



# Dialogue

Volume 28 No. 4  
Fall 2014



## Consumer Spotlight

### The Cervantes-Higareda Family and The McKenney Family

Like many of the children served by Regional Center of Orange County (RCOC), Ronnie Higareda and twins Charles and Edgar McKenney were born extremely premature. Ronnie was at 25 weeks gestation, while the twins were born at 27 weeks gestation. The tiny infants spent the first few months of their lives in a neonatal intensive care unit, as their worried parents waited for them to gain the physical strength and medical stability needed to join their families at home.

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*The tiny infants spent the first few months of their lives in a neonatal intensive care unit.*

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A few short years ago, those risk factors alone would have made all three of them eligible at birth for early intervention services provided by Regional Centers through California's Early Start program. That changed in 2009,

when eligibility for Early Start was modified and Prevention Resource and Referral Services (PRRS) was introduced. Administered by Family Resource Centers, rather than Regional Centers, PRRS' mission is to help families with at-risk babies and toddlers who do not meet the new Early Start eligibility criteria.

By most accounts, PRRS has succeeded in fulfilling its goals – reducing Early Start costs, while ensuring that parents of children with mild developmental delays get support and timely access to more intensive services should the child's needs change. As the Cervantes-Higareda family of Santa Ana, and



Edgar (left) and Charles (right) McKenney



The McKenney family: (L-R) Larry, Edgar, Connie and Charles

the McKenney family of Aliso Viejo, share their stories, it certainly seems that this is the case in Orange County.

Both Edgar McKenney and Ronnie Higareda are currently receiving Early Start services through RCOC, while Charles McKenney is continuing to be served through PRRS. Sharing their stories, these families have only positive things to say about the help they received from their PRRS service coordinator, as well as the RCOC Early Start service coordinators and other team members who monitored their children's development and responded to their changing needs.

As a first-time mom, Connie McKenney (the twins' mother) especially appreciated the educational materials she received, providing guidance on activities she can do at home to nurture Charles' and Edgar's development.

See **The Cervantes-Higareda Family and The McKenney Family** on page 7

## Dialogue

*Dialogue* is published four times per year by the Regional Center of Orange County for people with developmental disabilities, their families and service providers. *Dialogue* can also be read online at RCOC's website: [www.rcocdd.com](http://www.rcocdd.com).

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### Upcoming 2015 Board Meetings

January 15 • March 5 • May 7

The public is invited to attend RCOC board meetings. They begin at 6 p.m. and are held in the Regional Center Board Room at RCOC's headquarters in the Tustin Centre Tower complex, located at 1525 North Tustin Avenue in Santa Ana.

### RCOC Administration

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## Moving on at 3... Transition

Depending on the child's needs, RCOC's Early Start program may provide a variety of services and supports, from physical therapy and family training, to speech and language services, and more. All of these resources are aimed at getting children from birth to age three the early intervention help they need to try to close the developmental gap with their typical peers.

Around 10 percent of children in RCOC's Early Start program have developmental disabilities severe enough to qualify them for ongoing regional center services under the Lanterman Act.

However, regardless of whether or not a child meets Lanterman Act eligibility requirements, every child in Early Start receives transition services – that is help to prepare their family for the transition they will make when the child turns three years old and Early Start services end. Many parents say this support is invaluable to helping them understand the differences between Early Start and the school-based education services children with special needs receive from their local school districts from age three through age 22.

An important first step in that transition process are the "Moving on at 3...Transition" workshops, organized every other month by RCOC's Comfort Connection Family Resource Center. At the workshops, RCOC experts explain eligibility for

ongoing Regional Center services, while school district staff discuss the assessments they do and the eligibility requirements for special education preschool through the public schools. Parents also learn about the schools' Individualized Educational Program (IEP) process and how it differs from RCOC's Individual Family Service Plan (IFSP) process.

Respecting parents' busy schedules, the workshops alternate between morning and evening time frames, and take place in different cities throughout Orange County. Though only offered in English, Spanish and Vietnamese translation can be provided to ensure all parents get the information they need.

## Upcoming Transition Workshops

Here is information on upcoming transition workshops organized by Comfort Connection. For more information and to RSVP, please contact Patricia Garcia at 714-558-5400 or [pgarcia@rcocdd.com](mailto:pgarcia@rcocdd.com).

### Friday, January 30

9:30 to 11:30 a.m.

Educational Services Center  
4999 Casa Loma Avenue  
Yorba Linda

### Thursday, March 26

6:30 to 8:30 p.m.

Harper Assessment Center  
425 E. 18th Street, Room 5  
Costa Mesa

## Executive Director's Report

### Good News Ahead for Families with Young Children

By Larry Landauer, Executive Director

Historically, California has been a great place for people with developmental disabilities and their families. No other state has a Lanterman Act promise of community-based services and supports as we do. The past few years, though, have been tough for young children. The Great Recession and other budgetary concerns brought belt-tightening that narrowed eligibility for the California Early Start program. Administered by regional centers, Early Start provides early intervention services for children with developmental disabilities or significant developmental delays from birth to three years old.

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Starting in 2011, at-risk children who did not meet Early Start's tighter eligibility criteria were instead referred to a newly-created program: Prevention Resource and Referral Services (PRRS). Administered by dozens of local family resource centers across the state, the PRRS program has supported families by providing information on child development, helping parents

access services that can assist their child's development, and providing opportunities for parents to connect with and get support from others.

In Orange County, we're proud that the close relationship between our Regional Center and RCOC's Comfort Connection Family Resource Center has ensured that the developmental progress of children in our local PRRS



program has been followed closely. Service coordinators for RCOC and for PRRS partner with our Health Resources Group staff to keep tabs on each child's progress. Of course, it's welcome news when children close the developmental gap, but when they don't -- or if there is a concern the child may lose ground -- members of our staff quickly organize the necessary assessments to see if they should be moved into the Early Start program. In fact, we have found that around 20 percent of children initially placed in Orange County's PRRS program have later become eligible for Early Start.

We try to make this process seamless for the families we serve, and this issue's Consumer Spotlight feature shares the stories of two that have had this experience. Both the McKenney family and the Cervantes-Higareda family had babies who began their lives in neonatal intensive care units. When they were ready to go home, they were too young to be assessed for Early Start eligibility. However, diligent parenting combined with monitoring by our staff, ensured the

children were moved from PRRS into Early Start when it became clear that they needed more early intervention help.

As gratified as we are with our community's effectiveness in meeting the needs of families and children in spite of the state's budget challenges, we are extremely pleased that the improving economy has led California's elected leaders to restore the eligibility criteria that were in place before the PRRS program was created.

Beginning January 1, 2015, the eligibility criteria for Early Start will expand in two ways. First, infants and toddlers who are at high risk of having a developmental disability due to various biomedical factors will be eligible to receive services. Second, the threshold for determining the significance of a developmental delay will be the same for all infants and toddlers, regardless of age. Currently, children assessed at 24 months of age or older must have more significant delays to meet the Early Start eligibility criteria.

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#### *Beginning January 1, 2015, the eligibility criteria for Early Start will expand.*

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As we prepare for this change, RCOC continues to review the status of children in the PRRS program, and to prepare our staff to handle an increase in Early Start families. Our goal is that on January 1, families will notice no change whatsoever -- we hope they simply continue to receive the right services and supports to help their children thrive.

## Consumer Advisory Team Update

### “My Life, My Way”

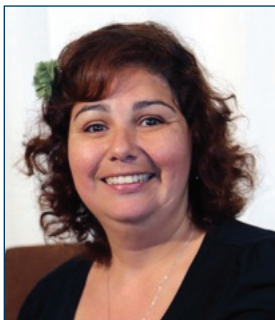
By Sylvia Delgado, CAT Chair

One of the things I like about RCOC is that the staff respect people with developmental disabilities, and their ability to make important life decisions. So I was pleased when RCOC sponsored the Second Annual Orange County Self-Determination Conference in October. As with last year’s conference, this event was organized by and for consumers. This year, it was called “My Life, My Way” and the main topic was end-of-life decisions.

Unfortunately, I was not able to attend. But I wholeheartedly support adult consumers making their own end-of-life decisions. That includes things like:

- What sort of medical treatment you want if you get sick and aren’t able to communicate your wishes at the time;

- How and where you want to be buried, or if you’d rather be cremated; and
- Who will receive your belongings when you pass away.



More than 50 people attended, including consumers who live on their own with the help of either independent

living (ILS) or supported living services (SLS) staff and trusted helpers they brought to the conference.

The day began with a video produced by the Department of Developmental Services (DDS). Then Clients Rights Advocate Jacqueline Miller answered consumers’ questions about the video and the booklet (also created by DDS for consumers) that was provided. Consumers also played a card game called “Go Wish” intended to help them to begin thinking about their own values and choices.

There was also a fun video, created by local consumers, called “You Can’t Tell Me How to Have Fun,” aimed

## Upcoming CAT Meeting Dates

December 17

*(Holiday Luncheon)*

January 21

February 18

CAT meetings are from 10 a.m. to noon at RCOC’s Santa Ana office, located at 1525 North Tustin Avenue. Call Jennifer Casteel at (714) 796-5330 ahead of time to let her know you will be there.

at helping adult consumers deal with those in the community who might treat them differently because of their disability. The video is posted on Integrity House’s Facebook page.

If you are interested in getting more information on end-of-life decision making, visit the DDS website at [www.dds.ca.gov](http://www.dds.ca.gov) and click on the Consumer Corner tab at the top of the page. From there, click on Publications and then scroll down to “Thinking Ahead: My Way, My Choice, My Life at the End.”

## Behavior Management Workshops for Parents

**R**egional Center of Orange County offers these workshops at no cost to parents. To gain the most value from them, parents are encouraged to attend all sessions in a series. The Behavior Management workshop covers essential principles of positive behavior management, with a practical focus on helping parents of children with developmental disabilities change their own behavior and that of their children. Parents are actively involved, and invited to discuss the specific behavioral challenges they are confronting. Advance reservations are required and group size is typically 8-15 families.

Contact your service coordinator or Julieann Garcia at (714) 796-5223 for additional information regarding dates, times and locations, and to register.

*NOTE: Child care is not provided, so please do not bring children to the workshops.*

### **Behavior Management Workshop (5 sessions)**

*Presented in English by Coyne & Associates*

**When:** Tuesday evenings – Jan. 20, Jan. 27,  
Feb. 3, Feb. 10 & Feb. 17

*(NOTE: Toilet training is the focus  
of the last session of this workshop)*

**Time:** 6:30 – 9:00 p.m.

**Location:** RCOC Santa Ana Office  
1525 N. Tustin Ave.

*Parking is located in the structure  
across from RCOC office building*

### **Behavior Management Workshop (5 sessions)**

*Presented in Spanish by Dr. Ana Lorenz*

**When:** Thursday evenings – Feb. 19, Feb. 26,  
March 5, March 12 & March 19

*(NOTE: Toilet training is the focus  
of the last session of this workshop)*

**Time:** 6:30-9:00 p.m.

**Location:** RCOC Orange Office  
3111 N. Tustin St., Ste. 150

## Stay Safe During the Holidays

**T**he holidays are a fun time to get together with family and friends and to shop for gifts. Enjoy the season, but remember that thieves are out during the holidays, too. Here are a few holiday safety tips.

At shopping malls, look for a well-lit parking space. If you leave any purchases in a car, put them in the trunk or out of sight since thieves look into car windows for things to steal.

When leaving the mall, use the mall's escort service to walk you to your car or the bus stop. Even better, shop with a friend or family member so you can keep an eye on each other's wallet, purse, credit cards and purchases.

If you make donations to charities, only give to organizations you know. Some thieves pretend to work for charities to trick people into giving them money, so be especially cautious of anybody who tells you they only want cash donations. Avoid that scam by sending your contribution in the mail, and always send a check – never mail cash.



## Comfort Connection Family Resource Center Offers Help for Parents

From assistive technology and behavioral challenges, to feeding tubes and toys, if it affects the lives of people with developmental disabilities or their families, there's probably something about it available through Regional Center of Orange County's Comfort Connection Family Resource Center (FRC). And if the Comfort Connection doesn't already have a DVD, book, research article, web link or other resource on the topic among its vast collection, FRC Supervisor Kathleen McFarlin and her staff can probably help a parent find it.

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*If it affects the lives of people with developmental disabilities or their families, there's probably something about it available through Comfort Connection.*

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Located in the lobby of RCOC's Santa Ana headquarters building, Comfort Connection is one of 47 family resource centers statewide that connect families who have children with special needs to resources and support. Most of the staff are parents of children with developmental disabilities, and many are bilingual. Operating for more than two decades, with funding from RCOC and the State of California, it has also been the local agency responsible for

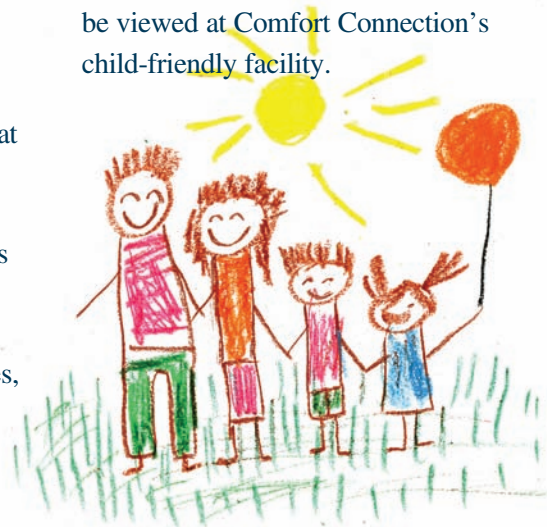
implementing the Prevention Resource and Referral Services (PRRS) program in Orange County – created by the State Legislature in 2011 to provide outreach, information and referrals for at-risk infants and children not eligible for Early Start.

### Resources Now Online

Years ago, families had to physically visit Comfort Connection to borrow items from its extensive lending library. Now, however, families can access thousands of resources at whatever time is convenient for them, by visiting the RCOC website ([www.rcocdd.com](http://www.rcocdd.com)) which hosts the Comfort Connection's online presence.

### Events to Activity Boxes

While many Comfort Connection resources are accessible online, there are still many good reasons for parents to visit in person. For example, parents can check-out dozens of instructional and informational DVDs that can help them nurture their child's development, make the most of professionally-provided therapies, and learn about a host of topics related to children with special needs, from infancy to young adulthood. These materials can also be viewed at Comfort Connection's child-friendly facility.



Another outstanding resource only available to Early Start and PRRS parents who visit Comfort Connection are the nine activity boxes the staff have assembled. Available for parents to borrow for up to three weeks, the activity boxes contain toys appropriate for children at different developmental stages, from birth to age three. Each box includes a description of each toy (in English and Spanish) and how it might be used to encourage all five realms of development.

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*Most of the staff are parents of children with developmental disabilities, and many are bilingual.*

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Comfort Connection also hosts free workshops and presentations on topics ranging from nutrition and potty training, to behavior management and building vocabulary with storybooks. Every other month, Comfort Connection presents "Moving on at 3...Transition" which helps families prepare for the transition they will make when their child turns three years old and Early Start services end.

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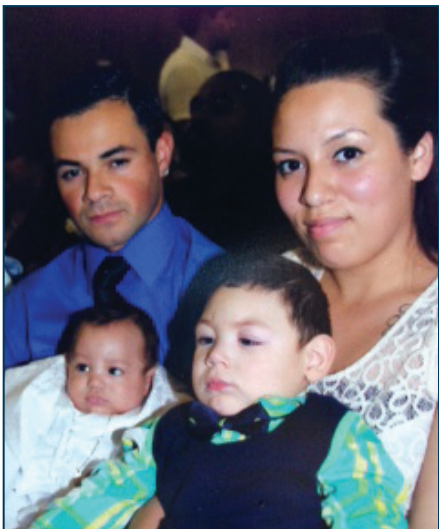
To learn more about Comfort Connection Family Resource Center and to access its online resources, visit the RCOC website ([www.rcocdd.com](http://www.rcocdd.com)) and click on the Comfort Connection link under the Family Support tab.

**The Cervantes-Higareda Family and The McKenney Family (cont. from pg. 1)**

“They were able to teach me how to teach my child,” she said, noting that she also taught the boys sign language to help them communicate in spite of their speech delays. “All of these learning activities my children want to do because they’re fun, but I know we’re helping their little brains re-route around the damaged parts.”

The twins are now 21 months old. Edgar, especially, has faced enormous challenges, requiring surgery just a few days after he was born, and again a few weeks later, and also suffering a collapsed lung while still in the hospital. While Charles’ delays are not as severe as his brother’s, Connie has seen both of her children make significant progress as a result of the professional therapies and work that she and her husband, Larry McKenney, do with them at home.

Though two-year-old Ronnie is the second child of Stephanie Cervantes-Higareda and her husband, Jesus



The Cervantes-Higareda Family: (L-R) Jesus, Ronnie, Christopher and Stephanie

Higareda, their family has shared some of the same experiences as the McKenneys.

“He had bleeding on the left side of the brain,” Stephanie said of Ronnie. “They told us he would not be able to walk, crawl and talk. They told us he’d be a vegetable.”

But Ronnie had other plans. He did roll over, he did crawl, and while he still says only a few words, he does talk and walk.

It’s especially exciting for Ronnie’s parents to see his progress, because their first child, three-year-old Christopher, has cerebral palsy. Diagnosed as a baby, Christopher began receiving therapy services through Early Start almost as soon as he came home from the hospital. He uses a wheelchair or walker, and recently made the transition from Early Start to public school.

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***“We don’t treat a disabled child as an inconvenience.”***

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Though her family has considerable experience with RCOC due to Christopher’s needs, Stephanie commented that Ronnie sometimes makes her feel like a new mom. “Ronnie’s showing me milestones I didn’t see with Christopher,” she said.

And, like Connie McKenney, Stephanie is a stay-at home mom whose daily schedule largely revolves around the therapy and doctor appointments her children need, as well as Christopher’s school schedule. Since the family currently

has just one car, it’s not unusual for her to drive her husband to his job in Rancho Santa Margarita as early as 4 a.m. in order to keep the family’s busy schedule.

Stephanie admits to occasional tears, fatigue and frustration, but says her husband is very supportive: “He’s the one keeping me on my feet when I can’t take it!”



Ronnie Higareda

“I’m so thankful for what we have,” Stephanie continued, noting that in many parts of the world, nothing like the services and supports that regional centers provide exist to help families of children with special needs.

Connie echoed Stephanie’s appreciation for the help and support children with disabilities receive in California.

“We don’t treat a disabled child as an inconvenience,” said Connie. “Here they’re treated as a valued member of society, and we receive the support we need to help our children reach their potential. I’m incredibly grateful for that.”



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Dialogue Newsletter  

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**Regional Center of Orange County Locations**

Santa Ana Office

1525 N. Tustin Avenue  
 24-hr Phone: (714) 796-5100

Orange Office

3111 N. Tustin, Suite 150  
 24-hr Phone: (714) 796-3700

Westminster Office

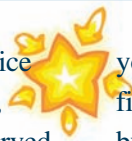
5555 Garden Grove Blvd., Suite 100  
 24-hr Phone: (714) 796-2900

**Support RCOC’s  
 Holiday Wish Tree  
 to Help Consumers  
 in Need**

**A**re you or your company looking for a fun way to help others during the holidays? If so, we hope you will consider supporting RCOC’s Wish Tree program. Each year, Wish Tree helps brighten the holiday season for more than a thousand Orange County consumers.

The Wish Tree begins when service coordinators contact low-income, needy individuals and families served by RCOC and identify their holiday gift requests, such as children’s toys, clothes, store gift cards and movie tickets. Individual Wish Tree supporters -- as well as companies, churches and volunteer organizations -- then purchase the requested items, wrap them, and deliver them to RCOC. Volunteers then make sure the gifts are delivered in time for the holidays.

If you would like to help, but don’t have time to purchase and wrap gifts,



you can still participate by making a financial contribution that will be used by volunteer shoppers to fulfill specific wishes. Checks should be made out to “Brian’s Fund,” and mailed to RCOC, P.O. Box 22010, Santa Ana, CA 92702-2010.

If you would like to donate to the Wish Tree program, contact Jennifer Casteel at 714-796-5330 or email [wishtree2@rcocdd.com](mailto:wishtree2@rcocdd.com).

To be considered as a Wish Tree gift recipient, contact your service coordinator.