

VELA STRATEGIC PLAN 2024-2028



VELA envisions a community where all families of children with disabilities thrive.

WHY VELA

Without an informed and supported parent, a child with disabilities will miss access to supports, services, and community. As parents attempt to navigate disability to secure what their child needs, wants, and deserves, they consistently encounter overwhelming systemic barriers. That's where VELA steps in.

SYSTEMIC BARRIERS

- Delays in evaluations and/or services
- Disability stigma and discrimination
- Long waitlists for services
- Acronym-laden healthcare and educational paperwork
- Not being treated like members of the team
- Limited support for English Language Learners

Our mission is to empower underserved Spanish and English-speaking parents of children with disabilities to become their child's greatest advocate, so they can move through the barriers and into opportunities.

WHAT VELA DOES

To move through barriers, VELA equips parents of children with disabilities with knowledge, skills, support and community. Our approach is rooted in a peer-to-peer model which centers parents of children with disabilities as experts and decision makers. Everything we do is available virtually or in person, in Spanish or English to account for language and culture, and at no cost to families. Current programming includes:

- 🔥 Interactive Courses
- 🔥 Individualized Case Management
- 🔥 Monthly Support Groups
- 🔥 Inclusive Family Events



VELA has consistently expanded its reach and impact each year. However, over 35,000 families of children with disabilities in Austin and surrounding areas are still experiencing barriers. So now is the time for us to do more.

VELA'S PLAN

VELA's Equity Centered Strategic Plan was created by, with, and for the communities we serve. It is anchored by six overarching focus areas, each designed to address key goals and build upon the successes of VELA's existing programming, partnerships and structure. Together, with the support of our staff, board, volunteers, and partners, we are poised to turn these aspirations into realities.

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FOCUS AREAS

BE THERE FROM THE START

More families are connected to VELA sooner in their journey of raising a child with a disability.

- More of the community has a deep understanding of what VELA does (and doesn't do) to serve families.
- Families are referred to VELA from a broader range of sources.
- VELA's services are built-into the process everywhere families receive diagnoses so we can be further upstream.

GROW WITH

Families are connected to all of the current VELA offerings, as well as the new, responsively designed services.

- Families can easily connect to all of VELA's services.
- Create and launch new programming to meet ongoing needs expressed by families—including on demand content.
- Focused on serving the most underserved families' needs and grow to serve them where they are - near and far.

LEVEL UP

VELA graduates have ways to impact system change, deepen relationships with each other, and become leaders at VELA.

- Course graduates know the path to become a part of the VELA team as a Parent Facilitator.
- Develop and launch a 1:1 Peer Mentor Program to match families with each other for mutual support.
- Create a Family Advisory Council to expand leadership opportunities for graduates and improve systems.

IN PARTNERSHIP WITH

VELA creates & deepens transformative partnerships with healthcare, education & community based orgs for system wide impact.

- Providers understand VELA's services, can easily access relevant resources, and know how to refer to a family.
- Official partnerships with shared goals are created and deepened.
- Create parent-led Professional Development opportunities for providers to support them and create system change.

SOLID FOUNDATION

As VELA grows, we will build the structure for staff and board members to feel supported and successful in their roles.

- Organizational systems and processes will be updated, enhanced, functional, and streamlined.
- Staff have access to training and development to meet the needs of every role.
- Board and staff have the capacity and support to achieve VELA's goals, with solid succession plans.

BIG IMPACT

Enhancing our comprehensive short and long-term data about the impact of VELA's programs and health as an organization.

- VELA's programmatic data will move into a new, more robust database.
- Measures of impact will be evaluated and updated for both short and long-term outcome tracking.
- The change that VELA unlocks for families will come to life through rich storytelling.

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According to a 2023 report from the CDC, the prevalence of developmental disabilities in children in the United States increased from 7.4% in 2019 to 8.6% in 2021 for children ages 3-17.

Much of this is due to better assessments and earlier identification of disabilities, however this increase in incidence means that more families of children with disabilities are navigating the complexities of systems that accompany having a disability. Locally, this impacts 35,000 children with disabilities ages 0-18 living in Travis, Williamson, and Hays Counties.

Despite the prevalence of children with disabilities, parents consistently report feelings of isolation, powerlessness and overwhelm negatively impacting their mental health and well-being as they learn how to navigate doctors, therapies, and special education for their child. It is especially challenging for families who are underserved, live at or below the poverty level, and/or experience language or cultural barriers. These families consistently encounter systemic barriers, such as acronym-laden paperwork, a lack of materials or providers that speak Spanish, and confusing steps they must take to access evaluations, therapies or school supports.

Most of the families served by VELA are also navigating other barriers, such as access to healthcare, housing instability, economic insecurity, language barriers, immigration status and more. As research shows that parental involvement is the greatest indicator of positive outcomes for children with disabilities, it is essential that all parents are equipped with the knowledge, resources, and support to advocate for their child.

VELA was founded in 2010 with a mission to empower underserved Spanish and English-speaking parents of children with disabilities to become their child's greatest advocate.

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Through culturally responsive courses and wraparound services, VELA walks side by side with families of children with disabilities to support them in their journey.

VELA serves families of children with disabilities in the following ways: interactive courses; supportive case management; monthly support groups; and inclusive family events. All services are at no cost to families.

VELA's interactive, peer-led 5 week courses guide parents through supporting their child's strengths, accessing resources, and advocating for their needs. Led by trained Parent Facilitators, the courses cover topics like Autism, Special Education, Transition to Adulthood, and Caregiver Wellness. Offered in English or Spanish, they are available in-person (with childcare) or virtually, with flexible scheduling. Parents learn alongside peers with shared experiences, building community and support. Parent Facilitators demystify terminology and teach parents how to navigate complex systems by breaking down how to make a Parent Toolkit, what questions to ask, services to request, and more. Each course session includes self-compassion strategies to support parents' emotional wellbeing.

Families also receive wraparound services that include supportive case management, monthly support groups and family events. Supportive case management provides one-on-one coaching and assistance with accessing insurance, therapies, special education services and more. Our monthly support groups are opportunities for families to meet other families while receiving emotional support and learning self-care strategies. And finally, family events provide inclusive adapted play and community building.

VELA serves families of children with disabilities throughout Texas, with a focus on underserved areas of Austin and surrounding counties.

In 2023, VELA served 2,400 individuals across 202 zip codes through both in person and virtual program offerings. Each year, about 90% of families served by VELA qualify and rely on public benefits, such as Medicaid and SNAP, and 60% are Spanish speaking immigrants. Families served represent children ages 0-20, with over 21 unique diagnoses, including autism, ADHD, Down Syndrome, cerebral palsy, and many others.

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Since its onset, VELA has been values driven and data informed.

To evaluate outcomes, VELA administers pre and post assessments using the “Family Outcome Survey” (a standardized measure normed for both Spanish and English speakers) as well as a coded exit narrative survey. Outcomes include: 1) Increased knowledge about developmental disabilities and child’s development; 2) Increased knowledge and navigation skills related to medical, therapeutic, education, and social service systems; 3) Improved caregiver mental health; 4) Increased use of relevant resources such as therapies, insurance programs and community support. Additionally, VELA monitors referral data, inquiries, and enrollment numbers during active course recruitment periods on a weekly basis.

VELA’s vision of creating a community where all families of children with disabilities thrive requires partnership and collaboration.

VELA is dedicated to building and maintaining a network of partnerships that enable the organization to expand our reach and to deepen the ways in which we serve parents of children with disabilities. VELA has referral partnerships with over 35 different healthcare and social service agencies in Austin and the surrounding areas. Referral partners include Dell Children’s Medical Center, Child Neurology Consultants of Austin, CommUnityCare, Any Baby Can and many others.

VELA is also working with school districts and healthcare providers to provide workshops for families accessing services, as well as trainings for staff. Partnerships with Employee Resource Groups at local corporations also provide opportunities to expand VELA’s reach in sustainable and impactful ways.

In the last 14 years VELA has grown from a 100% volunteer run agency to having 10 staff, a strategic and diverse board, and a community of committed volunteers.

VELA is dedicated to ensuring that the board, executive leadership and staff composition reflect the communities we serve. We do this, not only in terms of demographics, but also in ensuring that staff and board embody VELA’s values which are centered in equity and social justice.

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Over the last year, VELA has been in the strategic planning process—created by, with, and for the communities we serve.

As a first step in the process, VELA created a Strategic Co-Design Committee, which was composed of parents of children with disabilities who participated in VELA services, healthcare providers, VELA staff and members of the Board of Directors. This Committee met regularly through the planning period and their feedback drove the formation of the plan's goals. With the support of an external consultant who has experience with equity centered design, we held focus groups, interviews, surveys and 9 co-design sessions with the co design committee.

- Parents of Children with Disabilities: Feedback from parents highlighted the need for more accessible, comprehensive support services and the importance of advocacy in navigating healthcare and educational systems.
- Healthcare Professionals: Insights from healthcare professionals underscored the importance of integrated care models and the potential for partnerships to enhance service delivery to families.
- Educators: Educators pointed to the growing need for resources and training to support inclusive education and the role of organizations like VELA in providing these resources.
- VELA Staff and Board: Internal stakeholders emphasized the importance of organizational resilience, the potential for technology to enhance efficiency, and the need for strategic partnerships to expand VELA's reach.

VELA's strategic plan is anchored by six overarching focus areas, each designed to address key goals identified through our comprehensive planning process and build upon the successes of VELA's existing programming. These focus areas are supported by specific and actionable strategies that provide a clear path for achieving our mission of empowering families of children with disabilities to become their child's greatest advocates.

The plan is designed to guide VELA through the next four years (2024-2028), setting a course for growth, innovation, and greater impact. VELA will continue to show up for the most underserved, connect families in supporting one another, and create leadership opportunities for VELA graduates to engage in systems change work.

1. BE THERE FROM THE START

More families are connected to VELA sooner in their journey of raising a child with a disability.

Thousands of families of children with disabilities in our community and beyond lack access to the knowledge, support, and resources needed to navigate the complex health and education systems, cope with disability stigma, and overcome isolation.

Many of these families, or their providers, are unaware of the vital support VELA offers—or they only find us when they're already in crisis. Some may not be referred to us at all simply because their providers don't know we exist. From a systems perspective, there's a critical opportunity for VELA to become integrated into the diagnostic process, ensuring that families don't have to seek us out—we're already positioned as the immediate next step.

Strategies

- Create and implement a comprehensive awareness campaign, to include social media, partnerships, new website, search, SEO optimization, video, etc.
- Complete annual gap analysis to assess current and prospective referral sources, relevance and timing of referrals to inform a robust outreach plan that informs all communication efforts in order to grow or improve targeted referral sources.
- Build and deepen community relationships through partnerships with local organizations, schools, healthcare providers, and community leaders to amplify VELA's message and increase diversity of referrals.
- Empower and equip VELA grads to promote VELA through peer to peer word-of-mouth awareness of VELA in their communities.
- Develop and promote a VELA program offering that becomes a part of the diagnostic process for families- in healthcare and schools- to provide immediate access to support, community and resources.

2. GROW WITH

Families are connected to all of the current VELA services, as well as new, responsively designed services.

Families currently engaged with VELA, as well as those new to our services, often connect with us for their initial need, missing out on the full range of support we provide. Additionally, many families face recurring challenges that our current programs don't yet address but could in the future. Moreover, barriers exist for families wanting to access our services—our current offerings require either in-person attendance or live virtual participation, limiting access for those with more restricted availability to join.

Strategies

- Ensure participating families are connected to all of VELA's services by using new program database and enhanced communication such as additional newsletters, social media and texts.
- Determine and implement new key content for additional in person and/or virtual courses, workshops, series and/or services and products based on community need, team input, access to resources and gap analysis in community.
- Determine on demand content: explore adding stand alone information videos and/or self-paced courses to serve parents that cannot attend live programming and support graduates who want to retake or review content learned.
- Identify and prioritize service populations in alignment with what, who and where we want to expand services- keeping in mind that VELA is focused on showing up for those that need us the most.

3. LEVEL UP

VELA graduates have ways to impact system change, deepen relationships with each other, and become leaders at the organization.

So many families who graduate from VELA's services are eager to support others like them—not just by referring them to VELA, but by taking a more active role. Some are ready to go even further, creating change not just at the family level, but within broader systems. We have the opportunity to create a roadmap that provides graduates with the next steps in their leadership journey—deepening connections among parents, offering leadership opportunities, guiding VELA's growth, and driving parent-led system changes.

Strategies

- Create a pathway and training process to hire VELA graduates to become VELA Parent Facilitators.
- Design and launch a Peer Mentor Program that trains VELA grads to provide peer support peer support by matching them to other families.
- Assess needs and opportunities for leadership development for graduates in desired community areas (ex: legislative or school advocacy) and collaborate with organizations to create and offer specialized training and resources
- Establish a VELA graduate-led Family Advisory Council that shapes and guides VELA's programming and impact.

4. IN PARTNERSHIP WITH

VELA creates and deepens transformative partnerships with healthcare, education and community-based orgs for system wide impact.

Navigating disability requires families to engage with various systems—healthcare, education, social services, community organizations, and more. Unfortunately, these systems often operate in isolation, leaving parents unsupported and the systems themselves unchanged. While VELA has a history of collaboration, there are significant opportunities to grow and deepen partnerships with shared objectives, enabling us to better support families and providers, strengthen VELA, and improve the systems as a whole.

Strategies

- Develop tailored communication and materials highlighting VELA's approach, services, eligibility, and impact for healthcare and educational partners to understand our services- including when, who and how to refer.
- Develop a standardized partnership framework that clearly defines the roles, responsibilities, pricing models for fee for service contracts, and shared goals for VELA's collaborations with healthcare, educational institutions, and other related partners.
- Determine role of professional development offerings for providers, pricing models and key topic(s) to support them in their work with families of children with disabilities.
- Provide professional development trainings for healthcare and educational teams to create system change from within.
- Use a new program database for tracking of referrals that includes services received and progress reporting.

5. SOLID FOUNDATION

As VELA grows, we will build the structure for staff and board members to feel supported and successful in their roles.

VELA has rapidly expanded in response to community needs, which has greatly benefited those we serve and allowed us to serve a growing number of families each year. This growth has occurred during a time of rapid change in the non-profit sector, an economy dealing with high inflation, and amazing technological advances. Just as it is important to respond to the needs of families we serve, it is critical for our organization's long-term success and sustainability to invest in updates to our systems, technology, and procedures. Achieving the goals laid out in this focus area will enhance efficiencies, improve service delivery, attract and care for current staff and manage risks now and in the future.

Strategies

- Complete assessments on all current programming services: Courses, Case Management, Support Groups, and Family Fun Days.
- Create a decision making process for how and when we add new program topics, themes, or workshops and their formats.
- Using a horizontal growth framework, staff co-create shared decision-making protocols and avenues for input into organizational changes
- Create professional pathways for staff members, tailored to individual interests and organizational needs.
- Develop succession plan framework for Executive Director, Board Chair and other relevant positions.
- Conduct a comprehensive organizational assessment to identify operational gaps and improvement areas.
- Ensure at least 1 VELA graduate serves on VELA's Board of Directors
- Develop financial models that grow alongside this plan that include expanding earned revenue income

6. BIG IMPACT

Enhancing our comprehensive short and long-term data about the impact of VELA's programs and health as an organization.

From the beginning, VELA has been values driven and data informed. Our focus on serving families has been unwavering, however, we have not developed efficient and effective data review systems. As a result, we rely heavily on manual processes to assess the impact of our programs, despite having substantial data to demonstrate our success. As we continue to expand our services, it is crucial that we transition to more advanced data systems and processes. These new systems will enable us to measure progress more easily, design our programming more effectively, and better communicate our impact with our communities.

Strategies

- Migrate current data into a robust cloud software for program data housing, tracking, and analysis.
- Develop a consistent and annual program assessment process for evaluating program success
- Conduct pre and post tests, surveys and interviews, in-programming to gather expanded qualitative and quantitative information on demographics, outputs and outcomes
- Implement a feedback loop to integrate findings into program development and strategic planning.
- Develop a retention plan for families that includes goals for course completion, and minimum "dosage" for impact
- Develop a family engagement plan that defines success and creates support starting at initial touch point and continues through course completion and beyond.
- Create project management system and metrics to monitor progress towards strategies on this plan, aligned with revenue models.
- Explore securing white paper for third party review of VELA impact and services.