VIUCEDD’s Mission: “To enhance the quality of life for individuals with disabilities and their families and to provide them with the tools necessary for a productive and inclusive community life.”
I want to take this opportunity, to welcome our Harambee readers to another informative issue. This issue is very dear and near to my heart because it deals with an important aspect in our community: awareness and acceptance of our children, colleagues and friends who are living with Autism Spectrum Disorders (ASD). To bring attention to this developmental disability, April was chosen as Autism Awareness Month. We consider April as a special time to educate the public about issues that relates to this developmental disability, and to highlight the growing need for awareness about autism and autism spectrum disorders. It is that time of the year, when we focus on sharing positive, respectful, and accurate information about and people in the spectrum. Each individual with autism is unique. Many of those on the autism spectrum have exceptional abilities in visual and academic skills as well in music. About forty (40) percent have average to above average intellectual abilities. Yet, there are about twenty-five (25) percent who are nonverbal, and others who have significant disabilities and are unable to live independently. The month of April is here to remind us that Autism is a natural variation of the human experience, and we can all create a world which values, includes, and celebrates all kinds of minds.

April is also Autism Acceptance Month and is meant to promote, accept and celebrate people on the spectrum as family members, friends, classmates, co-workers, and community members making valuable contributions to our world in general and our community in particular.

In conclusion, let me indulge upon our readers that Autism Acceptance Month is about treating people with ASD with respect, listening to what they have to say in making our environment more inclusive and simply welcoming them to our schools, our community and our world.

On Sunday, March 19, 2017, on the Herman E. Moore Golf Course of the University of the Virgin Islands St. Thomas campus, Afternoon on the Green commemorated the Virgin Islands centennial year and UVI’s 55th anniversary. VIUCEDD staff members participated in the celebration. Alongside other UVI centers, degree programs, and clubs, under an academic tent, VIUCEDD showcased its many services and activities targeted for the Virgin Islands community, particularly for people with developmental and other disabilities. One featured activity was the upcoming 10th annual Autism Conference in observance of Autism Awareness Month, designed to bring awareness and acceptance of Virgin Islanders living with Autism Spectrum Disorder. Additionally, staff members promoted the American Sign Language (ASL) classes offered every fall and spring, assistive technology services, as well as the many trainings and technical assistance provided across the territory.
VIUCEDD Associate Director Invited to Participate with Executive Branch at National Governors Association Conference to address Juvenile Justice Reform

The Virgin Islands University Center for Excellence in Developmental Disabilities (VIUCEDD) hosted its 13th annual Voices that Count conference on October 11, 2016 on St. Croix and October 13, 2016 on St. Thomas. The two day policy forum encourages the community-at-large (disability community, advocates, caregivers, family members, private businesses, and Government Agencies) to meet the candidates vying for a seat in the Virgin Islands 32nd Legislative Branch. The forum is designed to bring the disability community together to meet with sitting and potential senators to discuss and address the challenges and issues faced by persons with disabilities. Discussions centered around improvements to the quality of life for people with disabilities in the Virgin Islands, were the core focus. Ms. Garcia specifically made a recommendation to the senators that there should be “More people hired within the government who has disabilities.”

Nina Garcia shares her story of living with Cerebral Palsy on St. Croix

Concerns raised by Disability Community at VTC

VIUCEDD received a special honor, when one of its members, Associate Director, Dr. Kimberly Mills was invited to participate with the Executive branch of government at a National Governors Association (NGA) conference. The NGA conference to be held in April of 2017 focuses on Juvenile Justice reform efforts. The Virgin Islands was 1 of only 4 states/territories selected to participate out of many other applicants across the 50 states. Dr. Kimberly Mills was the previous Keynote Address Speaker at the First Annual Crime Prevention Symposium sponsored by Senator Novelle Francis, Chairman of the Committee on Homeland Security, Public Safety and Justice. Mills commented “It’s an incredible honor to be asked to continue to participate with the juvenile justice reform efforts underway in the U.S. Virgin Islands. Educational attainment, early intervention efforts and multiple systems of coordinated care are key to helping to reduce the continued court involvement of our youth. I am eager to investigate research based best practices being implemented by Governors in other states so that some of those practices can be replicated in the Virgin Islands.”

Delegate to congress Stacy Plaskett answering questions from conference participants

Dr. Kimberly Mills speaks at Crime Prevention Symposium

Dr. Yegin Habtes giving his opening remarks

Dr. Kimberly Mills speaks at Crime Prevention Symposium
Head Start hosted its 9th Annual Father and Child Activity Day on Friday, October 21, 2016 at their Sugar Estate Complex. This activity is one of Head Start’s male engagement activities geared to provide learning activities to fathers/male care figures to support their active engagement in the early development of their children. VIUCEDD co-sponsored the event, along with the UVI Cooperative Extension Services and other community partners. Each father received a tote bag provided by VIUCEDD with website information on who to contact for developmental concerns they may have with their child(ren) and materials on child development. At this event, Dr. Karen Brown (VIUCEDD Associate Director) presented information on monitoring children’s development using the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention’s (CDC) Learn the Signs. Act Early. Milestone Moments Booklet and the Amazing Me” It’s Busy Being 3! book. This interactive presentation, It’s Busy Being Me,” engaged fathers in reading the book out loud to them and their 3 and 4 year old children as they followed along with their own copies to take home. Using this book and the booklet, Dr. Brown introduced developmental expectations/milestones for 3 and 4 year olds in a fun way. As she read with the fathers and their children, she engaged the group of children in skills expected of their age group. The children were excited as they showed what they could do, raising their hands to answer questions or perform an activity. She taught fathers how to monitor/track their child’s development by modeling this activity through the interactive presentation. Additionally, Dr. Brown taught fathers how to identify concerns and who to contact when a concern did arise.

If you have concerns about your child’s development, contact the following Virgin Islands agencies:

Birth to 2 years - Infants and Toddlers Program at (340) 777-8804
3 years and up – St. Croix School District at (340) 718-7997, Extension 264 or 238
St. Thomas-St. John School District (340) 774-4399, Extension 2234

The goal of CDC’s Learn the Signs. Act Early. program is to improve early identification of children with autism and other developmental disabilities so children and families can get the services and support they need. For more information on “Learn the Signs. Act Early,” visit the CDC’s website at https://www.cdc.gov/ncbddd/actearly/index.html. Materials are free and can be downloaded or ordered from the website.
Learn the Signs, Act Early!

Developmental milestones are things that most children can do by a certain age in terms of how they play, learn, speak, act, and move. Things like a 6-month old responding to her name; a 12-month old waving “bye-bye”; an 18-month old pointing out the plane in the sky; or a 2-year old speaking in short sentences—those are just a few examples of the many amazing developmental milestones that offer important clues about a child’s development. All children develop at their own pace. Some will reach milestones slightly late or early, but most children reach milestones around the same ages.

Looking for developmental milestones is easy and can be a lot of fun! Whether you are a parent, grandparent, guardian, teacher, or neighbor, keeping track of the milestones a child has reached, and the ones she’s still working on, is really important. Tracking milestones can help you understand a child’s abilities better and give you a clearer idea of what to expect as he learns and grows. It can also help you to be sure that the child is developing well for her age, and it provides important information to share with the child’s doctor at every checkup.

Developmental Milestones and Autism

Autism spectrum disorder (ASD) is a group of developmental disabilities that can cause significant social, communication and behavioral challenges. ASD occurs in all groups of people regardless of race, ethnicity, and socioeconomic status (SES). That said, it is almost five times more common among boys than girls. Some children with ASD show signs of future developmental problems within the first few months of life. For other children symptoms may not show up until 24 months or later. Some children with ASD seem to develop normally until around 18 to 24 months of age, then stop gaining new skills, or lose the skills they once had. While signs usually appear early in life (before the age of 3), many children with ASD do not receive a final diagnosis until later in life (over the age of 4). This is way too late. Early intervention is the key to meeting the needs of these children and their families.

Tracking and diagnosing ASD can be difficult. Research studies have reported that many parents of children with ASD noticed a problem before their child’s first birthday and almost 80-90% noticed a problem by their child’s second birthday. This information suggests the importance of including parents as partners in their children’s development and tracking/looking for milestones/expectations from infancy to school age. The goal of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention’s (CDC’s) Learn the Signs. Act Early. Program is to improve early identification of children with autism and other developmental disabilities so children and families can get the services and support they need. For more information on autism spectrum disorder, such as possible red flags, visit the CDC’s website at https://www.cdc.gov/ncbddd/autism/signs.html. For more information on Learn the Signs. Act Early.” visit the CDC’s website at https://www.cdc.gov/ncbddd/actearly/index.html. Materials are free and can be downloaded or ordered from the website. For assistance with ordering materials, contact Dr. Karen Brown, Associate Director for the Virgin Islands University Center for Excellence in Developmental Disabilities (karen.brown@uvi.edu or 340-693-1173).

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Dr. Karen Harris Brown
Associate Director, VIUCEDD
CDC’s Act Early Ambassador to the USVI
VIUCEDD Participates in 46th Annual Agriculture and Food Fair

The Agriculture and Food Fair of the U.S. Virgin Islands, also known as Agri-Fest, was held on St. Croix at the Department of Agriculture from Saturday, February 18 to Sunday 19, 2017. This annual event attracts as many as 30,000 people over the three days, and boasts an extensive farmer’s market, petting zoo and a variety of local foods and drinks. The University of the Virgin Islands Cooperative Extension Services (CES) is a co-sponsor of the event. This partnership provides many of the University’s department and programs the opportunity to engage fair attendees in informational and educational sessions. On display at the VIUCEDD’s table were assistive technology devices and tools that allow for individuals with a disability to enhance their independence at home, work and in the community. The software Jaws was also available for those who wanted to try the screen reader. The software is designed to assist blind and visually impaired individuals navigate computer applications with minimum assistance. Additionally, communication devices from the iCanConnect program were on display such as iPhones, iPads, large print keyboards and telephones with large keys and volume enhancers for people who are deaf-blind. Information on the Visitablity Design Act & Incentive Program, the low-interest cash loan program and other VIUCEDD initiatives were made available to interested individuals.

Denisha Joseph and Rennetta Lewis provide program information and conduct AT demonstrations to individuals visiting display table

VIUCEDD and VIDHS Partner to Improve Early Childhood Outcomes

VIUCEDD is excited to announce the launching of the first class of students studying to be credentialed as Registered Behavioral Technicians (RBT). The RBT initiative is a program of the new Autism and Developmental Disabilities Research Center (ADDRC) at VIUCEDD. The ADDRC is a state of the art research and training center established to improve professional training opportunities related to Autism Spectrum Disorders (ASD) and other Developmental Disabilities. The work of the ADDRC focuses on best practices related to early intervention and as such, wanted to bring current international best practices and methodologies related to early childhood learning of language, academic, social and adaptive skills to the forefront of the Virgin Islands early childhood service delivery through RBT training. The courses are being taught by Dr. Kimberly Mills who is a Doctoral level Board Certified Behavior Analyst (BCBA-D).

There are 25 participants from various early childhood agencies within the Virgin Islands Department of Human Services as well as agencies that serve older learners. The two-month course is taking place between March and May of 2017 on the St. Croix District. A cohort of 25 students will begin in the fall of 2017 on St. Thomas.

Carla V. Perkins, the Director of Quality Services for the Department of Human Services commented “We wanted to let our providers know that we value their work and are invested in their professional growth and development. The results will be better qualified staff and better outcomes for Virgin Islands youth.”
VIUCEDD’s Tech Corner

Technology’s Help is Ideal

Assistive technology is needed all around,
In schools, government offices, and VIUCEDD are places that the device can be found.
The software function on an iPad, has text-to-speech and word prediction,
And as for the iPhone, Siri helps you with weather updates and dictation.
VoiceOver is also a key feature that helps vision-impaired individuals,
Notifications such as incoming e-mails and text messages are enunciated in each syllable.
The hearing aids option gives users hearing accessibility,
The Zoom feature allows you to enlarge a section of the screen to maximize readability.
There are also options to increase color contrast or to set the screen’s color to grayscale.
All of the devices and its software are extremely user-friendly with braille.
With these built-in capabilities, everyone is expected great results,
Assistive technology enhances learning in an effective method for children and adults.

-Rennetta Lewis

The Virgin Islands Technology Related Assistance for Individuals with Disabilities (VITRAID) housed within the VIUCEDD is a program responsible for conducting and overseeing the activities of the Statewide Assistive Technology Program. VITRAID provides access to assistive technology (AT) devices and services at both their St. Croix and St. Thomas offices. Short-term loans of up to 30 days of AT devices to individuals and entities is available. The purpose of the loan may be to assist in decision making, to serve as a loaner while the consumer is waiting for device repair or funding, to provide an accommodation on a short-term basis for a time-limited event/situation, to conduct training, self-education or other professional development activity.

To inquire about our AT device loan program and available devices, please contact Ms. Sharon Williams at Sharon.williams@uvi.edu or call 340-692-4267.
Combined Hearing & Vision Loss?
You may qualify for FREE equipment
iCanConnect

Contact VIUCEDD* to learn about income and disability guidelines
(340) 692-4267 TTY: (888) 320-2656

www.icanconnect.org/states
*The Virgin Islands University Center for Excellence in Developmental Disabilities