

# Empowering the Autism Community: FAU CARD's BRIDGE Transition to Adulthood Initiative and First Responder Training Project



Florida Atlantic's Center for Autism and Related Disabilities (FAU CARD) is making significant strides in supporting individuals with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) and intellectual and developmental disabilities (I/DD) through two major initiatives: the launch of the BRIDGE Transition to Adulthood program and a continuing research grant to train first responders.

Supported by a two-year \$315,000 grant from the Taft Foundation, BRIDGE, which stands for Building Resources for Independence through Self-Determined Growth Experiences, provides comprehensive support and guidance to autistic individuals as they transition from youth to adulthood. The transition period is a particularly challenging phase for this population and BRIDGE provides young adults with specialized support, consultation, intervention, and long-term person-centered planning to develop meaningful outcomes for adulthood.

Developed by FAU CARD Director Jennifer Percival, Ph.D., CRC, Assistant Director Jacqueline Wood, Ph.D., and Transition Specialist Lauren Veit, M.S., CRC, the BRIDGE initiative focuses on three core pillars: direct consultation and individualized support, education and training for community partners, and interactive services to build social, self-advocacy, and vocational skills. BRIDGE offers direct consultation and individualized support for participants, their families, and support teams, utilizing interactive transition toolkits, resource guides, and video vignettes. The program also provides quarterly training on transition-related topics and hosts an annual Transition Conference to share research and best practices. Additionally, BRIDGE offers interactive services such as adult hangout groups, an advisory council, and an annual Art and Autism Expo to support participants in building essential skills and achieving adulthood goals.



For the third consecutive year, FAU CARD has been awarded a research grant from the Florida Developmental Disabilities Council (FDDC), totaling over \$470,000 for this three-year project. The grant focuses on creating and delivering comprehensive training sessions for law enforcement officers, first responders, emergency medical personnel, and firefighters. Sessions provide a broad range of techniques to effectively and empathetically engage with individuals with ASD and I/DD, fostering trust and improving the quality of interactions.

The probability of first responders encountering individuals on the autism spectrum is increasing. While police officers and emergency personnel are well-trained for most cases, their approach may not always suit those with ASD and I/DD, potentially leading to tragic outcomes. Understanding the behaviors associated with ASD and I/DD is essential for achieving positive outcomes in any situation.

Training creators FAU CARD Executive Director Jack Scott, Ph.D., and Clinical Researcher Torica Exume, Ph.D., are enrolling law enforcement officers and first responders in the newly enhanced statewide train-the-trainer curriculum. While this training program equips first responders with the skills to interact effectively with individuals with ASD, FAU CARD's recently launched BRIDGE initiative complements these efforts by supporting individuals with ASD as they transition from youth to adulthood. The project is also featured by the Florida Developmental Disabilities Council.

Through these initiatives, FAU CARD is creating a holistic support system to make a tangible difference in the lives of individuals with ASD and I/DD, while creating a brighter and more inclusive future.

