that first responders have access to the information they need when it matters. Neither requires disclosure of medical records or diagnoses, and neither is a prerequisite for receiving any service or accommodation.

Where the Occupant with Autism decal and registration speak to first responders at the home, a second voluntary tool speaks to law enforcement on the road, the SAFE designation. Created by the Florida Legislature, the SAFE designation lets an individual, parent, or guardian add a voluntary note to a vehicle's registration record indicating that a driver or passenger may have a condition that affects communication or interaction during a traffic stop or emergency. It applies not only to autism but to a range of conditions, including Alzheimer's disease, traumatic brain injury, and hearing or vision impairment. The moment an officer runs the license plate, the designation appears, so the same awareness and training that guide an interaction at the front door are present on the side of the road as well. The designation is voluntary, costs nothing to add or remove, and is requested through the Miami-Dade County Tax Collector's Office, which offers it at thirteen service locations across the county. Like the decal and registration, it requires no disclosure of medical records or diagnoses and is never a prerequisite for any service. Together, the home decal and the SAFE designation let the County share critical information with first responders in the seconds before a family can speak for themselves, whether the emergency happens at home or on the road. Miami-Dade rolled out the SAFE designation in April 2026, announced by Sheriff Rosie Cordero-Stutz and Tax Collector Dariel Fernandez. Learn more at miamidade.gov/global/police/safe-designation.page.

DATA CALLOUT

The decal and registration have also proven useful during emergencies such as hurricanes and tropical storms, when first responders moving quickly through a neighborhood or shelter can use the decal for immediate identification and the registration for the specific information they need to interact safely with that individual.

Miami-Dade Emergency Management extended the same commitment into disaster preparedness, recognizing that neurodivergent residents have distinct needs during emergencies that standard shelter operations are often not designed to meet. The department built accommodations for sensory sensitivities and other unique needs into its shelters and programs as standard practice, and produced a Neurodivergent Hurricane Preparedness Guide that walks families through creating a personalized emergency plan. The guide is available at miamidade.gov/hurricane/library/neurodivergent-hurricane-preparedness.pdf. Any jurisdiction can develop a similar resource using existing emergency management staff and publicly available guidance from FEMA and state emergency management agencies, making neurodivergent preparedness a standard part of how a community plans for disasters rather than an afterthought.

TRAINING BEYOND PUBLIC SAFETY

The same training-as-infrastructure model was applied across other high-impact environments. Libraries became early and successful implementation sites. Parks and recreation staff were trained to develop inclusive programming. Transit and airport personnel received training to support neurodivergent travelers. Emergency preparedness materials were adapted to include social narratives.

The Miami-Dade Public Library System became a national model for what neuroinclusive libraries can look like, earning both state and national recognition in the process. All 50 Miami-Dade County library branches offer sensory-friendly programming, and all library staff receive Autism Spectrum Disorder and Strategies for Inclusivity training through UM-NSU CARD. Following implementation of those recommendations, UM-NSU CARD conducted walkthroughs of the library branches to assess accommodations and environment, and formally designated the Miami-Dade Public Library System an Autism Friendly Partner. Library Director Ray Baker presented a plaque of appreciation to Commissioner Regalado at the ceremony. The Florida Department of State Division of Library and Information Services recognized the program as a statewide STARS innovation model. In 2024, the library system earned 77 national Achievement Awards, including the prestigious Best in Category recognition specifically for its autism-friendly spaces work. Over eight years, Miami-Dade Public Library System has earned 179 such awards, including three Best in Category honors.

The library system also functions as an employment on-ramp. Students from Crystal Academy, a Miami-Dade therapy center and school for children with autism and developmental delays, hold library cards, attend story time, and are now volunteering at the Coral Gables branch, gaining real work experience shelving and organizing books. Tasks are matched to each student's strengths and

interests: one student who loves building helps with furniture; another who is verbal and social helps set up story time. This is the same pipeline logic behind EmployABILITY305 and KLA: start with inclusion, build toward independence, and let the work speak for itself.

The Miami-Dade Public Library System's sensory-friendly programming began the way the best government programs often do: with a staff member solving a problem she understood personally. County Librarian Miriam Quiros-Laso, whose son is on the autism spectrum, created sensory-friendly story times at the Coral Gables branch before Miami-Dade passed a resolution to make its systems autism-friendly and neurodiverse inclusive. That resolution expanded the model to all 50 of the county's library branches. Every staff member in all 50 libraries now receives Autism Spectrum Disorder and Strategies for Inclusivity training through UM-NSU CARD. What started as one librarian thinking about her own son became countywide infrastructure.

The library system's neuroinclusion work spans multiple layers. Sensory kits, including fidget strings, squeezable toys, and noise-reducing earmuffs, are available at every branch and are used during programming. Social narratives, structured like picture books, are posted online for each branch, giving neurodiverse visitors a detailed preview of what to expect before they arrive: where the computers are, where the quiet space is, how to get a library card, how to check out books. These are not extras, they are the infrastructure of access. Doral, Key Biscayne, and South Dade Regional branches are building dedicated autism-friendly spaces with specialized lighting and sensory-appropriate furniture. Programming includes social clubs for young adults with intellectual and developmental disabilities, a sensory pop-up art experience, and clubs like Junior Environmental Rangers and Cosplay DIY that serve both neurotypical and neurodiverse youth together.

The training-as-infrastructure model extended to parks and recreation as well. Miami-Dade County Parks, Recreation and Open Spaces Department (PROS) earned the Certified Autism Center® (CAC) designation through the International Board of Credentialing and Continuing Education Standards (IBCCES), making it one of the largest parks and recreation departments in the United States to achieve that recognition. The CAC designation requires comprehensive, department-wide staff training and a measurable commitment to inclusive service delivery across parks, programs, facilities, and events. Staff across divisions participated in the training process, reinforcing that neuroinclusion is not a specialty function but a standard of how Miami-Dade serves the public.

The same UM-NSU CARD partnership extended into healthcare, where UHealth Jackson Children's Care, the pediatric emergency and urgent care network anchored by Holtz Children's Hospital at Jackson Memorial, became the first network of pediatric emergency departments in Florida to achieve an autism-friendly designation. All four emergency department locations completed

specialized sensory training, and each added a dedicated sensory-friendly exam room featuring soft music, dimmed lighting, and a beanbag chair, giving neurodivergent patients a calm and controlled environment for their care. The UHealth Jackson Urgent Care centers followed, earning the same designation, also a first in Florida. For families navigating an emergency or urgent care visit with a neurodivergent child, the designation means the staff who receive them have been trained to respond thoughtfully, and the space they are brought into was designed with their child's needs in mind. More information is available at pediatrics.jacksonhealth.org/autism-friendly.

Across departments, training created consistency. Families reported increased confidence navigating public spaces, while staff reported greater clarity and confidence in their roles.

REPLICATION CONSIDERATIONS

- Treat neurodiversity training as core infrastructure, not a special initiative
- Prioritize law enforcement and first responders as early adopters
- Implement voluntary identification tools that enhance communication without mandating disclosure
- Reinforce training regularly to account for staff turnover and evolving best practices
- Frame neuroinclusion as a safety and service improvement, not special treatment

Section 3. Advisory Boards, Committees, and Task Forces

Sustainable neuroinclusion does not happen through one-time initiatives or individual champions alone. Like all successful initiatives, it requires structure.

Miami-Dade County used advisory boards, committees, and task forces to create formal spaces where advocates, families, subject-matter experts, and policymakers could work together consistently. These bodies transformed community concern into actionable policy and ensured that neuroinclusion remained an ongoing priority rather than a temporary focus.

WHY ADVISORY STRUCTURES MATTER

Elected officials often hear from families and advocates during moments of crisis or public comment, but without a structured forum, those conversations rarely translate into coordinated action.

Advisory bodies solve this problem by creating a regular, predictable space for discussion, problem-solving, and accountability.

These structures move advocacy from informal requests to formal policy conversations, provide elected officials and staff with direct insight into lived experience, help departments coordinate rather than work in silos, and create continuity when elected leadership or staff change.

STANDING BOARDS AND FLEXIBLE TASK FORCES

There is no single model that works for every jurisdiction. Larger cities and counties may have the capacity to create standing advisory boards dedicated to neurodiversity. Smaller municipalities may find that joint task forces or shared advisory bodies with neighboring cities are more practical. Both approaches are valid. What matters is intentionality.

AN APPROVED ALTERNATIVE MODEL: A BUSINESS COMMUNITY TASK FORCE

Advisory structures do not have to sit inside government. A business community can stand up its own task force as an approved alternative model, extending neuroinclusion through channels government cannot reach on its own, advocacy, employment, and private sector partnership. ChamberSOUTH, the chamber of commerce serving Greater South Miami-Dade, is building exactly this, working from a model authored by Commissioner Raquel A. Regalado. The Neuroinclusion Corridor Task Force translates the County model into a private sector counterpart, with one representative from each corridor community, South Miami, Pinecrest, Palmetto Bay, Cutler Bay, Homestead, and Florida City, plus the District 7 Commissioner for unincorporated Greater Kendall, at the table. The task force organizes its work into two tracks, a Neuro-Friendly Business designation that helps customer facing members welcome neurodivergent families, and a Neuroinclusive Employer program that helps members hire and support neurodivergent talent. Training and expertise come from established partners such as UM-NSU CARD and IBCCES, so participation stays low cost and achievable for businesses of every size. Designed to launch in October 2026, Disability Employment Month, the model shows how a chamber of commerce can become a standing, replicable vehicle for neuroinclusion alongside a county's public framework.

COMPOSITION AND SCOPE

Effective advisory bodies are intentionally diverse. Miami-Dade prioritized participation from parents, self-advocates, clinicians, educators, service providers, and representatives from relevant government departments. Clear scopes of work helped ensure that discussions led to outcomes, with typical areas including policy review, barrier identification, training priorities, sensory space development, and employment initiatives.

FROM PERFORMATIVE SUPPORT TO POLICY ACTION

Advisory structures help address a common challenge: public expressions of support for neurodiversity are widespread, but without structure they often remain symbolic. Committees and task forces provide a mechanism for translating public commitment into policy decisions, budget considerations, and departmental action. We have also found that these structures create excellent opportunities for collaboration between cities and counties.

REPLICATION CONSIDERATIONS

- Match the structure to available resources
- Clearly define purpose and authority
- Ensure representation from both lived experience and operational departments
- Establish expectations for follow-through and reporting
- Use geographic mapping of existing resources to foster collaboration and prevent duplication

Section 4. Sensory Spaces, Inclusive Public Events, and Resources

Sensory-friendly environments are often misunderstood as expensive, specialized spaces designed only for children. Miami-Dade County took a different approach. Sensory inclusion was treated as a spectrum of options, ranging from permanent spaces to temporary adjustments, all grounded in one goal: expanding access to public life for neurodivergent children and adults.

This work was guided by a simple principle: neuroinclusion does not always require building something new. Often, it requires changing how spaces are designed, programmed, and communicated.

WHY SENSORY INCLUSION MATTERS

For many neurodivergent individuals, sensory overload is the primary barrier to participation in public life, because lighting, sound, crowds, unpredictability, and lack of clear expectations can turn otherwise welcoming spaces into environments that feel unsafe or inaccessible. Families and individuals often opt out entirely, and because absence does not generate complaints, policymakers rarely see the barrier.

PERMANENT SENSORY SPACES

Miami-Dade supported the creation of permanent sensory spaces in key public locations, particularly where individuals may experience heightened stress, long wait times, or temperature changes. These spaces are designed to support regulation rather than entertainment. Features may include adjustable lighting, sound dampening, tactile tools, quiet seating, and clear visual cues. All sensory areas are air-conditioned.

Miami-Dade prioritized adult-centered design. Neurodivergent adults benefit from environments that allow for decompression and self-regulation without stigma. Permanent sensory rooms work best in high-traffic environments such as libraries, government buildings, airports, and cultural venues.

MODULAR AND TEMPORARY SOLUTIONS

Not every jurisdiction can build permanent sensory rooms, and not every event requires one. Modular sensory solutions have been successfully deployed for events, festivals, and pop-up programming. The S3 (Sensory Support Space), in use since 2024, has transformed adult participation in outdoor events from the Coconut Grove Arts Festival to holiday gatherings. These solutions are flexible, reusable, and scalable, making them ideal for jurisdictions looking to start quickly.

The Dade County Youth Fair is one of the clearest illustrations of how neuroinclusion grows when you start small and stay consistent. The partnership did not begin with a comprehensive plan. It began with a sensory room. The following year, the Fair added a sensory map so families could navigate the fairgrounds with confidence. This year, the partnership reaches its most ambitious stage yet: designated sensory-friendly hours every Saturday and Sunday from noon to 3 p.m., during which ride music and lights are turned off; sensory-friendly space designations marked throughout the

fairgrounds; a recommended route for visitors who benefit from knowing their path in advance; and social narratives available through the Plan Your Visit section of the Fair's website at fairexpo.com. Three years, three steps, each one built on the last, and that is the model.

INCLUSIVE PUBLIC EVENTS AT EVERY PRICE POINT

One of the most effective sensory inclusion strategies involved adapting existing public events rather than creating new ones. Simple but thoughtful adjustments included dimming or eliminating strobe lighting, lowering music volume or offering quiet hours, reducing crowd density during specific time windows, and providing advance information so attendees know what to expect.

Sensory-friendly nights at cultural venues were created by turning down lights and sound, without redesigning the entire event. These adaptations expanded access without compromising the experience for others.

Large, high visibility events can carry neuroinclusion further than any single venue. On June 12, 2026, Miami-Dade hosted a Neuroinclusive Soccer Clinic at Evelyn Greer Park in Pinecrest, presented in partnership with Concacaf, Special Olympics and tied to the FIFA World Cup 26 in Miami. The clinic used a train the trainer model. From 10:00 to 11:30 a.m., Concacaf led a workshop teaching local coaches, teachers, and students aged eighteen and over its neuroinclusive methodology. From 12:30 to 2:30 p.m., those trained adults took the methodology onto the field, leading youth through drills and mini-games. The structure is easy to replicate, train the adults first, then put the training into practice with young people, all under a banner the whole community recognizes. Tying a clinic to a major sporting event turns a moment of regional attention into lasting local capacity.

SOCIAL STORIES AS A NEUROINCLUSION TOOL

Social stories are one of the simplest and most effective tools for making public spaces more welcoming. They explain what will happen, in what order, and what is expected, using clear language and visuals. By reducing uncertainty, social stories lower anxiety and increase the likelihood of successful participation. They benefit neurodivergent adults just as much as children.

Miami-Dade incorporated social stories across libraries, parks, transit, airports, emergency preparedness materials, and public events. Each social story was tailored to a specific space, using actual photos of the location rather than generic images, which cause confusion rather than comfort.

Social stories do not require specialized software or consultants. They can be created with a phone camera, clear captions, and a simple PDF. The goal is clarity, not perfection.

WATER SAFETY AND DROWNING PREVENTION

Drowning is the leading cause of death overall for individuals with autism, who are 40 times more likely to drown than their neurotypical peers, according to the American Journal of Public Health. Children with autism are frequently drawn to water and have a significantly elevated tendency to wander, and those two characteristics together create a risk that most standard public safety campaigns do not address. Miami-Dade recognized this gap and acted on it. When the County adopted Resolution R-455-24 to establish the Zero Drownings Miami-Dade program in May 2024, Commissioner Regalado amended the item to include specific programming and outreach to autistic children, adults, and their caregivers. The Zero Drownings initiative emphasizes multiple overlapping layers of protection: swim lessons, physical barriers, alarms, life jackets, CPR training, and rescue procedures. No single measure is sufficient on its own, and families of autistic children are encouraged to implement all of them. More information and swim lesson resources are available at zerodrowningsmiamidade.org.

EMERGENCY PREPAREDNESS AND FAMILY RESOURCES

Sensory inclusion extends to the moments when a whole community is under stress, including hurricane season and other emergencies. Miami-Dade pairs its sensory and training work with concrete resources that families and caregivers can use directly. The Neurodivergent Hurricane Preparedness Guide walks families through building a personalized emergency plan and is available at miamidade.gov/hurricane/library/neurodivergent-hurricane-preparedness.pdf. Caregivers can also register a loved one for the County's Emergency and Evacuation Assistance Program, which provides specialized transportation and shelter support for residents whose disabilities or medical needs prevent them from evacuating on their own. Registering before a storm ensures help is in place when it is needed, and more information is available at miamidade.gov/global/news-item.page (Register for emergency evacuation assistance). Any jurisdiction can assemble a similar set of family facing resources using existing emergency management staff and publicly available FEMA and state guidance, so neurodivergent preparedness becomes a standard part of how a community plans for disasters.

REPLICATION CONSIDERATIONS

- Start with one high-visibility location or event
- Pair environmental changes with staff training
- Design for adults as well as children

- Communicate clearly and proactively by posting social stories online before visits
 - View neuroinclusion as a series of choices, not a single investment
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WHEN GOVERNMENT LEADS, PARTNERS FOLLOW

One of the most meaningful outcomes of Miami-Dade's neuroinclusion work has been the ripple effect into the private and civic sectors. When government models neuroinclusion, partners take notice and act on their own.

The Greater Miami Convention & Visitors Bureau (GMCVB) is a compelling example. After engaging with Miami-Dade's neuroinclusion work, the GMCVB independently pursued and received Certified Autism Center™ (CAC) designation on April 1, 2024, granted by the International Board of Credentialing and Continuing Education Standards (IBCCES). The CAC designation is awarded to organizations that have completed autism training to better understand, welcome, and provide accessibility to autistic and sensory-sensitive visitors and their families. The GMCVB did not wait to be directed. They saw the model, understood the value, and acted.

This is what systemic neuroinclusion looks like in practice. When a major tourism and hospitality organization commits to accessibility for neurodivergent visitors, covering accommodations, attractions, dining, and transportation, it sends a signal to the entire industry. Greater Miami becomes not just a welcoming government, but a welcoming destination.

The signal the GMCVB sent is already producing more certifications across the destination. In June 2026, Loews Miami Beach Hotel earned the Certified Autism Center designation from IBCCES, after 400 of its guest facing staff and management completed autism and sensory training, the property completed an onsite sensory review, and the hotel created sensory guides for guests and a listing on the IBCCES Accessibility App. The certification is a direct follow-up to the training underway through the GMCVB and conversations with Commissioner Regalado, and it is part of the larger initiative for Greater Miami to become a Certified Autism Destination, in which hospitality, recreation, and entertainment venues across the area train and certify so that visiting and local families have many trusted options to choose from. A second certification is now underway at Loews Coral Gables in District 7. More information is available at ibcces.org/blog/2026/06/05/loews-miami-beach-hotel.

For communities replicating this work: share your neuroinclusion efforts publicly and broadly. Engage your convention and visitors bureaus, chambers of commerce, and hospitality partners early. You may not need to mandate anything, you may just need to show them what is possible.

Section 5. Transit, Airports, and High-Stress Public Infrastructure

Transit systems and airports are among the most complex and stressful public environments. They combine crowds, noise, time pressure, security protocols, and unfamiliar routines. For neurodivergent individuals, especially adults, these conditions create barriers to independence that are rarely visible to policymakers.

Miami-Dade County approached these environments with a clear understanding: if neurodivergent individuals can navigate high-stress infrastructure with dignity and confidence, access to the rest of civic life expands dramatically.

WHY TRANSIT AND AIRPORTS MATTER

Transportation is a prerequisite for employment, education, healthcare, and community participation. For many neurodivergent adults, the inability to independently use transit or air travel becomes a limiting factor long before skill or motivation. Challenges may include sensory overload, difficulty processing verbal instructions in loud environments, anxiety related to security procedures, and fear of negative interactions with staff or law enforcement.

MIAMI INTERNATIONAL AIRPORT AND THE MIA AIR PROGRAM

Miami International Airport launched MIAair, the Airport Instruction and Readiness program, in 2015, in partnership with UM-NSU CARD and the Ear Institute at UHealth. A decade later, the program has served more than 300 children with special needs. MIAair is a full dress rehearsal: participants practice entering the airport, obtaining boarding passes, going through security, and boarding an actual aircraft, all the way to a seat, in a safe, controlled environment before their real travel day. The experience is designed to make the unfamiliar familiar, reducing the anxiety that makes air travel inaccessible for so many neurodivergent individuals and their families.

On April 2, 2025, World Autism Awareness Day, MIA and American Airlines co-hosted a MIAair tour for more than 50 children with special needs from local high schools, accompanied by their parents and guardians. American Airlines provided gate agents and flight crew for the experience. That private sector partnership is worth noting: MIA did not need a special budget to staff the tour, they called their anchor carrier American Airlines, and any airport in Florida with an airline partner can do the same.

MIAair also produces a suite of free, downloadable resources available in both English and Spanish: a Social Narrative Brief, a full Social Narrative, a Caregiver Information Packet, and an Airline Travel Checklist. These materials allow families to prepare at home before the rehearsal visit, or to use independently if a rehearsal session is not logistically possible. The bilingual availability reflects the reality of Miami's population and serves as a model for any airport or transit authority seeking to make their accessibility materials genuinely accessible. All resources are available at miami-airport.com/miaair.asp.

In addition to rehearsal programs, MIA incorporated a dedicated sensory space open to neurodivergent children, adults, and their caregivers.

THE HIDDEN DISABILITIES SUNFLOWER PROGRAM

Miami-Dade integrated the Hidden Disabilities Sunflower program into both airport and transit environments. The Sunflower is an internationally recognized symbol that allows individuals to voluntarily signal that they may need extra time, clearer communication, or reduced sensory input, without disclosing a diagnosis.

A symbol alone is not sufficient. Miami-Dade's approach emphasized that recognition tools must be supported by staff training through UM-NSU CARD to ensure appropriate, respectful responses.

TRANSIT SYSTEMS AND DAILY MOBILITY

Public transit is often the primary mode of transportation for neurodivergent adults, particularly those who do not drive. Miami-Dade extended training and neuroinclusion strategies to transit operators and staff, focusing on communication, patience, and recognizing when behavior may be driven by sensory overload rather than noncompliance.

REPLICATION CONSIDERATIONS

- Partner with airports and transit authorities to pilot rehearsal-based programs
- Introduce voluntary recognition tools such as the Hidden Disabilities Sunflower lanyard
- Pair symbols and programs with consistent staff training
- Prioritize preparation tools such as social narratives and advance communication

- Work with TSA Cares and airline partners such as American Airlines that have neurodiversity programs
- Frame these efforts as customer service, safety, and access rather than accommodations

Section 6. Neuroinclusive Government Services

For many neurodivergent adults, the most difficult barriers are not found in schools or workplaces but at government service counters. Long wait times, crowded offices, complex forms, unpredictable processes, and high-stakes outcomes can turn routine tasks into overwhelming experiences.

Miami-Dade County recognized that access to government services is foundational to independence. Identification, voter registration, tax exemptions, and records access are not ancillary services but gateways to employment, housing, travel, civic participation, and adult life.

WHY GOVERNMENT SERVICES MATTER

An ID is more than a card. It is often the first requirement for employment, transportation, banking, travel, and accommodations. Many neurodivergent adults do not obtain or renew identification because the process itself is too overwhelming. As a result, barriers compound over time, and employment becomes harder, travel becomes harder, independence becomes harder.

NEURO-INCLUSIVE SERVICE DAYS

Miami-Dade Tax Collector Dariel Fernandez, in collaboration with Commissioner Regalado and the other constitutional officers, formally launched Neuro-Inclusive Service Days on April 2, 2025, World Autism Day, at the Stephen P. Clark Government Center. The inaugural quarterly service day took place on April 19, 2025, and served dozens of families with children on the autism spectrum, helping them navigate the process of obtaining identification cards, driver licenses, and tag renewals in an accommodating and supportive environment. All five Miami-Dade constitutional officers participated: Tax Collector Dariel Fernandez, Property Appraiser Tomás Regalado, Sheriff Rosi Cordero, Supervisor of Elections Alina Garcia, and Clerk and Comptroller Juan Fernández-Barquín. Each office provided personalized services tailored to individuals of all abilities. The program continues with quarterly full-service days in April (Autism Acceptance Month), July, and October (Disability Employment Month), and monthly ID-only service days on the third Saturday of every

month. These dedicated service days bring multiple constitutional offices and county departments together in one location, reducing the need for repeated visits and unfamiliar settings, two of the most common barriers for neurodivergent individuals accessing government services.

Services offered included identification services with shorter wait times and dedicated appointments, registration for the Occupant with Autism decal program, voter registration assistance, guidance on disability-related tax exemptions, property fraud alert enrollment, and access to voluntary invisible disability identifiers such as the Hidden Disabilities Sunflower.

VOLUNTARY DISCLOSURE AND DIGNITY

Florida allows individuals to voluntarily add disability indicators to state-issued identification. Miami-Dade ensured that residents were informed of this option and understood how it could support accommodations during travel, employment, or interactions with public agencies. Participation remained voluntary. The focus was on empowering individuals with information and choice.

COORDINATION ACROSS OFFICES

A key success factor was coordination among constitutional officers and departments. The Miami-Dade County Clerk, Tax Collector, Property Appraiser, Supervisor of Elections, and Sheriff worked together to ensure consistency and clarity. This coordination reinforced trust and demonstrated that neuroinclusion is not the responsibility of a single department, it is a shared government function.

Government outreach is itself a form of service access. During the COVID-19 pandemic, Miami-Dade passed a resolution directing a targeted educational campaign to reach neurodivergent individuals and their families with vaccine information. This mattered because standard public health communication channels — press releases, general announcements, and social media frequently do not reach individuals who rely on trusted intermediaries, have limited digital access, or require plain-language materials adapted to their communication needs. The lesson for any jurisdiction is that equitable outreach is not optional. If the same message goes to everyone through the same channel, it does not reach everyone equally.

REPLICATION CONSIDERATIONS

- Identify the most common service barriers faced by neurodivergent adults
 - Create predictable service windows rather than expecting individuals to adapt to
-

standard processes

-
- Train frontline staff to recognize and respond to neurodivergent needs
-
- Coordinate across offices to reduce repeat visits and confusion
-
- Frame service adaptations as access improvements, not special treatment

THE LOWEST-COST, HIGHEST-IMPACT MOVE: SHARE WHAT ALREADY EXISTS

Not every neuroinclusion action requires a new program, a budget line, or a resolution. Some of the highest-impact things a government can do cost nothing. One of them is this: put Parent to Parent of Miami's information in front of families who need it.

Parent to Parent of Miami provides peer support, workshops, and resources connecting families of individuals with disabilities and special needs to each other and to the services they need. In the Urban Impact Lab's 2023 community survey, Parent to Parent was the second most frequently named trusted resource in Miami-Dade, cited by families more than any organization except UM-NSU CARD. That kind of community trust takes years to earn. You do not need to replicate it; you need to point people toward it.

Every city has its equivalent, whether that is a peer support organization, a family resource network, or a disability-led advocacy group that families already know and trust. One of the most meaningful things an elected official or city manager can do is find that organization, build a relationship with them, and make sure their information is available wherever families encounter government: at service days, in library branches, at parks and recreation counters, in waiting rooms. A flyer, a QR code, or a mention at a public meeting costs nearly nothing and can mean everything to an isolated family.

Section 7. April and October

Two months of the year offer communities a powerful, built-in opportunity to advance neuroinclusion work: April, recognized nationally as Autism Acceptance Month, and October, recognized as Disability Employment Month.

Miami-Dade County went further than recognition. Through legislation, the County officially declared April as Autism Acceptance Month, not Autism Awareness Month, and adopted the infinity symbol as the symbol of that recognition, replacing the puzzle piece. These were deliberate policy choices, not just symbolic gestures. The language we use and the symbols we choose signal to neurodivergent residents whether they are truly welcome or merely tolerated.

October was similarly designated by legislation as Disability Employment Month, creating a formal county-wide focus on workforce access, employer engagement, and employment outcomes for neurodivergent and disabled adults.

WHY THESE TWO MONTHS MATTER

Most of the initiatives described in this toolkit were rolled out during April or October. These months serve as annual anchors that create momentum, organize partners, and give communities a structured reason to act. They also provide an opportunity to highlight organizations doing this work, celebrate neurodivergent individuals and their contributions, and educate the public on what comes next.

Using April and October intentionally moves communities away from one-time proclamations and toward sustained, coordinated action.

WHAT MIAMI-DADE DOES DURING THESE MONTHS

During April, Miami-Dade raises the Autism Acceptance flag on April 2nd, World Autism Day, and coordinates events across county departments and partner municipalities. April has also served as the strategic launch month for major initiatives. In 2025, Neuro-Inclusive Service Days were formally rolled out during April, using the month's visibility and momentum to introduce the program to the community.

Every April, Miami-Dade hosts Inclusive Family Day, a community celebration designed for neurodivergent individuals of all ages and their families. The event brings together county partners including libraries, police, and fire rescue, alongside food trucks, sensory activities, therapy dogs, and information tables from organizations ranging from therapy providers to job placement programs. Participants have the opportunity to experience a fire truck demonstration by Miami-Dade Fire Rescue, an experience that builds trust and reduces fear of first responders. A Sensory Van provides a quiet decompression space for those who need it throughout the event, ensuring the celebration itself remains accessible to the people it is meant to honor. In 2026, Inclusive Family Day takes place on April 25 at Temple Beth Am in Pinecrest, hosted in partnership with the Autism Speaks

Miami Empower Summit, which runs the same day from noon to 5:30 p.m., focused on Transition to Adulthood. The combined event brings together family fun, community resources, and expert panels on inclusive workforce, post-secondary options, caregiver self-care, medical and legal transitions, and independent living, all in one place, on one day. Inclusive Family Day is not a government program. It is a community gathering, and that distinction matters. The footprint grows each year because the community builds it. Government provides the structure, the partners fill it with meaning.

October's anchor event is MiAbility, Miami-Dade's Disability Employment Month showcase. MiAbility has grown significantly since its launch as an evening event at Super Blue, where the Kendall Learning Academy, Miami Dade College's data analytics credential program for neurodivergent students, presented alongside a speaker from Microsoft. This past October, MiAbility expanded into a virtual series showcasing adult programming across Miami-Dade County, featuring perspectives from parents, employers, and program providers on what workforce access looks like in practice. That evolution, from a single evening to a multi-session series, reflects the depth of community interest and the growing ecosystem of partners engaged in this work.

Both months are also opportunities to spotlight the organizations and advocates doing this work year-round, not just government initiatives but the service providers, nonprofits, educators, and employers who make neuroinclusion possible in daily life.

THE AUTISM ACCEPTANCE FLAG

The autism acceptance flag is available to communities that wish to fly it on April 2nd, World Autism Day. Flying the flag is a visible, public signal that your community sees, values, and is working to include neurodivergent residents. To request a flag, please reach out to Commissioner Regalado's office directly. We encourage every city and county in Florida to make this a tradition.

Coral Gables is an early example of what this looks like in practice. In April 2024, the City raised the Autism Acceptance flag at City Hall, lit the building in blue on April 2nd, organized a multi-stop caravan ending at Crystal Academy, and hosted a Battle of the Badges kickball game through their MySquad program. None of these required a county directive. Coral Gables saw the model, understood the message, and built their own April program. That is exactly what this toolkit is designed to enable.

REPLICATION CONSIDERATIONS

- Pass legislation formally designating April as Autism Acceptance Month and October as Disability Employment Month
- Adopt the infinity symbol as your community's symbol of neuroinclusion
- Use these two months as launch windows for new initiatives, since April and October create built-in momentum, media attention, and community readiness
- Partner with local organizations to co-host events and highlight their work
- Fly the Autism Acceptance flag on April 2nd and encourage your municipalities to do the same
- Host at least one community education event in each month, in person or virtual

Consider an annual Inclusive Family Day in April, a community gathering for neurodivergent individuals, families, service providers, and government partners to celebrate, connect, and learn about available resources

Section 8. Employment, Internships, and Workforce Access

Employment is the end goal of neuroinclusion. It is adulthood's primary vehicle for financial independence, identity formation, and social integration. Working does not have to look like neurotypical employment to mark the transition toward greater self-sufficiency. Whether ten hours or forty, paid or volunteer, employment provides structure, purpose, and identity stability. The failure to provide access to work leads to notable declines in mental health and increases in depression.

For neurodivergent adults, access to work is not only about income. It is about independence, identity, routine, and belonging. Yet employment remains one of the most persistent gaps in the transition from childhood services to adult life.

The scale of the challenge is significant. Nationally, studies estimate that 50 to 75 percent of autistic adults are underemployed or unemployed, and nearly half of 25-year-olds with autism have never held a paying job. More than 500,000 young adults with autism will age out of guaranteed services in the next decade. In Miami-Dade County alone, UM-NSU CARD estimates there may be as many as 50,000 individuals with autism spectrum disorder. These are not abstract statistics, they represent families navigating a system that was not designed for their success.

FROM EDUCATION TO EMPLOYMENT

Much of the early focus on neurodiversity occurs in educational settings. However, many supports drop off sharply at age eighteen or twenty-two, just as individuals are expected to enter the workforce. Families often find themselves navigating a confusing landscape of vocational programs, benefits systems, and employer expectations with little coordination between them.

Employers, meanwhile, frequently express interest in hiring neurodivergent individuals but lack guidance on how to recruit, onboard, and support them successfully. Miami-Dade addressed this disconnect by focusing on pathways rather than placements.

PUBLIC SECTOR AS PROOF OF CONCEPT

Miami-Dade began by examining its own hiring practices. Changes were made to County rules governing internships and job placement to explicitly include neurodivergent adults. This allowed the County to test accommodations, supervision models, and onboarding strategies within its own workforce, revealing opportunities in departments like Libraries, Water and Sewer, and Housing. From volunteer to intern to paid positions to long-term contracts with partners like CareerSource South Florida, neuroinclusion was discussed and prioritized.

This internal work gave the County credibility when engaging private-sector partners.

That credibility produced tangible results beyond county government. The Greater Miami Convention & Visitors Bureau, after engaging with Miami-Dade's neuroinclusion work, went further on its own. Not only did the GMCVB achieve Certified Autism Center™ designation in 2024, it also hired graduates from Easter Seals of South Florida's Culinary High School program as greeters. Neurodivergent young adults, trained in a program designed for their success, hired by one of Greater Miami's most prominent civic organizations. That is the employment pipeline working as intended: education to training to real jobs, without government mandating a single hire.

THE KENDALL LEARNING ACADEMY: A PIPELINE PROVEN

One of the most significant workforce initiatives in Miami-Dade's neuroinclusion record is the Kendall Learning Academy (KLA) at Miami Dade College, a program Commissioner Regalado helped create, designed to close a specific and persistent gap: neurodivergent young adults aging out of school services with no clear pathway into employment. The program supports students in transitioning from high school to college, with a focus on data analytics. Students earn a 20-credit Business Intelligence Professional College Credit Certificate, providing stackable credentials that prepare graduates for careers as Business Intelligence or Computer Systems Analysts. KLA is a collaboration between Miami Dade College, Miami-Dade County Public Schools, and local feeder schools, and is available beginning each summer term.

KLA's first cohort has graduated and every graduate was employed. Placements were coordinated directly by Commissioner Regalado's office, with each graduate placed in a county department for a paid internship designed to provide real work experience, structured feedback, and a letter of recommendation. For many, it was their first job, and that first job is proof of employability. From there, outcomes diverged in exactly the way a good program should produce. Graduates were subsequently hired by the Miami-Dade Tax Collector's office, an independent constitutional office that chose to hire them on their own terms, not as a county directive. The second KLA cohort is now enrolled and structured through CareerSource South Florida, a workforce development organization that partners with Miami-Dade County, building on the model the first cohort established.

The urgency behind this work is grounded in data. According to Deloitte Insights, between 10 and 20 percent of the world's population is estimated to be neurodiverse, a category that includes autism, ADHD, dyslexia, and Tourette's syndrome among others, and in the United States 85 percent of people with autism are unemployed, compared to just 4.2 percent of the overall population. That gap is not inevitable. KLA and other adult programming is evidence that it can close, one cohort at a time.

PRIVATE SECTOR AS SCALE

The private sector offers the greatest opportunity for scale, flexibility, and innovation, and Miami-Dade's role shifted from employer to connector, bringing together businesses, educational institutions, service providers, and advocates to reduce barriers on both sides of the hiring equation.

Employers often need support with adjusting recruitment and interview processes, understanding reasonable accommodations, providing clear expectations and structured onboarding, supporting supervisors and coworkers, and partnering with nonprofits focused on neurodivergent employment.

Neurodivergent job seekers often need exposure to real work environments, opportunities to build experience gradually, clear communication and expectations, and support navigating benefits and transportation.

Miami-Dade focused on partnerships that addressed both needs simultaneously.

In 2023, Commissioner Regalado commissioned Urban Impact Lab to conduct an ecosystem mapping study of Miami-Dade's neurodivergent employment pipeline. The research engaged parents, community organizations, and local employers through surveys and one-on-one conversations. Among parents surveyed, 32 percent said they were not confident their child would have access to employment opportunities. Transportation emerged as the single greatest barrier: unreliable Special Transport Service, inability to cross county lines, and the absence of private alternatives directly affected whether individuals could get to a job and keep it. Other key barriers included the risk of losing SSI or Medicaid benefits upon employment, employer hesitancy due to liability concerns, and a fragmented ecosystem where schools, vocational programs, and employers rarely connected. The study identified UM-NSU CARD and Parent to Parent as the two most trusted resources in the community, mentioned by name in survey responses more than any other organizations. These findings directly shaped Miami-Dade's employment strategy and informed the creation of EmployABILITY305.

INTERNSHIPS, VOLUNTEERING, AND ON-RAMPS

While paid employment is the goal, internships and volunteering serve as effective on-ramps. These opportunities allow job seekers to build confidence, demonstrate skills, and acclimate to workplace routines in lower-pressure environments. They also allow employers to learn what works without committing to permanent placements upfront.

The key is structure. On-ramps must be purposeful, time-bound, and connected to real employment pathways rather than indefinite holding patterns.

REPLICATION CONSIDERATIONS

- Review internship and hiring rules for unintended barriers
- Use public-sector roles as pilot opportunities where possible
- Partner with private employers interested in inclusive hiring
- Support structured internships and volunteer on-ramps

- Train supervisors and coworkers
- Coordinate with transportation, training, and benefits systems
- Alter hiring processes to allow individuals to demonstrate how they work rather than relying solely on verbal communication or eye contact
- Partner with local educational and vocational programs to provide hands-on opportunities

Section 9. What This Toolkit Is and Is Not

WHAT THIS TOOLKIT IS

Practical. It is grounded in policies, programs, and partnerships that have already been implemented and sustained within a large, complex county government. Nothing described here is theoretical.

Flexible. Communities are encouraged to start where they have capacity. Jurisdictions do not need to implement every section to make meaningful progress.

Scalable. The initiatives described can be adapted for cities, counties, airports, transit agencies, and public authorities of different sizes and resources.

Bipartisan and broadly supported. Every initiative described passed unanimously or with overwhelming support. When neuroinclusion is framed as access, safety, and effective service delivery, it resonates across political lines.

Focused on systems, not symbolism. The emphasis is on changing how government operates, not on awareness campaigns alone.

WHAT THIS TOOLKIT IS NOT

A mandate. It does not require jurisdictions to adopt specific policies or programs. It offers proven options and pathways.

Expensive by default. Many initiatives leverage existing staff, facilities, and partnerships. Several were implemented at little or no additional cost.

A one-size-fits-all solution. Communities differ in size, structure, and capacity. The goal is prioritization and progress, not uniformity.

Limited to children. While children often receive the most attention, the focus here is intentionally on adolescents and adults, particularly in areas such as public safety, transportation, government services, and employment.

Performative. Posting about neuroinclusion is not the same as doing the work. The initiatives described here require follow-through, coordination, and accountability.

A NOTE ON STARTING SMALL

Communities do not need to do everything to do something. Many jurisdictions begin with training frontline staff, adapting a library or park, creating a task force, or hosting a neuro-inclusive service day. Each step builds trust, capacity, and momentum.

Neuroinclusion is not about perfection. It is about intentional design. When communities focus on access, safety, and dignity, neuroinclusion becomes part of how government works rather than an add-on.

Section 10. How to Get Started in Your Community

Communities often delay neuroinclusion work because it feels complex, cross-cutting, or unfamiliar. In practice, getting started is less about doing everything and more about choosing the right first step.

STEP 1. START WITH TRAINING

Training is the most effective and least disruptive place to begin. Identify frontline staff who interact regularly with the public, including police and fire personnel, library staff, parks and recreation staff, transit operators, and airport and customer service staff, and partner with UM-NSU CARD or your local CARD center for evidence-based, practical training.

STEP 2. CHOOSE ONE PUBLIC SPACE OR SERVICE

Select one space or service where improvements can be piloted. Libraries are often an ideal starting point, being familiar, community-centered, and relatively easy to adapt. Focus on small, intentional changes: staff training, social narratives, sensory kits or quiet areas, and clear signage. Early wins

build confidence and credibility.

STEP 3. CREATE A STRUCTURE FOR ONGOING INPUT

Decide whether your community has the capacity for a standing advisory board or a task force shared with neighboring jurisdictions. The structure should match your community's size and resources. What matters is consistency, not complexity.

STEP 4. FOCUS ON SAFETY AND TRUST

Prioritize neurodiversity training for law enforcement and first responders. Implement voluntary tools such as decals or identifiers that support communication. Frame these efforts around de-escalation, safety, and trust. Trust is built when families see that responders are prepared and informed.

STEP 5. REMOVE BARRIERS TO GOVERNMENT SERVICES

Review how residents access basic government services, particularly identification. Dedicated service days, reduced wait times, trained staff, and clear process explanations directly support independence, employment, and civic participation.

STEP 6. ENGAGE EMPLOYMENT PARTNERS

Start by reviewing internship and volunteer opportunities for accessibility. Engage workforce organizations and employers interested in inclusive hiring. Support structured on-ramps that allow individuals to build experience gradually. Public-sector pilots can demonstrate what works, while private-sector partnerships provide scale.

STEP 7. COMMUNICATE CLEARLY AND CONSISTENTLY

Use websites, social media, and community partners to share what changes are being made, explain how to access services or programs, and set clear expectations. Transparency builds trust and increases participation.

A FINAL NOTE ON PROGRESS

Communities do not need to implement every initiative in this toolkit to make a difference. Start where you have capacity and build from there. Neuroinclusion is not a single project. It is a way of designing systems so that more people can participate fully in public life. This work is achievable, scalable, and broadly supported.

Many believe that the most difficult moment of parenting a neurodivergent child is the diagnosis. It is not. The scariest moment is when you realize that they will outlive you and one day live in a world without you as their caregiver.

At first, this realization keeps you up at night. Then it propels you every day to carve out space for them, to move them from dependence to independence.

Thank you for taking the time to read this toolkit. It means the world to every Floridian who, like me, loves a neurodivergent child and/or adult.

— Commissioner Raquel A. Regalado
Miami-Dade County Commission, District 7

Appendices

The following materials are included with this toolkit to support replication and reference.

APPENDIX A. LEGISLATION

This appendix consolidates the Miami-Dade County legislative record that anchors the Miami-Dade Model described throughout this Toolkit. Items are listed chronologically with File Number, title, type, and primary toolkit connection. Together, they demonstrate that neuroinclusion in Miami-Dade was not achieved through a single initiative — it was built deliberately, resolution by resolution, across training, public safety, emergency preparedness, workforce access, and civic inclusion.

A.1 Legislative Index (Chronological)

Year	File No.	Item	Type	Toolkit Section
2024	232521	Report: Voluntary "Occupant with Autism" Program	Admin. Report	Section 2 (Public Safety)

Year	File No.	Item	Type	Toolkit Section
2024	241112	Zero Drownings Program (Neurodiverse Inclusion Amendment)	Resolution	Section 4 (Public Events / Safety)
2024	241681	Tax Incentive for Businesses Offering Neurodiversity Training (Amendment)	Resolution	Section 8 (Workforce)
2023	230873	Autism Decal Program (MDPD)	Resolution	Section 2 (Public Safety)
2023	230147	Autism Acceptance Month + Rainbow Infinity Symbol	Resolution	Section 1 (Model) / Section 7 (April & October)
2022	221502	Report: Neurodivergent Youth Participate in Teen Court	Admin. Report	Section 2 (Public Safety)
2022	212660	Program for Neurodivergent Youth to Participate in Teen Court	Resolution	Section 2 (Public Safety)
2022	220192	Employment Opportunities for Individuals with Disabilities (EmployABILITY305)	Resolution	Section 8 (Workforce)
2021	212023	Neurodivergent Persons COVID-19 Vaccine Educational Campaign	Resolution	Section 2 (Training) / Section 6 (Government Services)
2021	210672	Report: Autism & Related Disabilities Agreement Transmittal	Admin. Report	Section 2 (Training) / Section 4 (Sensory / Social Stories)
2021	211697	Emergency Preparedness Info for Neurodivergent Individuals	Resolution	Section 2 (Public Safety) / Emergency Management
2021	211525	Vacant Entry-Level Positions (Neuro/Physical Disability Inclusion Amendment)	Resolution	Section 8 (Workforce pipeline)
2021	210031	UM-NSU CARD Countywide Autism & Neurodiverse Inclusion Program	Resolution	Section 2 (Training) / Section 4 (Sensory / Social Stories)

APPENDIX B. OFFICIAL ADMINISTRATIVE REPORTS

Official memoranda and administrative reports from Miami-Dade County agencies documenting the implementation of neuroinclusion programs referenced throughout this toolkit.

Resolution No. R-210031 — UM-NSU CARD Countywide Autism and Neurodiverse Inclusion Program (January 20, 2021)

The foundational resolution of the Miami-Dade neuroinclusion model, sponsored by Commissioner Raquel A. Regalado and adopted by the Board of County Commissioners on January 20, 2021. The resolution directed the County Mayor to enter into an agreement with UM-NSU CARD to develop a

countywide ASD and neurodiverse inclusion program at no cost to Miami-Dade County. The scope of the agreement required, at minimum: staff training for county employees who interact with the public (librarians, park staff, police officers, firefighters, and transit staff); development of social stories for county spaces including parks, libraries, and transit; age-specific programming for individuals with ASD; and development of autism-friendly spaces. The resolution cited the CDC's 2020 prevalence rate of 1 in 54 children diagnosed with ASD, the Autism Speaks projection that more than 500,000 young adults with autism would age out of guaranteed services within the decade, and CARD's estimate of up to 50,000 individuals with ASD in Miami-Dade County. The collaboration was required to launch during April in recognition of Autism Awareness Month.

Full resolution available at: miamidade.gov/govaction/legistarfiles/Matters/Y2021/210031.pdf

File No. 210672 — UM-NSU CARD Agreement Transmittal Report (April 20, 2021)

The 45-day compliance report required by Resolution No. R-210031, submitted to the Board of County Commissioners on April 20, 2021 as Agenda Item 2(B)(15). The report confirmed that the County Mayor had executed the agreement with the University of Miami–Nova Southeastern University Center for Autism and Related Disabilities to implement the countywide autism and neurodiverse inclusion program directed by the Board in January 2021. The transmittal formally established the partnership between Miami-Dade County and UM-NSU CARD that would go on to provide training to more than 2,500 police officers, firefighters, librarians, park staff, and other county employees, develop social narratives for parks, libraries, and transit, and support the designation of autism-friendly spaces across county departments.

Full report available at: miamidade.gov/govaction/legistarfiles/Matters/Y2021/210672.pdf

Resolution No. R-455-24 — Zero Drownings Miami-Dade (File 241112, May 21, 2024)

Adopted May 21, 2024, with Prime Sponsor Commissioner Keon Hardemon and Co-Sponsors including Commissioner Regalado. The resolution established the Zero Drownings Miami-Dade three-year trial program, created an Office of Drowning Prevention within PROS, and authorized the County Mayor to receive and expend up to \$750,000 in Children's Trust funding for staffing costs. Commissioner Regalado amended the item to include specific programming and outreach to autistic children, adults, and their caregivers.

Full resolution available at: miamidade.gov/govaction/legistarfiles/MinMatters/Y2024/241112min.pdf

Report on the "Occupant with Autism" Program (File No. 232521, December 2023)

Prepared by the Miami-Dade Police Department in response to Resolution No. R-555-23, sponsored by Commissioner Raquel A. Regalado and adopted June 21, 2023. The report details the development of the Occupant with Autism decal program, under which MDPD provides free decals to any Miami-Dade resident and hosts a voluntary registration website where caregivers can provide information about household members with autism spectrum disorder. UM-NSU CARD estimates there may be as many as 50,000 individuals with ASD in Miami-Dade County. The decal alerts first responders that an occupant may not speak, respond to, or comply with verbal commands, and may not have an awareness of danger. Decals are recommended for placement at the front door of a home or in the rear window of a vehicle. The program is funded through the MDPD budget at no additional cost to the County.

Full report available at: miamidade.gov/govaction/legistarfiles/Matters/Y2023/232521.pdf

UM-NSU CARD Collaborative Initiative Report: Enhancing Inclusivity for the Neurodivergent Population in Miami-Dade County (2024)

Prepared by Christina Rodriguez, M.S.Ed., BCBA of OJM Educational Consulting and submitted to Dr. Michael Alessandri, Director of UM-NSU CARD, this report documents the full scope of CARD's collaboration with Miami-Dade County under the partnership established by Resolution No. R-210031. The report covers training delivered to first responders, the public library system, parks and recreation staff, healthcare facilities, and transit and travel infrastructure, as well as media coverage, links to all department resources, and future planned initiatives. Key findings include 92 training events for first responders between 2021 and April 2024, training of over 100 parks and recreation staff members, staff and environmental assessments at all 50 library branches, sensory-friendly space development at Jackson Health System and Nicklaus Children's Hospital, and ongoing collaboration with Miami International Airport through the MIAair program. The report also inventories CARD's work with community attractions including the Miami-Dade Fair and Expo, History Miami, Superblue Miami, Frost Science Museum, and Pinecrest Gardens. This report is available from Commissioner Regalado's office or directly from UM-NSU CARD upon request.

APPENDIX C. URBAN IMPACT LAB STUDY

Commissioned research and survey findings from Urban Impact Lab (July 2023) documenting the neurodivergent employment ecosystem in Miami-Dade County. The study engaged 47 parents and guardians representing 53 neurodivergent individuals, plus one-on-one conversations with 10 community organizations and 2 local employers. Key findings include: transportation as the primary barrier to employment, 32% of parents lacking confidence in their child's access to employment

opportunities, and significant ecosystem gaps between schools, vocational programs, and employers. Includes a Roadmap with five recommendations and a catalog of active organizations, employers, and schools serving neurodivergent residents.

In July 2023, Commissioner Regalado commissioned Urban Impact Lab to conduct an ecosystem mapping study of Miami-Dade County's neurodivergent employment landscape. The study combined a parent and guardian survey, one-on-one interviews with community organizations and local employers, and desk research on schools, organizations, and employers across the region. Forty-seven parents and guardians responded to the survey, representing fifty-three neurodivergent individuals.

SURVEY FINDINGS

The survey documented significant unmet need. Thirty-two percent of respondents reported being not confident that their child or dependent would have access to employment opportunities. Twenty-nine percent were dissatisfied with the resources currently available to their family, while only three respondents reported being completely satisfied. Seventy-two percent had changed schools because their child's needs were not being met, and thirty-six percent described finding a school as extremely difficult. When asked which organizations they would recommend to other families, UM-NSU CARD was named twenty times and Parent to Parent was named fourteen times in thirty-eight responses, making them by far the two most trusted resources in the community.

KEY ECOSYSTEM GAPS

The study identified transportation as the single largest barrier to employment. The Special Transport Service (STS), the only free public option available, was described as unreliable, unable to cross county boundaries, and prone to delays that force employees to arrive hours early at their own expense. Other significant gaps included the absence of services for adults over age 22, whose supports tend to disappear at the age threshold; limited social skills and speech therapy coverage under insurance; disconnects between schools, community

organizations, and employers; and a strong reliance on word-of-mouth referrals that leaves many families without information until a crisis forces them to look. Employers were found to be largely untapped, with more than eighty percent of companies identified as inclusive employers using only general diversity language in their job postings, with little specific information about neurodivergent hiring practices or accommodations.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Urban Impact Lab recommended five areas of action: building an online navigation portal to centralize local resources for families; bringing in external organizations with proven neurodivergent employment models, specifically Gener8tor and CAI Neurodiverse Solutions, both of which expressed interest in expanding to Miami-Dade; piloting a small business inclusion program in District 7; launching an awareness campaign to connect families with existing resources; and pursuing transportation and infrastructure improvements in partnership with Transit Alliance Miami. The report also identified three organizations as clear standouts deserving of increased capacity and support: the De Moya Foundation, UM-NSU CARD, and Parent to Parent of Miami.

The full report, including the parent and guardian survey results, one-on-one interview summaries, and the Miami-Dade County Disability Employment Catalog, was prepared by Urban Impact Lab and delivered to Commissioner Regalado's office in July 2023.

APPENDIX D. LIBRARY SOCIAL STORY TEMPLATE

A sample social story template used in Miami-Dade County Public Libraries, available for adaptation by other jurisdictions.

Miami-Dade County Parks, Recreation and Open Spaces Department developed social narratives for park locations across the county as part of its Certified Autism Center® designation. Each narrative is a short, illustrated guide that walks visitors through what to expect at a specific park, designed to reduce sensory and social uncertainty before the visit. Social narratives are available for the following locations:

Gwen Cherry Park

A.D. Barnes Park

Oak Grove Park

Tamiami Park

Owaissa Bauer Camp

Amelia Earhart Park

South Dade Park

Tropical Park

Joe & Enid Demps Park

North Trail Park (PDF)

Each narrative can be downloaded and shared with families in advance of a visit. The format is replicable: any parks department can produce a social narrative for its facilities using photos, plain language, and a simple layout, without specialized software or outside consultants.

APPENDIX E. MIA AIRPORT MATERIALS

Materials from Miami International Airport's MIAair (Airport Instruction and Readiness) program, developed in partnership with UM-NSU CARD. Includes the Social Narrative Brief, full Social Narrative, Caregiver Information Packet, and Airline Travel Checklist, all available in English and Spanish. These resources are publicly available at miami-airport.com/miaair.asp and can be adapted by other airports and transit authorities.

The following materials are produced by Miami International Airport's MIAair program in partnership with UM-NSU CARD. All materials are available in both English and Spanish. Communities replicating the MIAair model may request permission to adapt these materials by contacting Miami International Airport or UM-NSU CARD.

MIAair FAQs

Answers to common questions about the MIAair program, eligibility, what to expect during a familiarization visit, and how to register.

Social Narrative Brief / Narrativa Social Abreviada

A condensed visual guide to the airport experience for families who want a quick overview of key spaces and processes before travel. Direct link: [PDF](#)

Social Narrative / Narrativa Social

The full step-by-step social narrative walking travelers with autism through each stage of the airport journey, from arrival through boarding, with photos and plain-language descriptions of what to expect.

Caregiver Information Packet / Paquete de Información para los Cuidadores

A comprehensive resource for parents and caregivers covering preparation for air travel, managing sensory challenges, and available accommodations at MIA. Direct link: [PDF](#)

Airline Travel Checklist / Lista de Preparación para el Viaje

A step-by-step pre-travel checklist covering each stage from packing and check-in through security, boarding, and the flight itself. Direct link: [PDF](#)

All MIAair materials and program information are available at miami-airport.com/miaair.asp. Families may also register for a familiarization visit through the MIAair program to walk the airport in advance of travel day.

APPENDIX F. LINKS AND RESOURCES

Key organizations, programs, and resources referenced throughout this toolkit:

UM-NSU CARD (University of Miami – Nova Southeastern University Center for Autism and Related Disabilities)

Parent to Parent of Miami (peer support, workshops, and family resources)

Occupant with Autism Decal Program (Miami-Dade)

Autism Decal Program — Commissioner Regalado personal story

Autism Decal Program — Islander News coverage

Autism Decal Program — WLRN radio coverage

Miami-Dade Tax Collector Neuro-Inclusive Service Day (article)

Neuro-Inclusive Service Program Day Launch — Tax Collector press release

CareerSource South Florida (workforce development / internship placement)

KL Gates World Autism Month Webinar — Commissioner Regalado as inclusion advocate

Autism Speaks — Commissioner Regalado recognition

Florida Department of State — Autism Friendly Library Award (MDPLS)

Miami-Dade Public Library System — Sensory Friendly Programs & Social Narratives

Hidden Disabilities Sunflower

TSA Cares

MIA Airport Instruction & Readiness Program (MIAair)

MIAair Social Narratives, Caregiver Packet, and Travel Checklist (English & Spanish)

MIAair + American Airlines — World Autism Day 2025 tour (press release, 300+ children served since 2015)

Florida League of Cities

Coral Gables — Celebrating Autism Acceptance (model municipal example)

Inclusive Family Fun Day 2026 (Autism Acceptance Month event with Autism Speaks Miami Empower Summit)

Dade County Youth Fair (sensory-friendly hours, spaces, route, and social narratives)

UHealth Jackson Children's Care Autism-Friendly Emergency Departments and Urgent Care

Miami-Dade Emergency Management Neurodivergent Hurricane Preparedness Guide

Miami-Dade Parks Social Narrative — Gwen Cherry Park

Miami-Dade Parks Social Narrative — A.D. Barnes Park

Miami-Dade Parks Social Narrative — Oak Grove Park

Miami-Dade Parks Social Narrative — Tamiami Park

Miami-Dade Parks Social Narrative — Owaissa Bauer Camp

Miami-Dade Parks Social Narrative — Amelia Earhart Park

Miami-Dade Parks Social Narrative — South Dade Park

Miami-Dade Parks Social Narrative — Tropical Park

Miami-Dade Parks Social Narrative — Joe & Enid Demps Park

Miami-Dade Parks Social Narrative — North Trail Park (PDF)

Law Enforcement Training — Miami-Dade officers receive autism training (Local10, 2022)

Miami-Dade Public Library System — Sensory Friendly Programs

Miami-Dade Parks — Tropical Park (sample park with social narrative)

MIAair Program — Miami International Airport

MIA Multi-Sensory Room Grand Opening (CBS Miami, 2019)

Miami-Dade Emergency Management — Neurodivergent Hurricane Preparedness Guide

Dade County Youth Fair — Autism Friendly Sensory Room

UHealth Jackson Children's Care — First in Florida Autism-Friendly ED Designation (South Florida Hospital News)

Resolution R-210031 — UM-NSU CARD Countywide Autism and Neurodiverse Inclusion Program (January 20, 2021)

File No. 232521 — Occupant with Autism Program Report (Full legistar record)

Resolution R-455-24 — Zero Drownings Miami-Dade with Neurodiverse Inclusion Amendment (May 2024)

File No. 210672 — UM-NSU CARD Agreement Transmittal Report (April 2021)

SAFE Designation, Miami-Dade County Tax Collector

Emergency and Evacuation Assistance Program (EEAP)

Loews Miami Beach Hotel becomes a Certified Autism Center, IBCCES announcement

IBCCES Certified Autism Center, Hotels and Resorts

IBCCES Certified Autism Destination

Greater Miami Convention and Visitors Bureau (GMCVB)

ChamberSOUTH, Neuroinclusion Corridor Task Force

Miami-Dade County Commission District 7