

October 22, 2015

## Molinaro to Expand Think DIFFERENTLY Initiatives in 2016 Budget Proposal

**Poughkeepsie...** Dutchess County Executive Marc Molinaro outlined plans to expand the County's "Think DIFFERENTLY" initiative, including the addition of a "Special Needs Advocate" position, in his 2016 Executive Budget at a tour yesterday of Abilities First's new state-of-art school for those with developmental disabilities in the Town of LaGrange. The County Executive was joined by Abilities First CEO Jeffrey Fox, as well as representatives from Dutchess County departments and other community agencies that serve those with disabilities for a early look at the school, which is slated to open on November 30th.

We launched our THINK DIFFERENTLY initiative this year to focus a spotlight on those living in our community with disabilities, ensuring every individual, regardless of abilities, has access to government services, access to businesses, access to all aspects of our community. In 2016, we are pleased to take THINK DIFFERENTLY to the next level," said County Executive Molinaro.

Dutchess County Government and local community agencies offer a wide range of services for special needs families. However, it can be challenging for an individual or family to understand how to access the wide variety services and navigate the various processes to get the specific assistance they need. In his 2016 Executive Budget, County Executive Molinaro will propose the creation of "Special Needs Advocate" position which will be a Deputy Commissioner level to assist families and provide the support they need to connect with services. This position will be a Deputy Commissioner within the Department of Community & Family Services and will report directly to the County Executive. The individual will manage, promote and expand the County's "Think Differently" initiatives, as well as serve as an ombudsman for special needs families with providers, government agencies and local businesses. Additionally, a new webpage will be created as a resource for special needs families to learn about the services available to them.

Dutchess County Government will also continue to enhance its event offerings for special needs families. In 2015, the County hosted two events: a summer picnic and a movie day in the fall. Both events were very well-received by participants, with hundreds of individuals attending. In 2016, County Executive Molinaro plans to expand the events with more activities at the summer special needs picnic and an additional movie day to be offered in the spring. These events received generous sponsorship support from a variety of local businesses which have expressed interest in continuing their support for future events.

Dutchess County's partnership with Anderson Center for Autism to expand the Autism Supportive Environment training also continues with nearly double the current year funding in the 2016 Executive Budget. The Autism Supportive Environment training is an opportunity for local businesses and their staff to better understand, serve and support individuals on the autism spectrum. Businesses learn how to make simple changes to the physical environment and can have staff trained to make their establishments more welcoming for those with autism and their families.

The five-year Dutchess County Capital Plan, which will also be sent to the Dutchess County Legislature along the 2016 Executive Budget proposal, will include a request to develop a new Parks Master Plan to improve and update the Dutchess County Parks system. As changes and improvements to Dutchess County's six public parks are evaluated, there will be a focus on how each of Dutchess County's parks can be more welcoming for those with disabilities, sensory issues and/or special needs.

Abilities First Executive Director Jeffrey Fox said, "We were very pleased to welcome County Executive Molinaro for a preview of our new school and to learn about his plans to expand the County's 'Think DIFFERENTLY' initiatives, in particular the addition of the Special Needs Advocate position. Together, we all have an important role in ensuring our community provides opportunity and empowerment for

individuals with disabilities and their families. Abilities First is proud to partner with Dutchess County Government to Think DIFFERENTLY about how we can best serve people of all abilities.”

Abilities First is relocating from its current location at 230 North Road to the new LaGrange school. Abilities First serves students from 21 school districts throughout Dutchess, Columbia, Orange and Ulster counties and has seen rising enrollment, necessitating the expanded space. Nearly 100 students will attend the new school, which will feature nine classrooms with instructional technology, adaptive physical education, a fully outfitted sensory gym, and clinical space for therapies. A fully accessible playground is also planned.

County Executive Molinaro will present his 2016 Executive Budget proposal on Wednesday, October 28th at Marist College’s Fusco Recital Hall. The budget will be available for review on [the County’s website](#). The County Executive will also host a countywide tele-town hall forum at 6:30pm on October 28th as an opportunity for residents to hear about the components of the 2016 county budget as well as ask questions and share feedback.