

COMPASS CONNECTIONS OF MAINE

Opening Doors to Community, Connection & Belonging

New Maine nonprofit aims to bridge transportation gaps and expand opportunities for people with intellectual and developmental disabilities

By Garret Wright

A new Maine nonprofit is working to address a problem that can easily be overlooked: the ability of people with intellectual and developmental disabilities to fully participate in their communities.

Compass Connections of Maine, founded by registered nurse and nonprofit leader **Jenn Barron, RN, BSN, LNC, SWOC**, was created with a simple but meaningful vision—to help people with disabilities experience greater independence, connection and belonging.

“People with intellectual and developmental disabilities deserve more than a place to live and access to basic services. They deserve the opportunity to go places, make friends, participate in their communities and experience life.”

The organization's first major project is the **Compass Connections Community Access Initiative**, which focuses on transportation.

For many adults with intellectual and developmental disabilities, transportation can determine whether they are able to attend a community event, visit a state park, go to a movie, attend a concert, meet friends or simply get out of the house.

Barron said the goal is not to replace existing MaineCare transportation services, but to address a different need.

“There is a difference between having transportation to receive a service and having transportation to participate in life.”

When Transportation Doesn't Mean Community Access

For adults with intellectual and developmental disabilities who live in small residential homes or other community-based settings, transportation can be one of the biggest barriers to full participation in community life.

While MaineCare provides transportation connected to certain authorized services, that transportation is generally tied to a person's eligibility, service plan and covered activities. It does not necessarily mean that an individual has access to a vehicle when they simply want to participate in an ordinary community activity.

A person may have transportation to a medical appointment, employment program or other authorized service—but what happens when they want to go to a movie? Visit the ocean? Attend a community festival? Visit a state park?

“Transportation is often available when it is connected to a service. But that's very different from having the freedom to say, ‘I want to go somewhere today.’”

That distinction is at the heart of the **Compass Connections Community Access Initiative**.

“We're not trying to replace MaineCare transportation,” Barron said. “We're trying to fill the gap that exists between transportation to receive a service and transportation that allows someone to participate in their community.”

A Need Across Maine

The need for community-based support is significant.

According to Maine Department of Health and Human Services data, as of **March 31, 2026, 6,362 individuals were receiving services through Maine's Section 18, 20, 21 and 29 Home and Community-Based Services waiver programs**. Of those, **2,990 were receiving Section 21 services and 3,122 were receiving Section 29 services**. An additional **2,824 individuals were on waiver waitlists**.

MaineCare's Section 21 and Section 29 waiver programs provide important home- and community-based services for adults with intellectual disabilities and/or autism. These programs can help individuals live in community settings and receive supports designed around their individual needs.

But Barron believes there remains an important distinction between receiving support services and having the opportunity to participate fully in community life.

“A residential setting should be a person's home—not the boundary of their world.”

Through the Community Access Initiative, Compass Connections is establishing a community transportation program centered around wheelchair-accessible vehicles. The organization hopes the program will eventually grow to include additional accessible vehicles and partnerships throughout Maine.

The first vehicle will provide opportunities to visit Maine State Parks and other outdoor destinations; attend movies, museums and cultural events; participate in community festivals and gatherings; enjoy recreational and social activities; pursue volunteer and educational opportunities; develop friendships; and simply get out into the community to experience something new.

During its first year, Compass Connections hopes to serve approximately **75 to 100 individuals**, provide **100 to 150 community outings**, create **250 to 400 individual participant opportunities**, and connect participants with at least **25 community destinations**.

The organization will also seek at least **85% participant satisfaction** while tracking individuals served, outings, destinations, wheelchair-accessible trips, hours of community participation and participant feedback.

Looking Beyond Transportation

Transportation, however, is only the beginning.

Barron envisions Compass Connections eventually offering **respite care for families and caregivers** supporting individuals with disabilities and other significant care needs.

For many families, caregiving is a 24-hour responsibility. While families may love and value the people they care for deeply, the demands of caregiving can leave little opportunity for rest, appointments, social activities or simply time to recharge.

“Caregivers need support, too. Sometimes the greatest gift you can give a family is the ability to take a breath and know that their loved one is safe and well cared for.”

The organization's long-term vision includes developing respite services that can provide families with reliable breaks while giving individuals meaningful, person-centered experiences.

Compass Connections' organizational mission includes respite care, along with support services, advocacy, education and community-based resources for individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities, people with neurodegenerative diseases, and their families and caregivers.

A Larger Vision

Barron brings decades of healthcare experience to the organization. Her professional background includes nursing, healthcare leadership, community-based program development and nonprofit work.

She has also been involved in developing community health services and addressing unmet needs through partnerships and grant funding. Her previous community work includes co-founding Sebasticook Family Doctors in Newport, now Hometown Health, and Lincoln County Dental in Lincoln County.

Through her work with Lincoln County Dental, Barron was nominated in 2010 for the **Phoebe King Award for Excellence in Public Health** by the Maine Department of Public Health. She also helped bring mental health services to the CarePartner program in Lincoln County through a grant from the Maine Health Access Foundation.

“Identify the need, develop a practical solution, measure the impact and then build from there.”

Ultimately, Barron hopes Compass Connections can become part of a larger network of community-based resources for people with disabilities and their families.

The vision includes accessible transportation, respite care, advocacy, education, adaptive equipment and other services designed to reduce isolation and increase independence.

“We want to build something that is sustainable,” Barron said. “Something that responds to what people and families actually need.”

The organization's long-term transportation vision is even broader: a sustainable statewide network of wheelchair-accessible vans and accessible buses, developed through partnerships with disability organizations, residential providers, municipalities, businesses, foundations, parks and recreation programs, families and other community partners.

“A compass helps you find your way. We want Compass Connections of Maine to help people find their way to greater independence, greater connection and a fuller life.”

The Community Access Initiative is the organization's first step toward that goal.

“One accessible vehicle isn't the end goal. It's the beginning.”

Learn More

Compass Connections of Maine

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Learn more about Compass Connections of Maine, the **Community Access Initiative**, future respite services, volunteer opportunities, community partnerships and ways to get involved.

To learn more or make a donation to support accessible transportation and future programs, visit:

compassconnectionsme.org

Every contribution helps Compass Connections move closer to a future where people with intellectual and developmental disabilities have greater access to community, connection, choice and meaningful experiences throughout Maine.