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Family Friends program helps special-needs kids

March 1, 2007 - The Epilepsy Foundation of New Jersey (EFNJ) will implement Family Friends, a service program established in 1984 by the National Council on the Aging (NCOA). The Family Friends program will supplement and expand the services of EFN's former program known as Helping Hands.

Much like the Helping Hands program, Family Friends provides services for children ranging in age from birth to 12 years who have special needs such as autism, cerebral palsy, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, Down syndrome and seizures. Through the Family Friends program, senior volunteers are recruited, trained, and assigned to the family of a child with a disability; the volunteers commit to at least one visit per week.

During their visits, the volunteers take on the role of mentor, teacher, companion and friend by offering both social and emotional support to the families while utilizing their skills and experiences to foster caring and trusting relationships with the children.

By expanding the former Helping Hands program into the Family Friends program, volunteers can further utilize themselves as resources for their families.

"We are developing a new level of involvement for the volunteers as active members. This is an innovative enhancement to the program," says Vivian Bartkus, director of Family Support Services.

In addition to their current roles, volunteers can perform research on health, education, social services and more from resources of the Family Support Center of New Jersey (FSCNJ). FSCNJ, located in Manasquan, will have a station set up for this necessary research. Thanks to this new element of the program, the volunteers can then relay what they have learned to the families and help to provide them with beneficial information.

The Family Friends program currently operates in Monmouth and Ocean counties within New Jersey and is part of the national Family Friends network.

The Epilepsy Foundation of New Jersey, an affiliate of the national Epilepsy Foundation, is a statewide voluntary agency dedicated to helping to improve the quality of life for people affected by epilepsy and their loved ones. The foundation recently celebrated 35 years of service and continues to provide innovative and needed services to over 125,000 New Jersey residents living with epilepsy. For more information about the Epilepsy Foundation of New Jersey, call (609) 392-4900 or visit www.efnj.com.