



Commit to Connect Office Hours: Resource Recap

Topic: Supporting the Social Connection Needs for Individuals with Autism June 30, 2026

Overview:

Commit to Connect hosted an Office Hours session on June 30, 2026, focused on supporting the social connection needs for individuals with autism. Office Hours are facilitated conversations featuring subject matter experts who share best practices and strategies for improving social connection of older adults and people with disabilities.

This session featured Tiffany Neal, Director of the HANDS in Autism® Interdisciplinary Training and Resource Center and Boti Ogunmola, Facilitation and Programming Navigator. The discussion was moderated by Katie Clark Wheeler, Program Analyst at the Administration for Community Living (ACL).

Housed within Indiana University, the [HANDS in Autism Interdisciplinary Training and Resource](#) provides training, resources, and support to meet the needs of individuals with autism. During the session, Tiffany and Boti discussed two programs offered by the Center that helps individuals with autism build and maintain meaningful socially connections within their communities.

The HANDSmade™ Vocational, Social Engagement, and Independent Living Program:

- Developed in 2010 to address barriers to employment, this HANDSmade program provides vocational training and social engagement opportunities for individuals with autism and other developmental disabilities to help them build skills and achieve greater employment success.
- Using a supported employment program model, the program offers a structured work environment where interns complete meaningful tasks such as assembling sensory kits and managing hospitality supplies.
- The program assesses participants' progress while providing instruction and support to strengthen employment skills, community participation, and independent living skills.
- HANDSmade also partners with employers to create mutually beneficial opportunities. Through these partnerships, employers can observe and learn best practices for supporting, teaching, and including employees with disabilities in the workplace, while participants gain valuable work experience in inclusive employment settings.
- The program also benefits employers by providing opportunities to learn how to support, teach, and include co-workers with disabilities in the workplace.

The PEER Potential™ Program:

- PEER Potential is a peer-to-peer social engagement and mentoring program that reduces isolation, strengthens belonging, and promotes community participation among individuals with autism and other developmental disabilities.
- Participants engage in structured and semi-structured activities, including campus events, community outings, student group gatherings, wellness activities, social skill-building opportunities, and informal interactions with peers. These experiences build authentic connections with peers without disabilities who share interests and can model or co-lead social participation.
- PEER Potential embeds this social engagement program in community settings, such as campuses and libraries.
- To build community awareness and engagement, the program also provides information to participants and their families on local services, supports, and social activities.

Key Strategies and Best Practices:

- Co-create programs with individuals with autism to ensure the program meets real-world needs.
- Obtaining active commitment from partner leadership (e.g., hospital networks and university departments) is essential for vocational programs.
- Develop and reinforce strong community partnerships. These mutually beneficial relationships may support pipelines for future employment of participants.
- Train future supervisors and coworkers on how to support and include coworkers with disabilities in employment settings.
- Peer mentors without disabilities benefit from leadership training. As a result of participating in programs, they often also become future advocates for inclusivity.
- Programs are best held across multiple settings—campus, community, and digital—to meet participants where they are socially and developmentally.

Speaker Resources:

- [HANDS in Autism® Website](#): provides resources to help build local capacity to help individuals with autism and their families find ways to address their concerns and thrive—in concert with any services they receive.
- [The HANDS Transition Services Network](#): provides a wide variety of Pre-Employment Transition Services and Vocational Rehabilitation services to address roadblocks to employment success.
- [HANDS in Autism Online Store](#): offers a range of resources available in its online store, including sensory kits, emergency bracelets and more.
- [Open Office Hours](#): join Ask-Learn-Share with HANDS in Autism® to ask your questions or share your successes and challenges related to your role, your setting and the topics you're finding most pressing.
- [Access HANDS training events](#): HANDS offers a wide range of services, training, and outreach options to best meet the needs of individuals (and

those who care for or work with individuals) with autism and related disabilities.

Speaker Contact Information:

- Tiffany Neal, Ph.D., HSPP, Director, nealtiff@iu.edu
- Boti Ogunmola, MPH, Facilitation and Programming Navigator, bomoogun@iu.edu
- Social Media: @HANDSinAutism and @TiffanyNeal_PhD
- HANDS mailing list: [sign up here](#)

Commit to Connect Resources:

- [Nationwide Network of Champions](#): Join this free virtual platform to connect with peers across the country, engage in discussions, share resources, and find events related to social connection.
- [Social Engagement Innovations Hub](#): A clearinghouse of more than 100 model programs focused on social connection across the U.S.