

What Happens After 21

A New Jersey family's guide to choosing an adult day program

For eighteen years, the calendar made the decisions. School started in September. There was an IEP meeting every spring. A bus came at the same time every morning, and if something went wrong, there was a case manager whose job it was to pick up the phone.

Then it stops.

In New Jersey, entitlement to school-based services ends at 21. There is no equivalent system waiting on the other side — no automatic placement, no default schedule, no one assigned to build the next chapter for you. What exists instead is a set of options you have to go find, evaluate, and choose between. Most families start that process later than they meant to, because nothing about the last year of school makes it feel urgent until suddenly it is.

This guide is meant to make that stretch less disorienting. It covers what actually changes, what a day program is and isn't, what separates a good one from a mediocre one, and the questions worth asking when you walk through the door.

What actually changes at 21

Three things shift at once, and it helps to name them separately.

The schedule disappears. Not gradually. A structured, supervised, six-hour day that has anchored your family's routine for nearly two decades ends on a specific date. For many adults with intellectual and developmental disabilities, losing that structure is harder than losing the academics.

The system changes hands. Services for children and services for adults are administered differently in New Jersey, with different funding, different paperwork, and different points of contact. You are not continuing a relationship. You are starting one.

You become the coordinator. Under school services, the district was responsible for putting a plan together. In adult services, families and Support Coordinators drive it. That's more control and more work at the same time.

None of this is a reason to panic. It is a reason to start early.

A realistic timeline

Every family's situation is different, and the specifics of eligibility and funding are best answered by your Support Coordinator or one of the independent organizations listed at the end of this guide. But as a general orientation:

Ages 16–18 — start paying attention. Transition planning becomes part of the IEP conversation. This is the moment to begin learning how adult services work, before you need to use them.

Around age 18 — the paperwork years. Eligibility determinations, decision-making arrangements, and funding conversations tend to cluster here. They take longer than anyone expects.

The final school year — start touring. This is the part families most often postpone. Touring is not a commitment. It is how you build a mental picture of what's available, and it is much easier to do calmly a year out than urgently in June.

After graduation — the transition itself. A good program will work with you on a start date, a ramp-up schedule, and how to make the first few weeks feel familiar rather than jarring.

If you take one thing from this page: tour before you need to decide. Families who tour three or four programs during the final school year almost always feel better about the choice they make than families who tour one in August.

What a day program is — and what it isn't

"Day program" is the phrase everyone uses, and it covers an enormous range.

At one end, it means a supervised place to be during the day. Safe, staffed, and not much more than that. At the other end, it means a structured environment built around building specific skills, with real routines, real responsibility, and progress that gets tracked.

Both are called day programs. They are not remotely the same thing.

What a day program is **not** is a job placement service, and it's worth being clear about that early so nobody's expectations get scrambled. Day services are supports — structure, skill-building, wellness, community participation, connection. Some people also pursue employment services through other channels, but that's a separate track with separate funding.

The useful question isn't "is this a good program." It's "**what will my son or daughter actually be doing at 11:15 on a Tuesday?**" Ask it. The answer tells you almost everything.

The four things that actually separate programs

Marketing materials look alike. These are the differences that show up in daily life.

1. Structure versus supervision. Does the day have a shape — tasks with a beginning and an end, a routine that repeats, something to get better at — or is it primarily supervised time? Both have a place, depending on the person. But you should know which one you're looking at.

2. Staff ratio and staff tenure. Ask both. Ratio tells you how much individual attention is possible. Tenure tells you whether your family member will be building relationships with the same people a year from now, which for many adults matters more than any program feature.

3. Individualization in practice, not on paper. Every program says it individualizes. Ask what that looked like last month for someone whose needs changed. The specific answer separates the real ones from the brochure ones.

4. Whether the environment fits the person. Some people do better in a quiet room. Some do better with noise, movement, and something physical to do. This is the most individual variable, and the one that a website cannot answer for you.

Where to get help that isn't from a provider

Every program you tour has an interest in you choosing them, including this one. These organizations don't, which makes them the right place to go for process questions, eligibility, funding, and advocacy.

- **NJ Division of Developmental Disabilities (DDD)** — the state division administering adult services. nj.gov/humanservices/ddd
- **The Arc of New Jersey Family Institute** — fact sheets, webinars, and direct assistance for families navigating the systems. Twenty local county chapters. thearcfamilyinstitute.org
- **Planning for Adult Life** — a statewide project funded by DDD specifically for young adults 16–21 and their families charting the transition to adult life.
- **SPAN Parent Advocacy Network** — publishes the *Family Guide to Transition Services in New Jersey*, available in English and Spanish. spanadvocacy.org
- **The Boggs Center on Developmental Disabilities (Rutgers)** — plain-language guides on adult health care, self-advocacy, and decision-making.
- **Your county Arc chapter** — the most useful local source for what's actually available near you.

One option in Sussex County

Green Vision is an approved NJ DDD provider serving adults 21+ with intellectual and developmental disabilities, founded in 2010. We run two campuses in Northern New Jersey — Randolph, where we started, and Lafayette, which is currently enrolling.

The short version of what makes our day different: it's built around a working electronics recycling operation. Participants take devices apart by hand — following multi-step processes, using tools safely, sorting materials, keeping a routine. The recycling is real, and so is the structure that comes with it. Alongside that, the day includes wellness and fitness, community inclusion connected to our recycling operation, and daily social connection with the same familiar group of peers and staff.

It isn't the right environment for everyone, and we'd rather tell you that on a tour than after enrollment.

Lafayette campus · 197 Route 94, Lafayette, NJ 07848

Program hours 9:00 AM–3:00 PM, with scheduling flexibility around DDD budget authorizations

Staff ratio up to 6:1, adjusted for support needs · Transportation is not provided at this time

No formal referral is required to schedule a tour

Schedule a tour — Lisa Toriello, Office & Compliance Manager

ltoriello@gvinc.org · (973) 998-7955 ext. 2 · gvinc.org/lafayette

And if you tour us and choose somewhere else because it fits your family member better — that's the system working. Use the checklist wherever you go.

The tour checklist

Bring this page to every program you visit. You won't remember to ask all of it otherwise, and you'll want the same questions answered everywhere so you can compare fairly.

The day itself

- ☐ Walk me through a typical day, hour by hour.
- ☐ What are the program hours, and how flexible is the schedule?
- ☐ What happens on a day when someone is having a hard time?
- ☐ What does a person do here if they finish a task early?
- ☐ How much of the day is structured, and how much is downtime?

Staffing

- ☐ What is the staff-to-participant ratio? Does it change by activity or support need?
- ☐ How long have your current staff been here?
- ☐ What training do staff receive, and how often?
- ☐ Who would be my family member's main point of contact?

Fit and support needs

- ☐ How do you review whether someone is a good fit before they start?
- ☐ How do you handle medical needs? Behavioral support needs?
- ☐ What kinds of support needs are you not set up to serve well? *(A program that can't answer this honestly is telling you something.)*
- ☐ What does the first few weeks look like for a new person?

Progress

- ☐ How do you track progress, and how do you decide what to track?
- ☐ How and how often will I hear about how things are going?
- ☐ Can you give me an example of a goal someone worked on and how it went?

Practical

- ☐ Do you provide transportation? If not, what do most families do?
- ☐ What's your current availability, and is there a waitlist?
- ☐ What are the enrollment steps, and how long do they usually take?
- ☐ Can we visit again, or do a trial day, before deciding?

And one for you, not for them: watch the room. Are participants engaged or waiting? Do staff speak to people or about them? Does anyone look genuinely glad to be there? Most families know within the first ten minutes whether a place feels right. That instinct is data. Write it down before you leave the parking lot.

COMPARE AS YOU GO

Program notes

Fill this in before you leave the parking lot, while the visit is still fresh.

PROGRAM

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