

Independence

Easterseals Wisconsin Newsletter
Summer/Fall 2020

Paul Leverenz Named CEO



The Easterseals Wisconsin Board of Directors is happy to announce that they have chosen Paul Leverenz, Vice President of FARM & Vocational Services, to replace retiring Christine Fessler (see story, page 3), as President & CEO of the organization. Leverenz will begin his new position on September 2, 2020.

Regarded as a national leader for his success in determining how to apply methods of vocational rehabilitation to a farm setting, Leverenz is asked to provide technical assistance and training to vocational rehabilitation programs throughout the country. He designed and conducted a series of workshops and on-farm training sessions over a period of seven years for Wisconsin vocational rehabilitation administration and counselors, and has participated in training new AgrAbility employees from 19 states.

"I'm fortunate to have had the chance to work with and learn from Chris Fessler for so many years and am grateful that she is leaving Easterseals Wisconsin in a stable and strong position," says Leverenz. "It's also been a true privilege to work with the talented and skilled staff that we have in the organization. I look forward to collaborating with them to move our services forward."

The Executive Search Committee, chaired by Pam Birschbach, worked diligently over the past several months to ensure that we understood the needs of the job and the attributes needed to successfully lead the organization into the future," says Board Chair Jason Klawonn. "After a nationwide search, we talked with a number of external candidates, some of them highly qualified. And when all was said and done, Paul rose to the top! We have confidence in Paul's vision, discernment, pragmatism, and steady leadership, and we have conviction in Paul's passion for both our mission and how much he cares for the wonderful staff at the agency."

Leverenz is an experienced rehabilitation professional with a M.S. in Vocational Rehabilitation Counseling, and has directed the Easterseals Wisconsin FARM Program since 1992. Under his leadership, the FARM Program has grown from a one-person program serving 20 clients, to a statewide operation serving close to 500 farmers with disabilities annually.

"During my time with Easterseals, I have visited hundreds of farm families throughout Wisconsin. That extensive travel has given me a broad and deep understanding of the diversity of the state both economically and programmatically. Because we are a statewide organization, it's my desire to seek out and develop collaborative relationships with individuals and organizations who can strengthen our organization and expand our services with a goal of reaching people in all corners of Wisconsin who may have need of them."

"I'm excited to work with and learn from our committed and experienced Board of Directors who share a real passion for what we do. I'm also looking forward to meeting the many generous supporters who share our mission and help to make our programs possible and having the opportunity to get to know each of them."

"Easterseals Wisconsin has a great history. I'm going to do my best to make sure our future lives up to that history."

The entire Easterseals Wisconsin staff and Board of Directors congratulate Paul on his new position and look forward to working with him to help build brighter, more independent futures for children and adults with disabilities across Wisconsin.

Exploring Job Options in Rural Wisconsin

The Easterseals Wisconsin FARM Program and Camp Wawbeek Transitions joined forces for their third year of working together to provide the Exploring Job Options in Rural Wisconsin program. One of the focuses of the Ag Career Exploration course includes relating the students' interests into the Ag industry, helping them understand that agriculture is much more than they may realize. Although the April weekend fell victim to the pandemic, 37 individuals took part over three weekend sessions held between October and February.

The February group of students enjoyed their trip to the Sauk County Humane Society, where they had the chance to ask questions and learn about opportunities that may be available to them in that field.

In order to provide this opportunity for Transitions campers, the FARM Program works with the Division of Vocational Rehabilitation (DVR). This year, we were fortunate to get extra support from the Todd & Shari Nelson Family Foundation, which allowed us to continue to serve all campers who wanted to participate.



To learn more about this program, please contact Ami Cooper, FARM Rural Rehabilitation Specialist, at acooper@eastersealswisconsin.com or by phone at 608-225-1867.

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Easterseals News

New Board Chair



Jason Klawonn, who joined the Easterseals Wisconsin Board of Directors in 2015, has been named Board Chair. He replaces Pam Birschbach, who remains on the Board. Klawonn, who lives in Kenosha, was introduced to Easterseals Wisconsin in 2006 when his son, Casey, first attended Wisconsin Elks/Easterseals Wisconsin Respite Camp. "The impact that Easterseals Wisconsin has had on my marriage and family is beyond measure," says Klawonn. "I look forward to giving back by taking on this additional role on the Board of Directors."

New Bathrooms at Camp Wawbeek



The bathrooms and showers in the Boys' Dorm at Camp Wawbeek underwent a makeover this spring, thanks to grants from the Gregory C. Van Wie Foundation and Kohler Company and donations from Mary Ann McKenzie and Madison Lighting. Following a design by the late John Van Wie, the new bathrooms and shower rooms are a beautiful, much-needed upgrade for our campers.

Congratulations!

Jeff Kratochwill has been promoted to Director of the Easterseals Wisconsin FARM Program. Jeff meets with farmers with disabilities, working with them to find solutions to help them stay in farming and maintain their independence. He conducts on-site work assessments, determines work-site modifications and adaptive equipment needs, develops a plan to implement recommendations, and coordinates funding and support services. As Director, he will train and supervise other Rural Rehabilitation Specialists and review all FARM Program reports. Jeff is a certified Assistive Technology Professional and serves as liaison to Division of Vocational Rehabilitation (DVR) field supervisors and to the Client Assistance Program, to resolve DVR service issues with clients.

Happy Anniversary to **Jill Gretzinger** who is marking 25 years with Easterseals Wisconsin! Jill has managed the Outagamie County Disability HelpLine since its inception in 1995, maintaining a data bank of resources and providing information and referral services to Outagamie County residents with disabilities and their families. She administers grants to individuals for disability-related equipment, serves on several local committees, facilitates a number of support groups, provides guardianship training, and has formed effective collaborations with other organizations, working with them to identify community needs.

Clothing & Vehicle Donations



Easterseals Wisconsin continues to accept Vehicle Donations. To donate your vehicle in support of Easterseals Wisconsin, please visit DonateACar.com and select Easterseals Wisconsin as your charity. They will make the arrangements to pick up the vehicle, handle the title transfer, sell the vehicle, give Easterseals Wisconsin the proceeds, and give you a donation receipt. Contact us at 800.240.0160 or visit DonateACar.com to learn more about donating your vehicle.

In the Eau Claire area, you can also continue to support Easterseals Wisconsin by donating clothing and household goods in good, reusable condition. Donations can be made by dropping items off at the Savers Thrift Store at 2833 Mall Dr. in Eau Claire or by placing donations in a clothing donation bin. Red Easterseals Wisconsin bins are located throughout the greater Eau Claire area. Whichever method you choose, you will keep reusable goods out of landfills as well as provide vital funding for Easterseals Wisconsin programs.

Your support makes a real difference - thank you!

Direct Mail & Monthly Giving

Where Do My Direct Mail Gifts Go?

Because both Easterseals Wisconsin and Easterseals, Inc. (the national office) conduct direct mail programs in Wisconsin, some confusion has been expressed over just where donated funds go and how they are used. The following information is offered to help donors understand the difference in the two organizations and in their mailings.

Easterseals Wisconsin's direct mail program is small in scale, with one - four mailings per year to a donor list of just under 3,000 persons. All funds raised through these appeals remain right here in Wisconsin, providing direct services to children and adults with disabilities and their families. This includes support of Camp Wawbeek, Wisconsin Elks/Easterseals Wisconsin Respite Camp, FARM Program and Self-Employment Services.



Mailings from Easter Seals Wisconsin are easily identified. They:

- are mailed from our state office at 8001 Excelsior Dr., Suite 200; Madison, WI 53717
- are printed on Easter Seals Wisconsin agency letterhead
- include a return envelope addressed to 8001 Excelsior Dr., Suite 200; Madison, WI 53717
- **do not** include or offer gifts such as calendars, address labels, notecards, blankets, etc.

Easterseals, Inc., the national office, runs a much larger direct mail program, soliciting tens of thousands of Wisconsin residents. *Appeals that originate from or are returned to a Madison P.O. Box support the national office.* While Easterseals, Inc. does not provide direct services to clients here in Wisconsin, they advocate on a national level for laws and programming to

benefit people with disabilities. For more on Easterseals, Inc., visit www.easterseals.com.

Although steps are taken to prevent donors from receiving mailings from both organizations, some duplication may occur. To be added to or removed from either mailing list, to adjust the number of appeals you receive, or to make name or address corrections, email Mary Statz at mstatz@eastersealswisconsin.com.

New!

We heard you! In response to donor requests, Easterseals Wisconsin is excited to bring supporters of our mission a new way to give. Donors are now able to set up a reoccurring monthly donation by visiting:

<https://giving.eastersealswisconsin.com/online-giving-form/>

Our Deepest Thanks!

When COVID-19 hit, it impacted the way we live, how we interact with our families and communities, and how we do business.

Recognized as an essential organization for the services we provide, Easterseals Wisconsin nonetheless immediately took steps to protect staff by making it possible for anyone wishing to work from home to do so. The painful decision to cancel our spring and summer camp sessions followed several weeks later when it became clear that doing so, while heartbreaking, was in the best interest of our campers – many of whom are medically fragile – their families, and our camp staff. (See page 5 for examples of what camp staff has done to help ease the pain of camp cancellation for our campers.)

But we had no control over the forced cancellation of three of our biggest fundraisers. No venue = no event. The Celebrity Basketball Experience (Madison), the Golf Outing for Kids (Wisconsin Dells), and the Skip Ellenbecker Memorial Golf Outing (Wausau area), were not going to take place. This turn of events left us wondering how we would replace the lost revenue which does so much to support our mission.

But when Director of Development Rachel Reichhoff started calling our event sponsors to let them know what was happening, she was truly amazed and moved by their response.

Our wonderful partners stepped up! Despite being impacted by the pandemic themselves, the majority of our sponsors told Rachel they were honoring their partnership with Easterseals Wisconsin and would be sending their sponsorship check even though the event wasn't going to take place!

These event partners are members of the Easterseals Wisconsin family, a family whose support makes a direct impact on our ability to provide year-round opportunities for people with disabilities statewide.

We are so incredibly grateful to the businesses, organizations, and individuals who stood by us during this unusual and difficult time, and look forward to working with all of you again when better days return.

Thank you so very, very much!



TOWN BANK

WINTRUST COMMERCIAL BANKING

TIERNEY FAMILY

Ideal Builders • Sara Scheonborn
Tom Woodward • Baker Tilly
Corporate Business Systems
Lincoln Financial Advisors
Just AGame Impressions
Revive Restoration
BCP Transportation
First Business Bank
State Bank of Cross Plains
Pam Wirth

Bank of Wisconsin Dells presents the
Easterseals Wisconsin
**Golf Outing
for Kids**
with hosts Pat & Barry Richter



Summit Credit Union • Log Gables • Frank Beer Distributors
Krantz Electric • Clack Corporation • Lincoln Financial Advisors
Park Bank • General Engineering • Delta Dental
Holtz Builders • Group Health Cooperative • Mutual of America
M3 Insurance • Fairway Mortgage • SVA • Decem Properties, LLC

**Skip Ellenbecker
Memorial Golf Outing**
to benefit Easterseals Wisconsin FARM Program



President & CEO Christine Fessler Retires



Christine Fessler is retiring on September 1, 2020 after more than 26 years as President & CEO of Easterseals Wisconsin. Since 1994, she saw net assets grow from \$1.9 to \$10.2 million. Camp Wawbeek grew from serving 424 campers annually to close to 1100, Respite from 129 to 800 campers, and FARM from serving 80 farmers to almost 500 each year.

New programs initiated under Fessler's leadership are still thriving today: Self-Employment Services, Disability HelpLine, Guardianship training, Veterans Family Camp, High-Functioning Autism, Transitions, Avenues to Understanding, Ag Equipment Exchange, Agricultural Career Exploration, Outreach to Socially Disadvantaged Farmers & Veterans, and the AmeriCorps program. Long-term committed staff dedicated to responding to community need are key to the programs' success.

Other programs over the years included Lifespan Respite training, Aging & Disability Services, Beginning Farmer program, Agricultural Assistive Technology training for vocational rehab counselors nationwide, Day Camp, Fox Valley Respite, WEST Adventures, and Trailblazers.

During Fessler's tenure, \$10.6 million in capital improvements have been made including the Van Wie residence hall, new dining hall, pool, ropes course/climbing tower, Menomoni cabin, Kiwanis Kafe, health center, and accessible playground, all at Wawbeek. At Respite, projects included Elks Village, kitchen, dining hall additions, nurses' station, gym/multi-purpose building, playground, and staff duplex. Two Capital Campaigns raised \$3.5 million for Easterseals Camps.

Chris brought the Donation Center to Easterseals, which has raised \$3.4 million of unrestricted revenue over 24 years to provide stability to our programs and help fund new ventures. She secured the agency's first federal grants, writing them herself for ten years and bringing in \$6.7 million until the agency brought on a full time grants manager. She established the Program Fund which contributes to the agency's operating expenses each year, and helps make new programs and capital projects a reality. Finally, under her watch, the Friends of Easterseals, Annual Campaign, Golf Outing for Kids and other events, and funds for Respite Camp in the state budget became a reality. Staff and Board together have worked to use resources wisely to bring hope and opportunity to the people we serve.

"It has been an honor to lead Easterseals Wisconsin for the past 26 years and to serve thousands of children and adults with disabilities in our state," says Chris. "I feel so much gratitude for the opportunity to lead the organization as its chief executive officer and am proud of what we have accomplished as a team.

"I could not have asked for a more supportive or highly participatory Board of Directors and I treasure the relationships with all of the directors over the years. It has been my great privilege to work with the most exceptionally dedicated and talented staff that I have seen in all of my years in working with nonprofit agencies. The growth and financial and program success we have achieved are the result of a committed team who deeply believe in our mission. Finally, I am grateful for the friendships built with donors, volunteers, and clients, who are at the heart of what we do.

"I am confident that we have laid a strong foundation and the agency is well positioned for future success. Thank you for the opportunity to serve as your President and CEO."

Thank you so much, Chris, for your caring, dedication, dreams, vision, fiscal responsibility, and attention to (the teeny-tiniest!) detail. Enjoy your retirement!

*Adventure Awaits – Safe Travels!
Your Easterseals Wisconsin Family*

AmeriCorps

The AmeriCorps members at Easterseals Wisconsin have been stepping up to "get things done" despite the forced closure of our spring and summer camp sessions due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Each member has adjusted their term to continue to serve our program either remotely or by addressing community needs in response to the virus.

AmeriCorps members have persevered and provided growth to our program during these uncertain times. The Easterseals Wisconsin AmeriCorps program truly appreciates each member and their service within our community. Below are reflections from two AmeriCorps members who served a portion of their term during COVID-19.

"As a first-term Respite Apprentice AmeriCorps member and first time at Easterseals Wisconsin Respite Camp, I had no idea what to expect. My experience with Easterseals Wisconsin has been the most rewarding and challenging experience in my life to date. This experience opened a whole new world for me that will stick with me for the rest of my life. I was a little disappointed by a pandemic getting in the way of some of my time at camp, but like camp has taught me, you have to go with the flow and roll with the punches." – Spring AmeriCorps Respite Apprentice

"My AmeriCorps term has taught me the importance of camp and the community it provides to people. I am grateful for my term giving me amazing memories and opportunities while camp was open. And I am also grateful that my term allowed me to find ways to serve people even when I am not physically near them." – AmeriCorps Veterans Coordinator

Our AmeriCorps team continues to make a big impact with their service in response to COVID-19 and Easterseals Wisconsin program needs.



Honoring John Van Wie



In January we lost a dear friend to Easterseals Wisconsin, John Van Wie. John had been a member of our Board for many years, served as Board Chair, and was involved in many projects at our camps. His latest and last project before his passing was the remodel of the boys' dorm bathrooms and showers at Camp Wawbeek, which turned out beautifully. John's mark is left on the agency and camp in the great work that he did for us, and we wanted a way to pay tribute to John and the legacy he is leaving.

Several years ago, John got his wife, JoAnne, involved with camp through our Veterans Family Camp. JoAnne is part of Quilts of Valor, a group that is dedicated to making and giving a one-of-a-kind quilt to every person who has served in our armed forces. Through JoAnne, we began holding a "Quilts of Valor Ceremony" at each Veterans Family Camp. It's a moving and meaningful ceremony that each Veteran and their family has come to look forward to. John was always proud to be a part of the ceremony, often in charge of taking photos while JoAnne led the presentation.

While talking about John after his death, Paul Leverenz suggested we have a barn quilt made to commemorate John – a way to honor his legacy that would tie in with the Quilts of Valor Ceremony and with JoAnne's quilt-making talent. Terri Graack, who has worked at camp for more than 20 years and shares our love for John, found an example of the tree that was used in the design. We wanted the tree to commemorate John's wisdom, that if you put down roots and let yourself grow, amazing things will happen. The border is in red, white, and blue, reflecting John's unwavering patriotism, and his love for our Veterans Family Camp.

The quilt will be displayed on the side of the Gregory C. Van Wie Memorial Residence Hall at Camp Wawbeek, and will greet every visitor as they make their way to the top of the hill.

Virtual Camp!

Having to cancel summer camp broke our hearts, even knowing that we were making the best decision for the well-being of both our campers and staff. We *know* how important camp is to campers and their families, so the Camp Directors and the rest of the camp team sat down and brainstormed ways we could bring at least some aspects of camp to our wonderful campers this summer.

We started the **Birchbark Blog** in March to help spread information about camp that wasn't on other social media platforms like Facebook or Instagram. We have used this to share activities, words of wisdom, and information about programs and other things that our camps are offering. Our blog can be found on the Easterseals Wisconsin website at <https://blog.eastersealswisconsin.com/>

During our brainstorming session, we came up with three primary things that camp offers our campers: Physical Activity, Socialization, and Creative Activities. From this stemmed our **Virtual Camp**. Each week we offer activities based on a different theme, and these are emailed as well as posted on our Birchbark Blog and social media sites.

Physical Activities: Virtual Camp offers activities to get everyone moving. Whether we are sharing information about accessible yoga poses, or getting everyone involved in a challenge to walk/wheel/roll 100 miles in a week collectively, we want to encourage all of our campers and their families to be active.

Socialization: We offer social events twice each week. On Tuesdays there is a Virtual Campfire that is held on Zoom, where campers and staff can join in, sharing some songs or stories. Most of the time, though, is spent catching up with old and new friends. On Thursdays we hold a Talent Show, inviting campers, families, and staff members to share their talents via a Zoom call hosted by camp. We have seen singing, storytelling, dancing, you name it! There is also, of course, lots of catching up to do!

Creative Activities: Activities are posted throughout the week on our blog and social media sites, From paper crafts to cooking activities, these fun activities go along with each week's theme and use supplies most people should have in their homes. We are also throwing in some great informational articles on issues important to camp such as tickborne illnesses, heat-related illnesses, self-care, mental health awareness, and other important topics.

*We miss you and can't wait to see you in person again!
Until then, please join us at Virtual Camp!*



Brendan served and worked at Respite Camp in 2017 and 2018! His favorite camp activity was going on Town Trip to eat ice cream and go shopping with all his camp peeps. Brendan's favorite camp song was Hey, Joel! The most important part of camp to Brendan was creating an environment where all campers and staff could feel supported and be their true authentic selves. Currently, Brendan works at a developmental disability clinic in Madison, WI and will be going back to school this fall for his master's to become a Board Certified Behavior Analyst.

