

Four-legged workers: An evidence-based resource for individuals with autism and their families

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Background

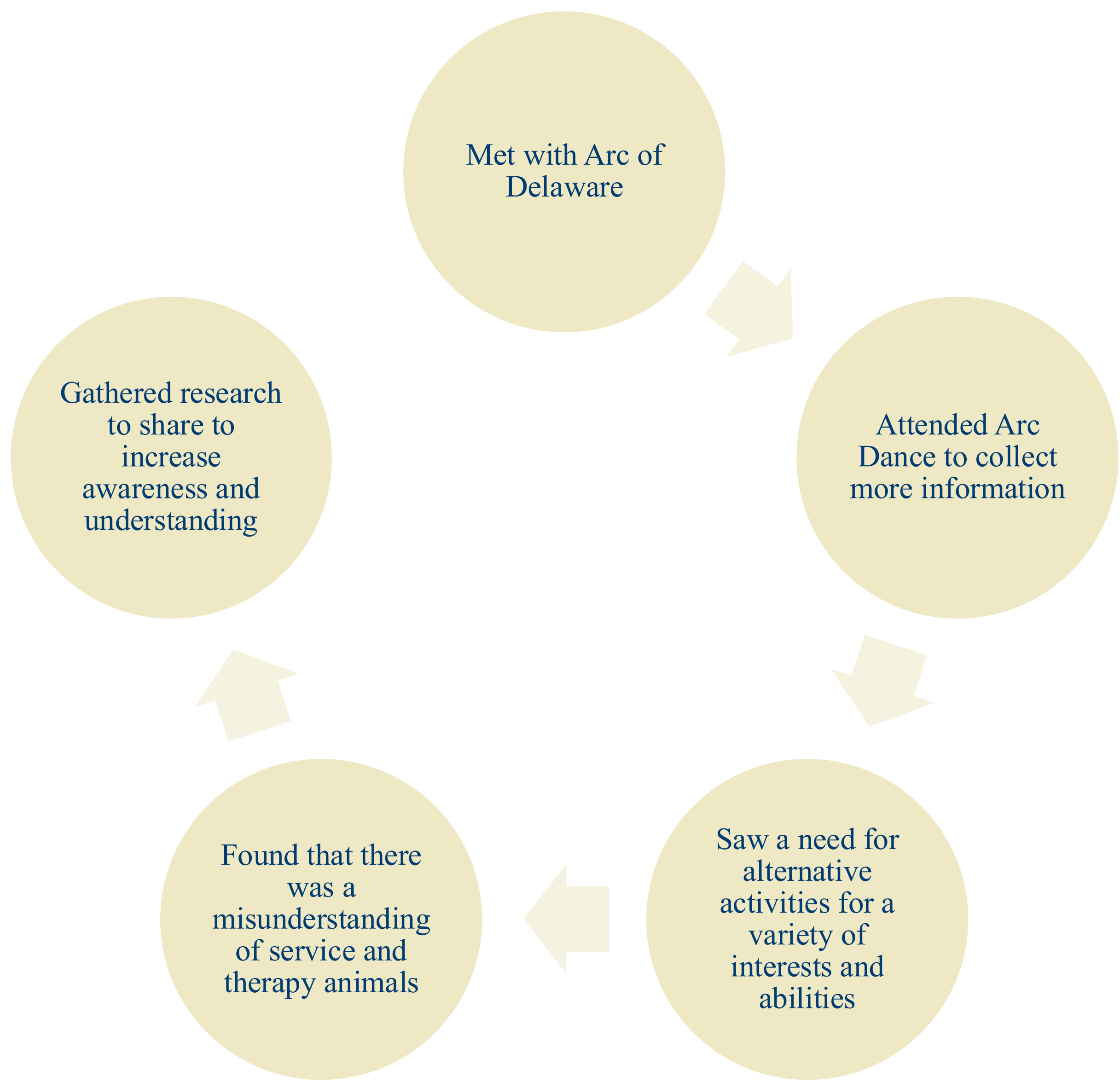
- Project focus of helping families:**
- Original project idea: Hold an informational event during an Arc of Delaware monthly dance for parents to learn about different topics such as mental health awareness, respite care, and so on
 - Revised project idea: Develop a resource guide for families to live on the Delaware Network for Excellence in Autism (DNEA) family resource page focused on service and therapy animals
- Service animal findings:**
- Service animals are working animals that are trained to perform tasks that assist an individual's disability or need for assistance (Winkle et al., 2011)
 - Per the ADA, service animals are allowed in most public spaces (e.g., schools, hospitals, restaurants, public transportation, grocery stores) and are NOT allowed in sterile environments (e.g., operating rooms) and some private spaces such as religious institutions that are not opted into ADA compliance (US Department of Justice, n.d.)
 - Studies found that having service animals showed improvements in sleep behaviors, child and family moods, and stronger bonds within the family unit (Leighton et al., 2023; Rodriguez et al., 2024).
- Therapy animal findings:**
- Therapy animals are not covered under the ADA and therefore are not guaranteed access to public spaces (US Department of Justice, n.d.)
 - Therapy animals can assist individuals with ASD by increasing socialization, promoting more frequent use of language and increased length of focus (Sams et al., 2006).
 - Studies found that having therapy animals or animal assisted therapy showed improvements in emotional wellbeing, cognitive engagement and memory, motivation, decreased psychological stress, and an increased adherence during challenging tasks (Meixner & Kotschal, 2022)

Next Steps

- The DNEA has approved my draft resource guide content on service animals and therapy animals
- DNEA will translate this information into a resource guide for families that will live on the DNEA Resource Guides website page.
- <https://www.delawareautismnetwork.org/resources/dnea-resource-guides/>
- The DNEA was the perfect choice for this project to live as the DNEA works to ensure that individuals with autism and their families have access to resources, education, trainings, and evidence-based practices and care throughout each stage of their lives. There is nothing like this resource guide that currently lives on their website, and this would help inform families who may be interested in adding a furry friend to their household.

Project Development Process

The journey I took during my leadership project helped me to understand the importance of listening to individuals and families, as well as the community you are aiming to serve. This ties in wonderfully with the LEND tenets of family-centered approach and cultural competence. It is important to respect families as the experts of their needs, beliefs, and values. This is just one way we can become effective leaders to facilitate change in the work that we do everyday on both small and large scales.



Sample Slides

THE PURPOSE

EASILY ACCESSIBLE AND DIGESTIBLE INFORMATION FOR INDIVIDUALS AND FAMILIES

- Create an accessible resource for individuals with disabilities and their families to learn more about service animals and therapy animals including:
 - What are service animals and therapy animals and what is the process of obtaining them?
 - What training goes into service animals and therapy animals?
 - Where they are and are not allowed according to the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA)?
 - Research findings from families with service animals and therapy animals in comparison with families without.

THE PRODUCT

- A summary of research findings for service animals and therapy animals.
- An easily digestible resource for families highlighting the benefits and differences between service animals and service animals.
- A unique addition to the already vast library of resource guides that live on the DNEA website in an area not already covered.

Resource Guide Features

Topic areas framed in question-and-answer format
Practical, Delaware-specific resources
Research findings shared using family-friendly terms
Will be graphically designed and accessible in print and digital formats
Sustained on DNEA website and through DNEA training activities

Method

- Met with The Arc of Delaware staff on January 31st to introduce the idea of holding an informational session for parents and caregivers
- Attended dances in Kent and New Castle counties as a volunteer to observe
- Noted that not many caregivers, other than group home staff, stayed for the dance; many families used the opportunity for personal time activities, such as a date night
- Asked parents, volunteers, and staff for their input on topics that may be helpful to families; volunteers noted that ongoing information sessions would not be sustainable
- Potential topics included the need for more information about service animals
- Met with a colleague who was conducting a systematic review of the literature on service animals and decided to create a hands-on guide for families
- Reviewed and summarized research literature on service and therapy animals and drafted a family resource guide
- Developed a presentation to pitch the idea of turning this information into a DNEA resource guide to present DNEA leadership
- Presented to DNEA leadership and received feedback
- Delivered my final product to DNEA to translate into the resource guide

References & Acknowledgements

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