

When Families Lead, Systems Follow: Inside the Family Leadership Series

What does it look like when families stop waiting to be heard and start demanding a seat at the table? It looks like the Family Leadership Series.

The Family Leadership Series (FLS) is a program of The Nemasket Group designed to develop family leaders. Parents and caregivers of individuals with disabilities come together over several months to build their knowledge, amplify their voices, and learn how to use both to make real change in the systems that serve their families. As Southeast Director, I have the privilege of witnessing that transformation firsthand. This year's cohort reminded me exactly why this work matters. Started in 1991 by Emily and Lou Nisenbaum and Kathi Hackett, the FLS was created by families, for families. Those founding families played a pivotal role in shaping the systems change we see today. Their legacy lives on in every cohort. Parents and caregivers of individuals with disabilities come together over several months to build their knowledge, amplify their voices, and learn how to make real change in the systems that serve their families. As Southeast Director, I have had the privilege of witnessing that transformation firsthand. This year's cohort reminded me exactly why this work matters.

This season, the Southeast region partnered with Jennifer Bertrand, Deputy Director of the Massachusetts Developmental Disabilities Council (MDDC), to guide participants through the world of policymaking and the legislative process. Families didn't just learn about leadership; they practiced it. Working in groups, participants created panels, developed their testimony, and took part in a mock hearing. For many, it was the first time they had ever stood up and spoken about the issues affecting their families. It was powerful to watch.

In the last session of the series, the Southeast region joined our Northeast and Central cohorts at the Massachusetts State House for a tour of the People's House, a building that belongs to all of us, even if it doesn't always feel that way. From there, we gathered for lunch at the Dubliner, and the conversation only deepened. Jennifer Bertrand issued a clear call to action: the work doesn't end here. Family voices are needed now, not later.

Senator Michael Moore spoke candidly about how his constituents influence his decisions. He doesn't just welcome family voices; he depends on them for accurate, real-time information that no policy brief can provide. Hearing that from a sitting legislator resonated differently for families who had spent months wondering if anyone was truly listening.

We closed with a conversation led by DDS Commissioner Sarah Peterson, who spoke directly with families about why their voices are vital to systems change. The message from every corner of that room was the same: when families lead, systems follow.

Raising children is not easy. Those we love most have led us down this path of advocacy. Navigating systems that aren't built with our families in mind is exhausting. Fighting for services, sitting in IEP or ISP meetings, making unanswered phone calls, we know that weight. We don't do this work because it's easy. We do it because we have no choice. Our children and loved ones deserve better, and we refuse to stop until they get it. The Family Leadership Series is for parents or caregivers who have been told no one too many times. They hear that it will never happen or that their loved one will never do that. It's for those tired of being talked about instead of being talked to. It's for anyone who has ever sat in a meeting and known, deep down, that they had something important to say. Applications for the Southeast Region open at the end of July and close in early September. The series includes four two-day weekends and a Legislative Reception in March. If you're ready to turn your experience into power, we're ready for you.

- Karen Claudio



Another Successful 5K Walk/Run in the Books!

Thank you to everyone who came out to participate in our annual 5K Walk/Run. This year was our 13th year holding this fundraiser, and it was a huge success! The participants & volunteers had a blast! This successful event wouldn't have been possible without our participants, volunteers, and wonderful sponsors. We appreciate everyone's support of The Nemasket Group and our mission to support others. We hope to see you again next year!



Gratitude Corner

This spring, we were honored to receive a generous donation from the Ghannam family, participants in our Medically Complex Program. Having equipment they no longer needed, the family chose to donate thousands of dollars' worth of items so they could benefit another family in our community. We are deeply grateful for their generosity and for their continued commitment to supporting fellow families. Among the donated items is a stairlift that will undoubtedly make a meaningful difference in the daily life, safety, and independence of a local family. Thank you, Ghannam family, for your kindness and for being such an active and caring part of our community.

- Georgia Toland, Complex Care Case Manager



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In Memory of Louis Nisenbaum



MONDAY, AUGUST 31ST, 2026



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