



# FLORIDA DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION

## Office of Inspector General

November 2011

Audit Report #A-10/11-10

### Centers for Autism & Related Disabilities

#### EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

We reviewed three of seven university-managed Centers for Autism and Related Disabilities (CARD) grant sub-recipients: the University of Florida-Jacksonville CARD (UF-Jax CARD), the University of South Florida CARD (USF CARD), and the Florida State University CARD (FSU CARD). The CARDS have been effective in delivering services to persons with autism and related disabilities. However, our audit of the CARDS identified several areas in need of improvement and made several recommendations to the Department of Education (Department) for strengthening the program.

Since 2006, the statewide CARD budget has been reduced by over \$1,646,900, resulting in a disparity between the services CARD has been mandated to provide and the available resources. A 20% cut in the budget will impact all seven centers for fiscal year (FY) 2011-2012. For this reason, our audit focused on efforts by the CARDS to implement cost-saving measures, increase revenue, and improve program efficiencies.

#### We found that:

- At least one CARD Constituency Board did not raise funds in accordance with Florida Statutes;
- Computer-based technology is not used to the fullest potential for service delivery and professional training at all of the CARDS; and
- Attendance at training events is not adequately documented at all of the CARDS.

To address these findings, **we recommend** that the Department:

- Ensure that the Constituency Board for each CARD increases its fundraising efforts to comply with Florida Statutes;
- Encourage the CARDS to increase the availability of online, distance learning technology, and computer-based training resources; and
- Ensure that documentation such as sign-in sheets is collected and confirm implementation of training events through the periodic sampling of attendance records.

#### BACKGROUND

Autism is a complex neurological disorder characterized by impaired social interaction and communication as well as behavioral deficiencies. Autism spectrum disorder, or ASD, is a class of disorders with similar features and includes classic autistic disorder, Asperger Syndrome, and Pervasive Developmental Disorder, Not Otherwise Specified. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention estimates that an average of 1 in 110 children in the United States now has an ASD. Autism is the fastest-growing developmental disability, with a cumulative growth rate of 690% in Florida from 1992 to 2003. The percent growth rate of autism between 2009 and 2010 was 15.1% in Florida. The CARDS are established to provide non-residential resource and training services for persons of all ages and of all levels of intellectual functioning with autism spectrum disorders, dual-sensory impairments, and related disabilities. Each CARD center offers services

free of charge to include individual and direct family assistance in the home, school, and community, technical assistance and consultation, professional training programs, referral services, and public awareness programs. The CARDS must maintain consistent service delivery, although each center is operationally and fiscally independent. Each university-managed CARD represents a unique geographical service area across the state. The CARDS serve more than 24,000 individuals on the autism spectrum and their families. A listing of the CARDS and their corresponding service areas is provided in Appendix A.

In 1993, the Florida Legislature authorized funding for the CARD program which is administered through the Department. The funding originated from two sources—state general revenue appropriations as well as federal fiscal stabilization funds (also known as stimulus funding). The total amount awarded to the seven CARD centers for FY 2010-2011 was \$6,236,191. The federal stimulus funding was temporary and will no longer be available for FY 2011-2012. Section 1004.55, Florida Statutes, and Florida State Board of Education Rule 6A-7.033 provide authority for the CARD program.

#### **UF-Jacksonville CARD—**

The University of Florida (UF) Division of Developmental Pediatrics is a multidisciplinary organization which consists of three separate programs: the Division of Developmental Pediatrics, the Florida Diagnostic and Learning Resource System (FDLRS), and the UF-Jax CARD. According to the Division chief, one of the center's greatest strengths is its integration which allows for the provision of a variety of birth to adulthood medical and educational services under one roof; this assimilation has significantly streamlined the program resulting in greater efficiencies. The UF-Jax CARD falls under the purview of the UF College of Medicine as opposed to an academic institution. Operating under a medical model, the UF-Jax CARD provides a

comprehensive approach to client services and affords “one-stop service” in a variety of disciplines including child neurology, genetics, adolescent psychiatry, and behavioral pediatrics. The CARD services rendered are primarily center-based; the center offers few school or home-based consultative services. The UF-Jax CARD's grant award totaled \$790,404 and consisted of \$746,999 from state general revenue funds and \$43,405 from federal stimulus funds for both FY 2009-2010 and FY 2010-2011.

#### **USF CARD—**

The USF CARD is the oldest of seven university-based regional CARD sites. The CARD is part of USF's College for Community & Behavioral Sciences, which falls under the Division of Applied Research and Educational Support. The CARD is a community-based resource center; services are provided primarily in homes and schools enabling CARD consultants to provide support in natural, non-clinical settings. The CARD provides services to children and adults with ASD across what are known as the “four components of caring”: direct assistance, technical assistance and consultation, professional training, and public education and awareness.

Over 3,100 families and 6,500 professionals throughout central and southwest Florida receive services from the USF CARD. The total grant award for FY 2010-2011 was \$1,093,752 from two funding sources: \$1,033,689 from state general revenue funds and \$60,063 from federal stimulus funds.

#### **FSU CARD—**

In existence since 1994, the FSU CARD operates under the FSU Autism Institute which is associated with the FSU College of Medicine. Currently, the center serves nearly 2,900 registered clients with ASD. The CARD service area spans 18 counties across the Florida panhandle with a main office in Tallahassee and satellite offices in Panama City and Pensacola.

The CARD was established to provide services to eligible persons with autism and related disabilities, as well as resources, consultation, and technical assistance to families and professionals who work with CARD clients. Most services provided by clinical coordinators are community-based and rendered off the premises in schools, homes, and throughout the community. The FSU CARD's grant award totaled \$878,248, consisting of \$830,019 in state general revenue funding and \$48,229 in federal stimulus funding for both FY 2009-2010 and FY 2010-2011.

## **FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR IMPROVEMENT**

### **1. The Constituency Board did not raise funds equivalent to two percent of the total funds allocated to the UF-Jax CARD per Florida Statute.**

#### **UF-Jacksonville CARD—**

According to Section 1004.55, Florida Statutes, each CARD must have a Constituency Board (CB) to help guide program policies, priorities, and activities. The statute also mandates that the CB for each CARD raise funds equivalent to 2% of the total funds allocated to that center in each fiscal year.

The CB failed to raise the legislatively mandated funds for FY 2010-2011 of \$15,808, or 2% of the budget. Although this amount seems small relative to the total grant award, it represents the equivalent of the total current travel budget. We were informed that while members of the CB have worked individually to raise funds, primarily through in-kind donations, the CB has not conducted any formal fundraising events. While the UF-Jax CARD was the exclusive recipient organization for the annual Toy Drive with Walgreens Corporation in 2010, no monies were generated through any fundraising efforts by the CB.

With the impending 20% reduction in funding for FY 2011-2012, fundraising should be an important priority for the UF-Jax CARD. The UF-Jax CARD's budget has already been reduced by almost 35% over the past four years. As a cost-saving measure, the CARD has not dedicated any funds to cover salary costs for its Executive Director since 2006. Furthermore, the CARD chose not to renew several positions and to shift some staff members off the CARD budget to the Division of Developmental Pediatrics. Management stated that the loss of staff contributed greatly to the decrease in the amount of services the CARD was able to provide. Appendix B illustrates the change in individual assistance contacts delivered between FY 2009-2010 and FY 2010-2011.

During FY 2010-2011, the CARD experienced the loss of the clinical director and two full-time educational coordinators, staff directly involved in providing consultative services to persons on the autism spectrum. The staff shortage means that only four educational coordinators are available to serve the needs of the six-county service area, with a total population of 1,441,292 (U.S. Census Data, 2010). The total registry of the CARD was 2,701 individuals with autism at the end of FY 2010-2011.

To help offset the budget cuts, **we recommend** that the CARD increase its fundraising efforts to meet the statutory requirement. Fundraising efforts could also work to forge new partnerships locally to bolster its presence within the community. The UF-Jax CARD should capitalize on existing relationships with companies like CSX Corporation and Walgreens Corporation.

#### **USF CARD—**

The USF CARD exceeded the statutory requirement with regard to fundraising. The CARD was able to generate \$33,126 in total revenues, or 3.03% of the total budget. The two most successful fundraising campaigns were the "Spring Sprint for Autism 5K" and the "Fiesta by the Bay" event held in April

2011, which raised \$12,500 and \$10,200, respectively. The CARD has a strong community presence and has established lasting partnerships and collaborative relationships.

### **FSU CARD—**

We found that the CB complied with applicable laws, raising funds exceeding 2% of allocated funds as required by Florida Statutes. Extensive documentation was submitted by the FSU CARD to support fundraising efforts by the CB for FY 2010-2011. Documentation was submitted listing all fundraising events held between July 1, 2010 and June 30, 2011. The two most profitable fundraising events were the “2011 Autism 5K Fun Run” and the “Sunshine Car Care Coupon Book Sales” which grossed \$7,418 and \$5,474, respectively. A total of \$17,760 (or 2.02% of the total budget) was raised during this time period. Several organizations have partnered with the CARD to help raise funds, including the FSU Film School, the Capital Area Running Club, the Tallahassee Little Theatre, and Students Supporting Autism Awareness.

To mitigate the impact of the FY 2011-2012 20% budget reduction, the FSU CARD has taken steps to increase program efficiencies by consolidating the administrative duties of the Panama City and Pensacola offices with the Tallahassee office. Economies were also achieved by reducing the number of clinical coordinators through elimination of positions, attrition, or reassignment to other projects unrelated to CARD. Additionally, the decision was made not to renew the position of branch office associate director when vacated. The Pensacola office experienced the loss of its associate director and a clinical coordinator for FY 2011-2012.

According to the CARD director, “The success of our staff in obtaining external funds has been a primary source of supplemental programmatic support.” **We recommend** that the CARD continue to augment its fundraising capabilities to prevent further staff layoffs and reassignments.

## **2. Computer-based technology is not used to the fullest potential for service delivery and professional training.**

### **UF-Jacksonville CARD—**

We found that the UF-Jax CARD could benefit from the increased use of technology. The grant agreement specifies that the CARD must provide alternative modes for service delivery and training using computer-based technology. The CARD must also restrict travel when training can be provided online or using teleconferencing formats.

The UF-Jax CARD service area is home to nearly 1.5 million people, and nearly 3,000 individuals on the autism spectrum are on the CARD registry. Documentation provided by the CARD revealed only a limited usage of computer-based technology (e.g. online, DVD, web conferencing) for the implementation of service delivery and training in FY 2010-2011. Management communicated that efforts have been made to increase online training but that there has been difficulty in obtaining consent from presenters to be videotaped or to conference online. The CARD staff has made several DVDs and is working to increase the online training library. We were also informed that the CARD has purchased licenses through *Rethink Autism* which provide a web-based autism behavior program and training modules for use by teachers in the classroom. Augmented use of such computer-based technology could significantly enhance service delivery and reach constituents in far-reaching counties at a much reduced expense.

A detailed analysis of the travel expense reports, receipts, and vouchers provided by the CARD revealed that travel expenditures are modest and do not represent a significant outlay. In fact, the travel budget for FY 2010-2011 was \$15,050, less than 2% of the total budget. The travel budget for FY 2011-2012 was reduced by 88.5%, from \$13,050 to only \$1,500, which is reflective of the move to a more center-based program. However, the

program's center-based emphasis means that it will be more difficult for clients in outlying counties to receive services. We believe that the CARD could serve an even greater number of constituents and their families by leveraging technology and making use of a variety of distance-learning tools.

We were informed that the Department is assisting the CARDS in the development of additional online training resources through funds provided to a project at the Florida Center for Interactive Media. **We recommend** that the Department continue to encourage the CARDS to increase the availability of online, distance-learning technology, and computer-based training resources made available to constituents, their families, and educational professionals.

#### **USF CARD—**

We found that the USF CARD has been noteworthy in its efforts to deliver services and to conduct training using alternate modes of delivery such as online trainings and web-based seminars and DVD formats. In fact, the USF CARD has been a model for other CARDS in its extensive use of technology. The CARD greatly benefits from its association with the University of South Florida which gives it access to the university's Information Technology department. The CARD recently contracted with Adobe Connect which has allowed the center to broadcast regional trainings and to host online meetings with partners, families, and teachers. The CARD also uses Skype for one-on-one interaction with its clients.

The CARD has developed an extensive library of online training presentations (teleconferences, videos, and tutorials with narration) which can be accessed from the USF CARD website. The USF CARD has also developed another website called the *Learning Curve*, an online resource designed specifically for teachers and administrators of students with ASD. Other uses of technology include participation in webisodes and webinars, an online "eNewsletter," a Facebook presence, and the availability of

the annual CARD conference on DVD. The USF CARD has extensively used technology for service delivery, training, and technical assistance and has capitalized on all available resources to meet their objectives.

#### **FSU CARD—**

The FSU CARD uses technology only to a limited extent to provide consultative services and training. We were informed that the staff is making a concerted effort to use phone, regular mail, and electronic mail more frequently, to videoconference and teleconference staff meetings between the branch offices, and to use Skype for one-on-one communication with parents and teachers. Additionally, the CARD has recently purchased an Adobe Connect license and will host its first training presentation for constituents in early October 2011.

One way that the CARD has responded to the budget decreases has been through the increased use of technology to provide training and consultative support to larger numbers. We agree that the CARD could more fully leverage computer-based technology to provide services to a much larger population and to reduce staff time and travel expenses.

We found that the FSU CARD website is outdated and lacking in some areas. The annual reports and the newsletters provided are not current, and there is no training calendar available. The "Resources" section is currently under construction and there are no online training presentations on the site. We were informed that CARD staff is working to update the site and to create web-based trainings.

The CARD is also making an effort to reduce staff expenses such as travel, materials, rent, and equipment. The percentage of the total FSU CARD budget that was spent on travel was only 4.1% (or \$34,175.50 of \$830,019) for FY 2010-2011. The FSU CARD Detailed Budget Narrative for FY 2011-2012 indicates

that the travel budget for FY 2011-2012 was reduced by 36% from the previous year. The reduction is reflective of continued efforts to increase training, technical support, and dissemination of resources using innovative technology.

**3. Attendance at training events is not adequately documented for the UF-Jacksonville CARD.**

**UF-Jax CARD—**

Pursuant to Florida Statute, each CARD must implement a training program that includes developing, providing, and evaluating pre-service and in-service training in state-of-the-art best practices for professionals who work with the populations served. Documentation provided to us reveals that at least 14 regional trainings were conducted during FY 2010-2011. Records do indicate that an effort was made to reduce out-of-district travel as most of the events were held in Jacksonville, Florida. The records also substantiate that well over 50 local trainings were offered the same year. The “Summary of Reporting Data” from the UF-Jax CARD database shows that 148 trainings and group discussions were conducted during FY 2010-2011. Additionally, the CARD provided documentation to confirm that more than 72 different trainings (44% above requirement) were implemented locally (primarily CARD center-based); many training sessions were conducted multiple times during camps, conferences, and workshops.

However, sign-in sheets or other attendance documentation verifying attendance at these events is mostly lacking, and the few rosters that were submitted do not adequately document participation. We were informed that the previous clinical director failed to collect sign-in sheets for trainings or to make entries into the Department’s Project Tracking System (PTS). Sign-in sheets have since been reinstated for all training events. **We recommend** that the Department provide greater oversight in ensuring that documentation such as sign-in sheets is

submitted by CARD staff training providers. The implementation of training could be confirmed through periodic sampling of these attendance records.

**USF CARD—**

We found no deficiencies with regard to documentation of training events for the USF CARD.

**FSU CARD—**

We found no deficiencies with regard to documentation of training events for the FSU CARD.

**NOTEWORTHY ACCOMPLISHMENTS**

Noteworthy practices were identified for the CARDS during our audit, including:

1. The Department’s Bureau of Exceptional Education and Student Services has provided useful support to the CARDS. In particular, we were informed that the Bureau’s project liaison has been instrumental to the success of the CARDS due to her accessibility, dedication, and responsiveness.
2. The Department gives the CARDS some autonomy, allowing each center to capitalize on the unique expertise and strengths of its staff and the resources available within the community. Both the medical and the educational approaches to service delivery have proven effective in serving individuals with ASD.
3. The Department encourages each CARD to develop special projects such as the USF CARD’s “Autism-friendly” initiative which has been successful in helping businesses to welcome individuals with autism.
4. The Partnership for Effective Programs for Students with Autism that is funded by the Department provides useful training and technical assistance to educators of students with autism spectrum disorder.

## OBJECTIVES AND SCOPE

The objectives of this audit were to determine whether:

- The CARD grant agreement was awarded and executed in compliance with controlling laws, administrative rules, policy, and good business practices;
- The CARDS delivered services in accordance with the program objectives;
- The Department provided effective oversight of the CARD program.

The scope of this audit included a programmatic review of the UF-Jax CARD, the USF CARD, and the FSU CARD and their agreements with the Department for FY 2010-2011. Program travel expenditures were also reviewed for FY 2010-2011. This audit was part of the approved 2010-2011 annual audit plan and was performed in support of the Department's goal of quality efficient services.

## METHODOLOGY

This audit was conducted in accordance with *The International Standards for the Professional Practice of Internal Auditing*, published by the Institute of Internal Auditors. The audit team achieved these audit standards by:

- Conducting on-site visits to the UF-Jax CARD, the USF CARD, and the FSU CARD;
- Interviewing Department program managers and the project liaison;
- Interviewing administrators and staff at each CARD;
- Researching applicable statutes, rules, guidance, and the CARD grant agreement;
- Reviewing the Department's FY 2010-2011 Request for Application (RFA);
- Reviewing prior audit reports for each CARD;

- Reviewing program and travel records obtained from each CARD; and
- Reviewing Annual Reports for FY 2009-2010, FY 2010-2011, and FY 2011-2012 for each CARD.

## CLOSING COMMENTS

The OIG would like to thank the Department and CARD management and staff for their assistance during the course of this audit. Our fieldwork was facilitated by the collaboration and cooperation provided by all personnel involved. We were impressed by the professionalism and dedication demonstrated by each organization.

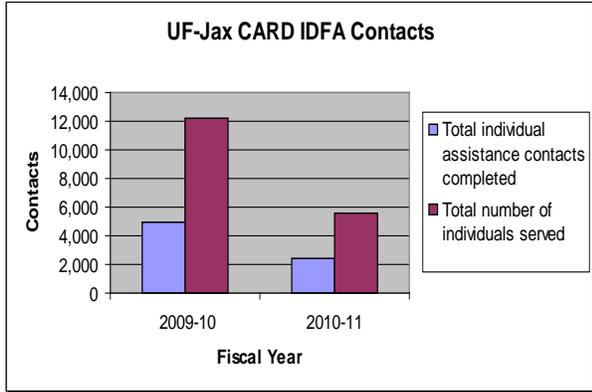
**APPENDIX A—CARD Locations in Florida**

| <b>CARD Center</b>  | <b>Counties Served</b>   |
|---|--|
| Florida Atlantic University (FAU)                                 | Palm Beach, Martin, St. Lucie, Okeechobee, Indian River  |
| Florida State University (FSU)                                    | Bay, Calhoun, Escambia, Franklin, Gadsden, Gulf, Holmes, Jackson, Jefferson, Leon, Liberty, Madison, Okaloosa, Santa Rosa, Taylor, Wakulla, Walton, Washington |
| University of Central Florida (UCF)                               | Brevard, Lake, Orange, Osceola, Seminole, Sumter, Volusia  |
| University of Florida College of Medicine (UF-Gainesville)        | Alachua, Bradford, Citrus, Columbia, Dixie, Gilchrist, Hamilton, Hernando, Lafayette, Levy, Marion, Putnam, Suwannee, Union                                    |
| University of Florida Health Science Center—Jacksonville (UF-Jax) | Baker, Clay, Duval, Flagler, Nassau, St. Johns   |
| University of Miami (UM)—Nova Southern University (NSU)           | Broward, Miami-Dade, Monroe  |
| University of South Florida (USF)                                 | Charlotte, Collier, DeSoto, Glades, Hardee, Hendry, Highlands, Hillsborough, Lee, Manatee, Pasco, Pinellas, Polk, Sarasota                                     |

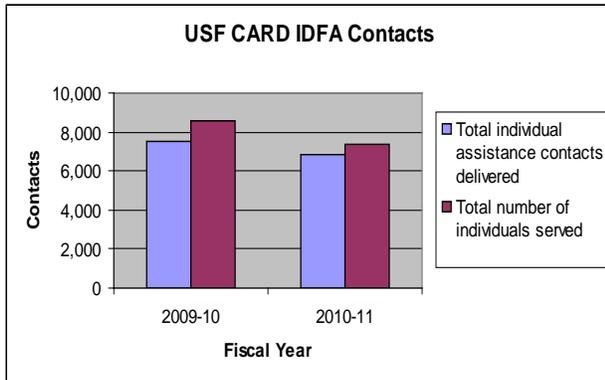
## APPENDIX B—IDFA Contact Data

### UF-Jacksonville CARD

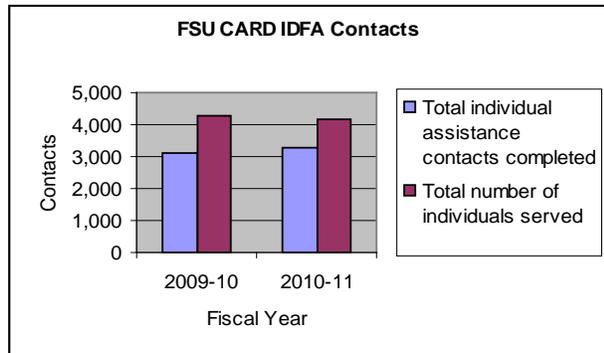
Between July 1, 2010 and June 30, 2011 (FY 2010-2011), the total number of individual and direct family assistance (IDFA) contacts delivered is illustrated as follows:



### USF CARD



### FSU CARD



# FLORIDA DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION



## STATE BOARD OF EDUCATION

---

KATHLEEN SHANAHAN, Chair  
ROBERTO MARTÍNEZ, *Vice Chair*

### *Members*

SALLY BRADSHAW  
GARY CHARTRAND  
DR. AKSHAY DESAI  
BARBARA S. FEINGOLD  
JOHN R. PADGET

Gerard Robinson  
Commissioner of Education



November 8, 2011

Greg White, MBA, CIA, CGAP  
Director of Auditing/Acting Inspector General  
Office of Inspector General  
Florida Department of Education  
321-1201 W. Gaines St.  
Tallahassee, FL 32399-0400

Dear Mr. White:

The Bureau of Exceptional Education and Student Services (BEESS) has reviewed the preliminary report on the audit of the Centers for Autism and Related Disabilities (CARD). The audit was thorough and the recommendations included in the report will assist BEESS staff and the CARD programs.

We will continue our collaboration with CARD to ensure quality services. Thank you for your acknowledgement of the excellent work of the CARD Centers and of our BEESS staff members.

If you have additional questions, please contact Cathy Bishop, Interim Chief, Bureau of Exceptional Education and Student Services, at (850) 245-0475 or via email at [cathy.bishop@fldoe.org](mailto:cathy.bishop@fldoe.org).

Sincerely,

Pam Stewart

PS/cb

Attachments

PAM STEWART  
CHANCELLOR OF PUBLIC SCHOOLS