

OCRA Semi-Annual Outreach Report

July 1, 2024 - December 31, 2024

Outreach continues to be an important part of OCRA's work to connect with people served by regional centers across California. OCRA connects with the community through a combination of resource fairs, substantive legal trainings, open houses, and self-advocacy trainings. OCRA trainings are often offered in many languages, including English, Spanish, Korean, Vietnamese, and American Sign Language.

This semi-annual report gives information on trainings and presentations completed from July 1, 2024, through December 31, 2024. During this period, OCRA conducted 247 outreach and training activities to 8,749 attendees. This is a 31.3% increase in the number of outreaches and 21% more attendees compared to the same period in 2023. Below are highlights of OCRA outreach activities during this reporting period.

Highlights

OCRA Celebrates 25 Years of Service

2024 marked the 25th anniversary of OCRA providing independent advocacy services for regional center clients. To commemorate this milestone, OCRA hosted simultaneous, in-person open houses across the state to connect with clients, families, service providers, and regional center staff. OCRA welcomed 635 guests who learned more about OCRA. OCRA also recognized self-advocates at each open house location with an advocacy award. OCRA staff enjoyed celebrating our work and look forward to continuing to advocate for the rights of people with intellectual and developmental disabilities. See below for more details.

Spotlight on Employment for Regional Center Clients

OCRA hosted a statewide employment webinar to celebrate National Disability Employment Awareness Month. To focus on client-centered outreach activities, the training spotlighted a panel of self-advocates who shared their struggles and successes in finding and keeping a job. The panel also included professionals who support self-advocates in their employment journey. Representatives from the Department of Rehabilitation and the California Resources for Independent Living talked about the services they offer to help regional center clients prepare for competitive integrated employment. They also described jobs that are *not*

inclusive and violate the right to fair pay for people with disabilities. The audience enjoyed learning from self-advocates about a variety of topics, including deciding to disclose a disability to an employer, asking for reasonable accommodations, and getting and keeping a well-paying job. The event was offered in English, Spanish, and Korean with simultaneous ASL interpretation.

Importance of the Right to Vote

Of the 247 activities and trainings completed during this reporting period, 32 (12.9%) were self-advocacy trainings educating regional center clients directly about their right to vote. OCRA worked hard to encourage regional center clients to exercise their right to vote. This topic was more important during this period because it was a presidential election year. The importance of this topic and the positive feedback received shows OCRA's commitment to outreach that promotes self-advocacy.

Self-Advocacy Trainings

Each OCRA local office conducts at least two self-advocacy trainings per contract year. Many offices provide more than two. Topics include emergency preparedness, self-advocacy, clients' rights, money management, voting rights, community living options, and employment rights and options. Between July 1, 2024, and December 31, 2024, OCRA conducted 71 self-advocacy trainings, more than triple the number (20 from the same period in 2023).

Day Program Hosts Clients' Rights Bingo.

In August 2024, day program Visions in Motion invited OCRA to do a Clients' Rights Bingo training. Shelly Hendriks, a member of OCRA's administrative support team, presented this interactive training along with Outreach Coordinator Elizabeth Campos.

The 25 attendees eagerly learned about their rights while playing an exciting game of Bingo. Each person got their own Bingo card and chips to play with, along with prizes to choose from. Attendees learned about their rights as they filled their Bingo cards. These cards show pictures of people with disabilities living in the community doing different activities, including grocery shopping, playing sports, and going to the movies. Everyone enjoyed learning, but they especially liked hearing from OCRA's Shelly Hendriks, who used to work at the day program.



Photo: Administrative Assistant Shelly Hendriks and Outreach Coordinator Elizabeth Campos with Vision in Motion participants in front of a whiteboard.

Valley Mountain Regional Center Clients Learn about Emergency Preparedness.

It was a rainy day toward the end of 2024 when OCRA presented a self-advocacy training for 20 Valley Mountain Regional Center clients who attend the Valley CAPS ABLE day program in Manteca. The 20 participants were eager to learn how to prepare to stay safe during an emergency or natural disaster.

Assistant Clients' Rights Advocate Idalia Arroyo started the training with introductions and a general overview about OCRA. She then played an educational video called "Feeling Safe, Being Safe: Sam's Story." This short 10-minute video goes over the steps Sam, a member of DDS's Consumer Advisory Committee, takes to create her own safety plan. During the video, participants repeated aloud the things they need to create their own safety plan.

After the video, Idalia showed an example of the items an emergency kit should include and recommended it be stored in a backpack. Going through this emergency kit is the most interactive and fun part of the emergency preparedness training. Idalia asked the audience to share examples of what they plan to include in their own emergency kits. The excited participants shouted flashlights, candles, food, and water.

Idalia also helped the attendees complete their own emergency preparedness workbook and magnet. She used these tools to talk about creating their own safety plan with information on how they will stay safe. The tools recommend adding contact information for their regional center service coordinator, day program staff, family, or neighbors. The workbook also provides space to list medications and information about how others should interact with them during an emergency. Each participant took home the workbook, magnet, and snacks at the end of the training.

It Was a Full House at Clients' Rights Bingo.

OCRA hosted a Clients' Rights Bingo training for 49 clients of the North Los Angeles County Regional Center. Participants were excited to learn about their rights while playing a fun game of Bingo instead of a passive presentation. Each participant got their own Bingo card and tokens to track all the clients' rights images called out by Clients' Rights Advocate Erica Rodriguez or Assistant Clients' Rights Advocate Fatima Perez. The attendees enjoyed sharing stories of how they exercise their rights such as grocery shopping, playing sports, and going to the movies. At the end, everyone sat down to lunch together to learn more about each other.



Photo: Clients' Rights Advocate Erica Rodriguez and Assistant Clients' Rights Advocate Fatima Perez standing in front of an orange and black background with several training participants.

OCRA Hosts Clients' Rights Bingo in Temecula.

Ronda Chow, Inland Regional Center's Clients' Rights Advocate, presented a Clients' Rights Bingo at the People's Care community-based day program in Temecula. Participants had a chance to learn about their rights while having fun. Ronda used the bingo cards to talk about specific rights including the right to marry, the right to work, and the right to participate in social recreational activities. During several rounds, each participant had the chance to complete their bingo card and yell "Bingo" and compete for prizes or candies. Participants also enjoyed meeting Ronda in person and bonded with her over the game. They learned they could call her if they have questions about their rights.

Community Outreach and Events

Transition-Age Youth and Their Families Learn about Alternatives to Conservatorship.

Ronda Chow, Inland Regional Center's Clients' Rights Advocate, joined Alondra Castillo from the State Council on Developmental Disabilities to provide a training on alternatives to conservatorship during the San Bernardino City Unified School District's Special Education Department's Transition Night.

The purpose of the presentation was to introduce transition-age youth, their families, and educators to the supports available in the community once those students leave the district. Ronda also hosted a resource table and provided information about OCRA services. Ronda spoke with many family members who were convinced that a conservatorship was the only option to protect the rights of their loved ones. After attending the training and speaking with Ronda, about 55 attendees learned that it is not true. They learned that less costly and less restrictive alternatives, like a power of attorney, could address their concerns and the needs of their loved ones with disabilities.

OCRA Connects with Families at the San Andreas Regional Center Annual Superhero Festival.

In July 2024, OCRA participated in a resource fair for clients of the San Andreas Regional Center and their families. The outdoor festival was a fun way to connect with local community organizations providing services to regional center clients. The fair included several booths, games, face painting, costumes, and tons of prizes for clients and their families.

Outreach Coordinator Elizabeth Campos attended the event dressed in a superhero costume. The resource table included useful publications and a prize wheel. OCRA connected with 177 people and provided information about OCRA and the services available to regional center clients. Visitors asked many questions about accessing OCRA's services and planned to call OCRA's local offices for individual intake consultations. Everyone at the event enjoyed being a superhero and talking about their superpowers.



Photo: Elizabeth Campos sitting behind a table with a red tablecloth and a white runner with Disability Rights California's contact information. The table also has a prize wheel and resource materials.

Regional Center Clients and their Families Connect with Community Partners at Self-Determination Resource Fair.

In September 2024, Clients' Rights Advocate Wilmary Torres and Associate Clients' Rights Advocate Ada Hamer took part in Frank D. Lanterman Regional Center's first self-determination resource fair. Getting to meet in person with clients and their families was the highlight of the resource fair. The event was sponsored by the regional center's self-determination program local advisory committee. Clients already enrolled in the self-determination program and those interested in enrolling spoke directly with independent facilitators, financial management service agencies, and community partners involved in the self-determination program. Wilmary and Ada encouraged clients and family members to

contact OCRA if they needed help navigating the self-determination program. They also enjoyed speaking with other organizations at the resource fair and sharing how OCRA is part of the local advisory committee.



Photo: Clients' Rights Advocate Wilmary Torres and Associate Clients' Rights Advocate Ada Hamer standing behind a table with a red tablecloth that includes OCRA's contact information in white. The table also includes resource materials.

OCRA Coaches Hoopa Valley Tribe's Critical Response Team on How to Support Regional Center Clients.

The Hoopa Valley Tribal Police Department invited OCRA to train its Critical Response Team on OCRA's services, the regional center system, and examples of reasonable accommodations made by first responders to people with disabilities. During this virtual training, Clients' Rights Advocate Clifford Black and Assistant Clients' Rights Advocate Crysalynd Miranda provided helpful tips on how law enforcement can better accommodate people with disabilities while in the community. Tips included remaining calm, speaking in plain language, being aware of sensory or mobility needs, and offering reasonable accommodations.

Clifford and Crysalynd also suggested that the specialized unit develop a "special consideration form" for other local police departments to share with people with disabilities in the community who want to give information about themselves and how to interact with them in an emergency. The attendees appreciated learning about crisis intervention services available to regional center clients and their families. The training helped bring OCRA and the Hoopa Valley Tribal Police Department members together to learn more about each other.

OCRA Joins Transition to Adulthood Workshop Series.

The Center for Autism and Neurodevelopmental Disorders (CAND) invited Associate Clients' Rights Advocate Maria Rojas, to take part in their annual training series for the Latinx community. The goal of the series is to help regional center clients and their families prepare for possible changes in their public benefits as they transition to adulthood. OCRA staff serving Regional Center of Orange County clients have been involved in CAND's training series since 2019.

Maria gave an overview of Supplemental Security Income (SSI) and Social Security Disability Insurance (SSDI) benefits. She explained the different eligibility requirements for minors and adults in each program. She explained the redetermination process using adult disability rules once a person turns 18, including documents needed to show eligibility at age 18. Maria emphasized important issues such as how Social Security treats a parent's income, in-kind support and maintenance rules, and wage reporting requirements. Maria also briefly discussed the benefits of a CalABLE account and its relationship with Social Security benefits. Maria provided separate trainings on CalABLE accounts and alternatives to conservatorship during CAND's training series.

OCRA Hosts Open Houses to Celebrate 25 Years of Making a Difference for Regional Center Clients and Their Families.

Before OCRA began in 1999, regional centers were responsible for providing advocacy services for clients. Regional center clients, families, and other advocates fought for a change in the law to transfer clients' rights advocacy services to an independent agency to avoid potential conflicts of interest. Disability Rights California applied for and became the agency to provide advocacy services to clients of all 21 regional centers in California.

In October 2024, OCRA celebrated its 25th anniversary of advocating for the rights of regional center clients. At simultaneous open house events throughout the state, OCRA welcomed 635 guests. The open houses gave the public a chance to meet OCRA staff, connect, and share stories with each other. Attendees were mostly regional center clients, families, service providers, and regional center staff. The open houses helped attendees reconnect with their local OCRA advocates and other community partners. Each open house included an overview of OCRA's services and the presentation of a self-advocacy award. Awards were given to clients whose spirit remained unbroken despite facing challenges getting services or exercising self-determination. These awards highlight the importance of OCRA's partnership with past and future clients and the disability community in general.



Photo: North Bay Regional Center client Diego Monreal with the advocacy award he received during OCRA's 25th anniversary open house.



Photo: Clients' Rights Advocate Aimee Delgado and San Gabriel Pomona Regional Center client Yushen Lin with the advocacy award he received during OCRA's 25th anniversary open house.

OCRA Spotlights the Employment of Regional Center Clients.

OCRA celebrated National Disability Employment Awareness (NDEAM) Month by hosting an educational webinar to encourage employment options for people with intellectual and developmental disabilities. The event was offered in English, Spanish, and Korean with simultaneous American Sign Language interpretation. The panel, moderated by OCRA's Peer Advocate Scott Barron and Deaf Community Advocate Ken Datugan

from Disability Rights California's Advocacy and Community Engagement unit, featured people with disabilities who are already working and some who are looking for jobs. The 182 attendees heard from specialists who focus on helping people with disabilities find jobs.

Matthew Barenchi and Jeri Ramirez from the Department of Rehabilitation shared how their agency helps people with disabilities get the education, skills, and tools they need to find and keep a job. Frederick Garcia, an employment specialist from California Resource Services for Independent Living, shared how their agency can help regional center clients looking for employment. Paula Tobler talked about her work at Disability Rights California tackling disability employment issues. Self-advocates Eric Aguilar, Jordan Feinstock, and Brenda Acosta shared how they successfully found jobs and the challenges they faced along the way. They gave important tips on how (or if) to disclose a disability to a potential employer and how to ask for reasonable accommodations.

The audience had many questions on how working can affect eligibility for public benefits like Social Security or Medi-Cal and the panelists answered or gave referrals and resources to participants.

OCRA Participates in the Supported Life Institute's Supported Life Conference.

In October 2024, OCRA participated in the Supported Life Institute's Supported Life Conference at the Wyndham Hotel in Sacramento. Since 1987, this event for people with developmental disabilities encourages training and networking to create inclusive communities. In the fall, it is a 2-day conference with an audience of about one-third self-advocates and two-thirds professionals or others. As a co-sponsor, Disability Rights California presented two self-advocacy trainings and participated in the resource fair alongside other service providers and community-based organizations.

Outreach Coordinator Elizabeth Campos presented a session on community living options for regional center clients. The audience learned about their rights to support and services no matter where they live. Elizabeth spoke about considerations when exploring living in the community, including living alone in your own apartment, having a roommate, moving into a group home, or living with a foster family. Participants shared their personal experiences transitioning into the community. The audience appreciated learning how their peers resolved

challenges they faced during the process of moving out of restrictive settings and into the community.

Senior Attorney Ibrahim “Bebo” Saab presented a session on voting rights. With the presidential election on the horizon, the training emphasized that people with disabilities have the right to vote. The audience learned about political parties, the types of issues they might vote on, and how they can vote, depending on their disability. Bebo covered why voting is important and the specific responsibilities of a voter. The training included a fun quiz at the end to see what the audience learned.



Photo: Senior Attorney Bebo Saab sitting in front of a screen presenting voting rights training at the 2024 Supported Life conference.

OCRA also participated in the resource fair during both days of the conference. Clients' Rights Advocate Kelsey Handcock and Administrative Assistant Shelly Hendriks staffed the table on the first day. Assistant Clients' Rights Advocates Mathilde Garnier-Tobar and Eduardo Cardenas Jr. were present on the second day. OCRA directly connected with 65 attendees during the 2-day conference and distributed brochures and resource materials. Self-advocates who stopped by OCRA's resource table enjoyed the interactive games and prizes.



Photo: Assistant Clients' Rights Advocates Mathilde Garnier-Tobar and Eduardo Cardenas Jr. sitting with Senior Attorney Bebo Saab in front of OCRA's banner at the resource table.

Conclusion

OCRA continues to make outreach a central part of its work. Over the next six months, OCRA plans to continue its emphasis on self-advocacy trainings and connecting with underserved communities. Looking towards the future, OCRA is exploring opportunities to collaborate with other community-based organizations and other units within Disability Rights California to complement its daily work with regional center clients. This may include collaboration on training opportunities and larger statewide events.