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**Special Needs Advocacy Firm Educates Parents and Individuals on**

**Future Care Planning During National Disabilities Awareness Month**

***Threats of cuts in human services programs prompt families to a focus on planning to allay fears, anxiety and aloneness***

**LINCOLNSHIRE, IL** (Mar. 15, 2013) - [Protected Tomorrows](http://www.protectedtomorrows.com/families/familymem.php), the nation’s leading special needs advocacy firm, helps families and individuals with disabilities across the country understand the importance of future care planning and community with several complementary webinars this spring – “5 Things Every Family Needs to Know about Special Needs Planning.” The webinars will be held [Tuesday, March 19, 6:00 – 7:00 pm CDT](https://www2.gotomeeting.com/register/140547106) and [Wednesday, March 20, 12 – 1 p.m. CDT](https://www2.gotomeeting.com/register/600279786), and then again Wednesday, April 17, 6:00 – 7:00 pm CDT and Thursday, April 18, 12 – 1 p.m. CDT.

These free webinars will help families learn what they need to know about:

• The Vision of the Future – Think Outside the Box

• Government Benefits – SSI, SSDI & Medicare & Medicaid

• Legal Considerations – Special Needs Trusts

• Creating a Fulfilling Future – Live, Learn, Work & Play

• Future Caregivers & Family Communication

“With March being National Disabilities Awareness Month, it’s the perfect month to share our expertise to help families with special needs,” said Mary Anne Ehlert, president and founder of Protected Tomorrows, who has specialized in special needs planning for more than 25 years. “Many families with a loved one with special needs are fearful and anxious when thinking about their child’s or sibling’s future. We want to empower them with knowledge.”

April is National Autism Awareness Month. Last spring, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention reported the autism spectrum disorder 25 percent more common than previously thought, affecting more than one million children and teens in the U.S.

An estimated 55 million people live with some sort of disability whether it’s physical, developmental, mental or cognitive.

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***Protected Tomorrows’ Family Webinars– page 2***

Protected Tomorrows also provides a community for families with special needs, many whom feel alone, through its web-based [Family Membership Community](http://www.protectedtomorrows.com/families/familymem.php). The tool offers guidance, coaching and planning from experienced professionals on how to plan a safe and fulfilling future for a loved one with special needs. It also gives overwhelmed caregivers a chance to connect with the Protected Tomorrows team one-on-one and with each other, via an online Forum.

Reports by the federal program Head Start show an almost universal feeling of isolation at the time of a disability diagnosis. And the National Family Caregivers Association states: mothers of children with intellectual disabilities have higher depression rates than parents of normally developing children.

Judy Brooks of Orlando, Fla., was among mothers feeling disconnected. “It’s a world of unknowns,” she says. “No one makes it easy to go down this path, but now a load has been lifted from our shoulders.”

For more than nine months, Mrs. Brooks and her husband Andy have been working with the Protected Tomorrows team using their 8-step planning process to create a Future Care Plan™ for their 19-year-old daughter with learning disabilities as she is preparing to transition out of the school system and into the work world.

As a high school senior, Devin is now volunteering in the Special Olympics Young Athletes program, which is helping her build her skills working with children. Her dream is to work at a day care center someday. Protected Tomorrows connected the Brooks to the nearby Special Olympics program and also helped them obtain government benefits and work through key portions of a special needs trust. “They (the Protected Tomorrows team of professionals) pushed us out of our comfort zone and kept us on track in working through the steps in the planning process.”

Devin is the Brooks only child. “This all has to be done,” Mrs. Brooks added. “I can’t imagine if it wasn’t done and something happened to us.”

Veronica and Don Boyajian of Deerfield, Ill., are another couple proactively planning. “By not planning, you’re doing a disservice to your child, their siblings or other people who have to pick up the pieces after you pass on,” Mrs. Boyajian says.

The Boyajians daughter Marisa, 26, has velocardiofacial syndrome (VCFS), which is the second most common chromosomal condition next to Down syndrome. She works at a local grocery store, is involved in a number of social activities and lives at home. The goal is to have her live as independently as possible. “We would like to have her settled in a supervised residence before we leave this world, so she doesn’t have to adjust to two major life changes at once.”

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***Protected Tomorrows’ Family Webinars– page 3***

The Boyajians too have worked with Protected Tomorrows through the 8-steps, getting paperwork in order, proper documents in place and exploring future residential options. “You never exhale completely – there’s always work to be done – but we do sigh and feel better after each task is complete,” Mrs. Boyajian added.

Both the Brooks and Boyajians wish schools and pediatricians would have resources for parents while in school and during the transition from the school system to adulthood.

Some of Protected Tomorrows’ employees have loved ones with special needs, so Mrs. Boyajian finds comfort in knowing they have firsthand experience with future care planning. “It’s scary,” Mrs. Boyajian said. “You feel you have to figure it out all yourself. But Protected Tomorrows helped us navigate through the processes. They know the ins and outs of the special needs world.” Mrs. Brooks concurs: “They guide you and do a lot of the work for you.”

“Whether it’s getting their child the help he or she needs at school or transitioning to adult programs and residential care, we are there to help families,” said Teri Bodeman, director of Family Advocacy Services at Protected Tomorrows.

The Online Family Membership Community is geared toward special needs families facing transitional times – when a parent first hears of a life-altering medical diagnosis, when children are leaving the school system, or when adult siblings are stepping into the caregiving role for their brother or sister.

In addition to access to Protected Tomorrows experts and families in similar situations through the Community Forum, the Family Membership Program provides:

* Webinars on how to safely navigate the future
* Protected Tomorrows’ proprietary Online Future Care Planning System
* Access to a one-of-a-kind “special needs library” filled with information about government benefits, legal options and more

Annual membership to the Online Family Membership is $29.95 for the month of March and April.

For more information on the “5 Things Every Family Needs to Know about Special Needs Planning” webinars or the Family Membership Community, call (847) 522-8086 or visit [Protected Tomorrows](http://www.protectedtomorrows.com/families/familymem.php).

**About Protected Tomorrows**

*Protected Tomorrows, Inc., headquartered in the Chicago suburb of Lincolnshire, is the leader in enhancing the lives of families with members who have special needs. Through their work with clients and the family’s advisors, and alongside of other advocates and legislators, Protected Tomorrows addresses many concerns of families with special needs such as: future care funding, government benefits, legal considerations, residential options, employment opportunities, recreational choices, education options and family communications. For questions, contact us at info@protectedtomorrows.com, or visit www.protectedtomorrows.com.*