



# Autism Awareness Month

Rockland County Rallies for Autism Awareness Month  
Celebrating Inclusion, Advocacy, and Community Support



BY: Robert Jowaiszas

April is Autism Awareness Month, a time when communities across Rockland County come together to celebrate, understand, and support individuals on the autism spectrum and those with developmental differences. Awareness is only the first step; inclusion, advocacy, and community support are what truly create change.

History of Autism Awareness Month: Autism Awareness Month began in the 1970s when advocates sought to increase public understanding of autism. In 1972, the organization now known as the Autism Society of America officially launched “Autism Awareness Month” in April to raise awareness, reduce stigma, and advocate for better services. Over the decades, it has evolved into a global observance that emphasizes acceptance, inclusion, and celebrating neurodiversity.

What is Autism? Autism, or Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD), affects how a person communicates, interacts with others, and experiences the world. It shows up in many different ways, which is why it’s called a spectrum. Some may have difficulty with social cues, while others excel in focused tasks or creative endeavors. Many have strong attention to detail, unique problem-solving skills, and passionate interests. Programs across Rockland County help individuals harness their strengths while supporting areas of challenge.

Community Programs and Support: Organizations like Venture Together in Nanuet and Another Step, Inc. in Valley Cottage are at the forefront. Venture Together offers residential programs, day habilitation, creative arts, and employment training through their thrift store, Just-A-Buck, while Camp Venture integrates children of all abilities to learn, play, and grow together.

Another Step emphasizes person-centered supports, from supported living and respite to community participation and employment skill-building. Other local organizations contribute to this strong network of services. The ARC

Rockland advocates for individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities, while Jawonio, Inc. in Congers provides day programs, family support, and community integration. Jawonio’s leadership reminds the community, “This month is not just about raising awareness — it’s about fostering acceptance, inclusion, and understanding every single day.” Groups like Hamaspik of Rockland County, BRIDGES, Capabilities Partnership, Inc., and the Mental Health Association of Rockland County enrich this ecosystem, supporting independence, social integration, and community engagement.

Sports and Inclusion: Through Special Olympics New York — Hudson Valley Region, athletes participate in basketball, soccer, and floorball, developing confidence, teamwork, and friendships. Events like the Law Enforcement Torch Run raise funds while celebrating the talents of all athletes. A local coach said, “Every athlete has a story. Some people run fast, some jump high, but everyone crosses the finish line with pride — and that’s what matters.”

Rally in the Valley: In March, Rockland Community College hosted the annual Rally in the Valley, where families, advocates, and service providers gathered to push for increased funding for disability services. A key issue was a proposed 4% cost-of-living adjustment (COLA) for service providers, essential to covering rising costs and

supporting the workforce behind programs like Venture Together and Another Step. Signs waved in the RCC Fieldhouse reading, "Support our services. Support our community."



### 3000 people in attendance

Local elected officials joined the call. Congressman Mike Lawler told attendees, "You need to be paid more. And that is a responsibility of all of us at the federal and state level to make sure that you have the funding you deserve to provide the services that you do and to support every single family and individual in this room."



### Congressman Mike Lawler

*In a separate comment, Rockland County Executive Ed Day added, "April is Autism Acceptance Month — this month and every month, let's strive for inclusivity, understanding, and support for neurodiversity."*

*These messages highlight the county's commitment to fostering environments where individuals with autism and developmental differences can thrive. A Personal Step: Stories from the Community: Families, volunteers, and self-advocates bring these programs to life every day. At the Rally in the Valley, Katy Sanchez, a self-advocate with The ARC Rockland, shared her experience with direct support*

*professionals (DSPs) who help her navigate daily life, learn new skills, and gain independence. "Because of [DSPs], we can live our lives in the community," Sanchez said, highlighting how essential support services are to quality of life for people with autism and developmental differences.*

<https://youtu.be/7w1Pe38pNss>

*Community leaders also emphasized the power of collaboration. Randi Rios-Castro, CEO of Jawonio, addressed the crowd with a unifying message: "When you look around today, you see something powerful. Families, advocates, providers, community members, and people with disabilities standing shoulder to shoulder, [all] here because we believe that disability rights are human rights." Her statement underscored the spirit of solidarity that fuels Rockland County's efforts to expand services, increase awareness, and strengthen inclusion.*

*How the Community Can Step In: Autism Awareness Month is more than wearing blue or sharing posts online. Residents can make a difference by volunteering, donating, attending events, or sharing stories of inclusion.*

*Organizations like Venture Together, Another Step, Jawonio, and Special Olympics welcome support year-round, and even small acts help build a more inclusive community.*

*A Rockland Community College student who attended the Rally reflected, "I hope more people know about places like Venture Together. It matters for past generations of families and for ours now. I'm glad something is being written about it."*

*From classrooms to sports fields to county rallies, Rockland County demonstrates that awareness alone isn't enough. Inclusion, action, and sustained support are the steps that truly build a community where everyone belongs. This April, residents are not only recognizing autism—they're stepping together to ensure that every individual has the opportunity to be seen, supported, and celebrated.*