What’s In The Stimulus Bill?

Everyone is talking about it, but few of us know what is contained in the new stimulus bill signed by President Obama. Here is an excellent summary courtesy of the Coalition for Human Needs, demonstrating in clear and simple terms the intended impact of the new federal economic stimulus program. Highlights of special interest to the disability community include:

- 13.6 percent increase in food stamp benefits.
- $100 million in emergency food and shelter aid.
- Unemployment insurance benefits extended to year’s end and raised by $25.
- One-time $250 payment to recipients of Supplemental Security Income (SSI).
- $50 million for a new program of capacity-building grants to nonprofit organizations, to expand delivery of social services to people and communities affected by the recession.
- $1.5 billion in homeless prevention aid.
- $225 million, available through 9/30/10, of which $175 million is for the STOP Violence Against Women Formula Assistance Program; $50 million is for transitional housing assistance grants for victims of violence.
- $500 million to serve low-income adults, include recipients of public assistance, covering supportive services and needs-related payments as well as employment/training services.
- $120 million to allow nonprofits to add 24,000 older workers.
- $400 million to school districts for preschool special education, and $500 million for state grants for infants and families (with disabilities, birth through age 2).
- $540 million, including $140 million for independent living programs (of which $18.2 million is for state grants, $87.5 million is for independent living centers and $34.3 million is for services for older blind individuals).
- $650 million for evidence-based clinical and community-based prevention and wellness strategies to address chronic illnesses.
- An extension of the moratorium on the following final regulations through July 1, 2009: targeted case management; school-based services; provider taxes; and outpatient hospital services. Also states the sense of the Congress that the HHS secretary should not promulgate as final the proposed regulations related to graduate medical education, cost limit for public providers and rehabilitative services.

National Parks are for Everyone!

The National Park Service (NPS) has developed a website to aid visitors with disabilities and special needs to find accessible trails, programs, activities, and other features at national parks nationwide. It is hoped that they can assist visitors and their families and friends in travel planning to the National Park Service site of their choice. Visit the website at [http://www.nps.gov/pub_aff/access/index.htm](http://www.nps.gov/pub_aff/access/index.htm) to learn about what opportunities are available in parks for visitors with disabilities and special needs. Don’t forget that national parks offer passes for free access for people with disabilities.

The Golden Access Passport is for citizens or permanent residents of the United States who are blind or permanently disabled. The Golden Access Passport is a lifetime entrance pass to national parks, monuments, historic sites, recreation areas, and national wildlife refuges that charge an entrance fee. The Golden Access Passport admits the pass signee and any accompanying passengers in a private* vehicle if a park has a per vehicle entrance fee. Where a per person entrance fee is charged, the Golden Access Passport admits the pass signee, spouse, and children.

The Golden Access Passport also provides a 50% discount on federal use fees charged for facilities and services such as camping, swimming, parking, boat launching, and tours. In some cases where use fees are charged, only the pass signee will be given the 50% price reduction. The Passport is nontransferable and does NOT cover or reduce special recreation permit fees or fees charged by concessionaires. A Golden Access Passport must be obtained in person at a federal area where an entrance fee is charged. It is available only to citizens or permanent residents of the United States who are medically determined to be blind or permanently disabled. You may obtain a Golden Access Passport by showing proof of medically determined permanent disability, or eligibility for receiving benefits under federal law.

Recycle Crayons

Did you know that crayon wax spends eternity in a landfill. Instead you can send old unwanted crayons to Crazy Crayons, where your castoffs will be melted down and turned into a new generation of crayons.

For details visit crazycrayons.com
High School Assessment Exams (HSAS)

Do I have to Pass the HSA Exams to Graduate?

Before a student can graduate, all Maryland public school students who started 9th grade in 2005 or later must do one of the following:

- Pass all four HSA exams.
- Get a combined score of at least 1602.
- Get certain scores on AP or IB exams.
- Complete Bridge Plan projects.
- Get a “waiver” of the HSA requirement (2008-09 school year only)

What Is “Appropriate Assistance”?*

It means extra help. If you fail one or more HSA exams, your school must give you extra help (such as tutoring, Saturday school, or summer school) to strengthen your areas of weakness in those subjects. To find out what assistance is offered at your school, talk to your teachers, guidance counselors, or principal. You can also call the Local Accountability Coordinator for your school district. To find out your Local accountability Coordinator, call 1-877-HSA-EXAM

What Is The Project Option?

The project option (also known as the Bridge Plan) is another way for students who are having trouble passing the HSAs to earn a high school diploma. You can do projects in any or all of the four subjects instead of passing the HSAs in those subjects.

1. You must take the HSA exam in a subject at least twice.
2. You must participate in “appropriate assistance” after failing the first time.
3. You must pass the course in that subject.
4. You must have satisfactory attendance.
5. You must be making progress toward your diploma.

If you want to do projects, talk to your teachers, counselor, or principal. You should be assigned a Project Monitor to help you. Your projects will be scored by a panel. The panel will recommend to the superintendent of your school district whether to accept your project or not. If your project is not accepted, you should get written feedback to help you revise the project, and you should be able to resubmit the project within 10 days.

What Are My Rights If I Fail the HSA Exams?

- Retake the exams. You can also retake exams you’ve already passed to raise your combined score.
- Get “appropriate assistance” (extra help) from your school to help you pass.
- Do projects (the Bridge Plan) if you fail an HSA exam twice.
- Stay in school until age 21 and keep trying to meet the graduation requirements.
- Be considered for a waiver of the HSA requirement if you meet the criteria (2008-09 school year only)

What Is A Waiver?

For the 2008-09 school year only, some students might get “waivers” allowing them to graduate even if they failed HSAs, didn’t get a 1602 combined score, and didn’t successfully complete projects. To be considered for a waiver, you must do all of the following:

- Meet all other graduation requirements.
- Take all four HSAs before graduation.
- Participate in “appropriate assistance” and the project option if your school gives you the opportunity.

In addition, to be considered for a waiver, there must be a special circumstance that kept you from meeting the HSA requirement. Examples of special circumstances are scheduling problems with courses or HSA exams, your school not giving you “appropriate assistance,” or serious illness or accidental serious injury before the most recent HSA testing.

In spring, 2009, district superintendents will decide which students (if any) get waivers, with input from principals. If the district superintendent denies you for a waiver, you or your parent/guardian can appeal this decision to the State Superintendent of Schools by sending an appeal letter. If the State Superintendent denies your appeal, this decision can be appealed in court. You may want to talk to a lawyer about appeals.

Do Special Education Students Have To Meet The Same Requirements To Get A Diploma?

Yes. But some special education students can take the Modified HSAs instead of the regular HSAs. The Modified HSAs test the same information, but in a different format. Your IEP team should discuss whether you can take the Modified HSAs. Your parents or guardians can ask for an IEP meeting to talk about this issue.

If your IEP has testing accommodations (such as extra time on tests), then you must get these accommodations when you take the HSAs. If you think you need more accommodations, your parents or guardians can ask for an IEP meeting to talk about it.

Like all students, special education students have the right to get “appropriate assistance,” the right to do Bridge Plan projects (with testing accommodations), and the right to be considered for a “waiver” of the HSA requirement if they meet the criteria (2008-09 school year only).


Reprinted from Maryland Legal Aid
How To Choose A Summer Camp

Choosing a summer camp program for your child involves some important research. Because the camp experience will have significant impact on your child’s life, it’s important for parents to choose a camp wisely.

Regardless of the age of your child, it is important that the ultimate selection of a camp accommodate all or some of the needs, interests, goals, and expectations of both parent and child. The parent must make an effort to understand what the child wants and why. A good way to begin is to sit down as a family and respond to the following questions:

- What do you and your child want to gain from the camp experience? Learn new skills, develop more self confidence, improving proficiency in certain areas, become more independent?
- What are other expectations of the camp experience?
- What are the special interests that your child wants to explore?
- Are there any physical, intellectual, or social limitations that should be considered?
- What kind of emphasis will your child profit from the most? For example: is a lot of structure desirable, is social interaction with members of the opposite sex important, or does your child need a place where he or she is encouraged to develop at their own pace?

With the above information in mind, it is appropriate to look at some of the specific characteristics that should be considered in determining what you and your child want. These characteristics include type of camp, cost, size, location, programs and activities and special needs.

Sleep-away camps provide a summer residential program where campers enjoy daily and evening activities. Depending on the type of program chosen, a camp experience can range anywhere from one week to an entire summer.

When considering sleep-away camp, parent should keep a few questions in mind:

- Is your child ready for a sleep-away experience?
- What is expected from the camp experience?
- What type of camp fits best with family schedules?
- What are the total costs of sleep-away camp?

Nonprofit camps many times are less expensive than private sleep-away camps. As a parent you have to make careful assessment of your family’s financial limitations regarding camp costs.

Camps may vary in size from under 100 campers to more than 400. Smaller camps may foster a very special environment where campers and staff really get to know each other, and where individual needs can be quickly met. Large camps are often organized into small units thus making it possible to receive the same kind of attention offered by a smaller camp. This is a complex issue that will require special attention and investigation. In a good camp there may be little correlation between size and the quality of the total camp experience.

If you feel your child requires special attention in an area such as confidence building, it is probably more important to find out how a camp meets that need rather than getting hung up on size. In this regard, you might want to keep these kinds of questions in mind: What do you do to prevent campers from getting lost in the shuffle? Can a below average athlete feel comfortable in trying new things and in working on skills at his or her own pace? What is done to promote a sense of self worth? The answers to such questions and others will help you identify appropriate camps and as you move toward a final selection.

In choosing a location you might want to consider the cost for you to visit the camp, and the proximity to camps your other children are attending during the summer.

As you might imagine, camps have all kinds of program offerings. Some camps may emphasize one activity, while others will offer a wide array of programs. A more traditional camp program tends to be broader in terms of what it offers. In making a decision about camp, it is vital that you and your child look into the total camp program and that you examine the quality of the staff and facilities available to support that program.

More questions to think about:

- Will the program encourage the child to try new things?
- What is the philosophy regarding competitiveness?
- Which activities are required?
- Is instruction given in each activity?
- How structured is the program?
- Are there choices the child can make?

Now your task is to identify those camps which appear promising in terms of meeting your specifications. This is the information gathering part of making a decision. The best way to proceed with your comparison and to narrow your choices is to take a careful look at some of the camps you have identified. Review the brochures and video’s with your child. Then you can choose the ones you’re most interested in and arrange to speak or meet with the camp directors. They’ll give you more detail and you can ask specific questions like:

What is the director’s age and background?

How long as the director run this camp?

What are the camp’s goals and philosophy?

What kind of camper is most likely to have a good experience at this camp?

What facilities does the camp have?

What is the schedule like?

What is the camper-counselor ratio?

What kind of staff training is provided?

What percentage of campers return each year?

What is the total cost of the camp including extras?

What is the swimming instruction program like?

How does the camp insure the safety and security of its campers?

What is the food like and who prepares it?

What medical facilities and medical staff is on campus?

Is there a refund policy if the camper leaves early?

Will the director supply references?

What happens when the weather is bad?

How does the camp program meet individual needs?

What kind of insurance coverage is there?

Don’t feel self conscious about asking a lot of questions. A good camp will have paid a lot of attention to these parental concerns and should be eager to respond to them. Be careful not to focus on one area and therefore omit others. Involve you child in the selection process. Remember to let your child ask questions too. Finally, ask for references of families who have had their child attend the camp. Speaking with these families can give you valuable insight about the camp and the families that send their children there.

For more information visit the National Camp Association, Inc. at www.summercamp.org or call 1-800-966-2267.
Governors Office of the Deaf and Hard of Hearing (ODHH) Update

The Maryland Advisory Council for the Deaf and Hard of Hearing met on March 30, 2009. As the Parent Representative on the Council I would like to keep you informed about what’s happening at ODHH. Some highlights of the council meeting:

- Legislative update, ODHH will continue as a separate agency. Both the House and Senate voted to support ODHH as an independent agency representing deaf, hard of hearing and deafblind Maryland residents.

- The Closed Captioning of Campaign Ads bill (Senate Bill 97) is still in committee. Maryland residents are encouraged to contact their Senators to support the bill so it can be voted out of Committee. It is critical that you contact members of the Senate Education Health and Environmental Affairs Committee as well as your Senator to support SB97.

- ODHH Annual report released, In 2008 ODHH provided the community with over 280 community announcements through their email distribution list. ODHH had more than 440 requests for information, and provided workshops, awareness training and technical assistance to government agencies and the community. The report can be found in full at www.odhh.md.gov

- ODHH will be launching a new website shortly.

- ODHH will be working to host a Legislative Day in Annapolis next year.

- The next Advisory Council meeting will be held on June 2, 2009