

Making **a** Difference

WINTER 2009

A photograph of three people in business attire standing together. On the left is a man in a dark suit and blue patterned tie. In the center is a woman in a dark blazer. On the right is a man in a dark suit and colorful tie. They are all smiling.

Discovery Day Highlights Employment Solutions

GCDD Gets Organized

**Legislative Agenda Focused
on Preventing Cuts**

www.gcdd.org

A quarterly magazine of the Governor's Council on Developmental Disabilities

The Governor's Council on Developmental Disabilities collaborates with Georgia's citizens, public and private advocacy organizations and policymakers to positively influence public policies that enhance the quality of life for people with disabilities and their families.

GCDD provides this through education and advocacy activities, program implementation, funding and public policy analysis and research.

**GOVERNOR'S
COUNCIL ON
DEVELOPMENTAL
DISABILITIES**

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Letters to the Editor

Letters should include the writer's full name, address, phone number, and may be edited for purpose of clarity and space.

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GOVERNOR'S
COUNCIL ON
DEVELOPMENTAL
DISABILITIES

To Georgia's Disability Community,

As we begin the 2009 Legislative Session, I'd like to commend all the advocates who continue to keep legislators, as well as my office, informed on the issues Georgians with disabilities face every day. Your advocacy efforts have helped Georgia agencies provide more services to more people in more communities than ever before. As we all know, the struggling national economy has impacted local and state tax revenues. I have asked state agencies to reduce spending as the state works to meet its constitutional requirement of a balanced budget. While difficult budget times are never easy, we will do all we can to preserve direct services that Georgians receive from state government.

One of the major issues we will be working on with the General Assembly this year will be the proposed reorganization of the Department of Human Resources (DHR). Our state's growth and health care needs have changed dramatically since DHR's creation 35 years ago. The current proposal calls for the creation of a new Department of Behavioral Health encompassing the mental health and addictive disease programs currently housed in DHR. The current plan also calls for merging the Department of Community Health with the public health and health regulation programs of DHR to make up a reconstituted Department of Health. The remainder of DHR programs will make up a leaner, more focused Department of Human Services.

This change will require approval of legislation by the General Assembly, which convenes in January. I look forward to working with our state's legislators on this proposal, with an expected transition date to the new agencies set for July 1, 2009.

I want to ensure that our state receives the highest possible return on our investment into health and human services while providing the best possible care for our residents. The restructuring

of DHR recognizes that our needs have changed and puts in place a framework for a more efficient, effective delivery of critical services.

I hope you will continue to work with your legislators during the upcoming session to ensure your voices are heard and your issues are fully explained. Thank you for your commitment, leadership and ongoing advocacy.



**While difficult budget times
are never easy, we will do
all we can to preserve direct
services that Georgians receive
from state government.**

Sonny Perdue
Sonny Perdue
Governor



Budget Shortfalls Demand Imaginative Solutions

By most accounts, Georgians with developmental disabilities and their families will join their fellow citizens across the state and the rest of the nation to face extraordinarily tough economic issues in the year ahead. Together, we are braced to withstand the effects of many difficult choices that must be made in order to forge the most reasonable path forward.

But even in a tight budget environment, opportunities can be born as people try to figure out a “way out of no way.” We often do our best thinking under great pressure. During times when it is obvious that the status quo must give way; alternative prospects are inadequate; and it is unacceptable to leave anyone or any program behind, we rise to the occasion. What else can we do in addition to advocate for funding? This is when people find new approaches to create new realities, and the future can be recast. It is what people do when they care enough to act.

“No professional, institution, business or government can substitute for the power, creativity or relevance of productive local citizens.” This quote from John L. McKnight, co-director of Northwestern University’s Asset Based Community Development Institute, in his forward to *When People Care Enough To Act*, by Mike Green, is very much the thought that is the impetus behind the Governor’s Council on Developmental Disabilities’ recent decision to create the Real Communities Initiative. The initiative is part of GCDD’s effort to have a greater impact by bringing disability issues to the forefront in the minds of Georgians. In this issue of *Making A Difference*, we bring together the expertise of Mike Green and Bruce Anderson, council members, staff, GCDD collaborators and advocacy program graduates to explore the theory and application of community development and organizing models of change.

It is change in the form of cuts to existing services that GCDD opposes. Despite budget shortfalls, *Unlock the Waiting Lists!* needs for community-based services have not lessened.

Other changes GCDD will advocate for during the 2009 legislative session include: Under the Children’s Freedom Initiative, GCDD proposes legislation to deter the institutionalization of children under the age of 21. • GCDD will push for new homes on slabs to have three basic accessible features as required by the New Homes Access Act. • We will put forward Individual Development Account legislation that will expand state law to allow for authorized purchases of assistive technology, communication devices, home modifications or adapted vehicles which are necessary to be able to work. • GCDD supports an Employment First Georgia resolution stating that work is a primary, meaningful life activity that provides economic independence for people with disabilities and urging state agencies to support pathways to employment.

This edition of the magazine also emphasizes our commitment to employment through its coverage of GCDD’s 8th annual Making A Difference Discovery Day, which not only demonstrates the benefits of hiring people with disabilities, but why businesses should do it – how businesses can get started. This was the first year the event was streamed live over the Internet. The archived presentations will reside on our www.gcdd.org Web site to help spread the message that employment for people with disabilities is good for business, good for communities and good for the economy.

Disability Day At The Capitol is Wednesday, February 25, 2009. We encourage you to join GCDD and hundreds of supporters, volunteers and advocates from across Georgia. Come and discover why so many members of the disability community care enough to show up for what has become a traditional celebration of community and friendship, year after year in record numbers.

Finally, we encourage you to write thoughtful responses to specific articles published in *Making A Difference* magazine. Please allow us the opportunity to print your opinions by emailing Valerie Meadows Suber, Editor-In-Chief at vmsuber@dhr.state.ga.us, subject line, “Letters To The Editor.”

Remember, a crisis in resources does not mean there is a crisis in our imagination. See you February 25, at our 11th annual Disability Day at the Capitol.

As always, thank you for your support.



ERIC E. JACOBSON



TOM SEEGMUELLER

Eric E. Jacobson
ERIC E. JACOBSON
EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR, GCDD

Tom Seegmuller
TOM SEEGMUELLER
CHAIRPERSON, GCDD

“No professional, institution, business or government can substitute for the power, creativity or relevance of productive local citizens.” John L. McKnight



Obama Wins Hard-Fought Election

Barack Obama was named the president-elect at approximately 11 PM Eastern Standard Time on November 4, 2008. Obama will be the nation's 44th president, and the first African American president.

Some participants of the Project SEARCH program in Hall County were first-time voters in this historical election. "It made me feel a sense of pride to know my vote might make a difference in the world," said Ryan Sexton, 20, who voted for the first time in the primary election.

Amber Mullis, 20, agreed. "I felt a sense of pride when I went to vote," she stated. "I felt nervous and scared, but I felt like I had made a difference in the world."

"It made me feel a sense of pride to know my vote might make a difference in the world."

On his current transition Web site, www.change.gov, Obama has listed a four-part plan that will affect Americans living with disabilities. This plan includes:

- providing educational opportunities by funding the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, supporting early intervention for children with disabilities and universal screening, as well as improving college opportunities for high school graduates with disabilities and making college more affordable
- ending discrimination and promoting equal opportunity by restoring the Americans with Disabilities Act, supporting the Genetic Information Nondiscrimination Act and improving health care
- increasing the employment rate of workers with disabilities by effectively implementing regulations that require the federal government and its contractors to employ people with disabilities; providing private-sector employers with accommodating resources; and encouraging employers to use existing tax benefits to hire more workers with disabilities

- supporting independent, community-based living by enforcing the Community Choice Act, creating a voluntary national insurance program to help adults who have or develop functional disabilities to help them remain independent and in their communities and streamline the Social Security approval process

For more information about the Obama administration, visit his transition Web site at www.change.gov.

Senator Chambliss Keeps His Seat in the Senate

U.S. Sen. Saxby Chambliss (R) triumphed in the run-off election on December 2 against Democratic rival Jim Martin. With 57 percent of the vote, Chambliss will return to his seat in the senate, where he has served since 2002.



Fulton County Artists Produce Exhibit

The Fulton County Department of Mental Health, Developmental Disabilities and Addictive Diseases

(MH/DD/AD) presented its first major art exhibit by adults with developmental disabilities titled "Artistic Expressions" in November 2008.

Initially planned to be on display at the Fulton County Government Center atrium from November 10-14, the exhibit was so popular that it was extended until the 18th. The art on display included crafts, drawings and paintings from approximately 200 artists who are assisted by MH/DD/AD services.

"It shows that people with developmental disabilities are people and not just a person with a disability," explained Mary Woods, manager of the North Training Center, one of three training centers in Fulton County that offers day support and habilitation services. Woods went on to say that when the public came in to view the artwork, they had no idea that the art was done by a person with a developmental disability.

According to Brian Williams, resource development officer of MH/DD/AD, another exhibit is being planned for spring 2009 for the public to actually purchase the art pieces. "There was a lot of interest in purchasing several of the pieces displayed," Williams explained. "Of course, none were for sale, but as the interest level was so high, we're going to host an exhibit for the public to come in and purchase items." ●



Council, Staff Members Appointed to Boards

The Governor's Council on Developmental Disabilities continues to deliver Real Influence for Georgians with disabilities across the state. Several council members and staff have been recently appointed to serve on boards with broad impact on the disability community.

GCDD Council Member Glen Friedman was appointed to the Olmstead Planning Committee by Gov. Sonny Perdue (R).

The committee consults with the state on policies, processes or problems that may prevent the implementation of the goals of the Olmstead Plan. As part of the committee, Friedman will provide input from a self-advocate's perspective and help create the Annual Olmstead Report that describes how the Olmstead Plan is being implemented and what the goals are in the future.

GCDD Deputy Director Patricia Nobbie, Ph.D., has agreed to serve on the inaugural board of directors for Georgians for a Healthy Future, an organization that creates a unified voice for consumers on health care issues. The organization received a \$250,000 grant from the Healthcare Georgia Foundation that will be used as start-up money and to hire an executive director.

The independent, nonpartisan alliance of public and private organizations, policy makers and consumers work together through education, research and advocacy to assure all Georgians have better health care and health outcomes.

GCDD Advocacy Director Kate Gainer has been appointed to the Advisory Council of the Georgia Office of the State Long-Term Care Ombudsman.

During her two-year term, Gainer will offer advice and collaboration to the Long-Term Care Ombudsman Program, communicate its services in the community, help obtain resources for the program and long-term care facility residents, advocate for improvements for long-term care residents and build relationships with other public agencies and programs, providers and policymakers.

McKeen Joins GCDD

College student and self-advocate Will McKeen is the newest member of the Governor's Council on Developmental Disabilities staff. As an intern with

"Through life experiences, I saw the need to effectively advocate on behalf of myself...and others."

the organization, McKeen is excited to take advantage of the opportunities that GCDD will provide.

"I'm contracted to do a lot of work with the GCDD Web site," McKeen explained. "I'll also be doing a lot

of work with Dr. Patricia Nobbie in researching legislative issues."

McKeen became interested in working in this field through his involvement as a self-advocate. "I have Asperger's Syndrome," he stated. "Through life experiences, I saw the need to effectively advocate on behalf of myself ... and others." He had originally interned with the Parent Education Center through the

Individuals with Disabilities Education Act prior to joining GCDD.

A student at Oglethorpe University, McKeen plans to graduate in 2010 with a degree in organizational management. ●



GLEN FRIEDMAN



PATRICIA NOBBIE, PH.D.



KATE GAINER



11th Annual Disability Day at the Capitol Wednesday, February 25, 2009

Join the Governor's Council on Developmental Disabilities and more than 1,800 Georgians with disabilities, their families and supporters from across the state for the 11th annual Disability Day at the Capitol to:

- Rally on the Capitol steps
- Meet your legislator and explain what issues are important to you
- Celebrate community, advocacy and friendship
- Let legislators know

REAL COMMUNITIES MAKE A DIFFERENCE!

LEGISLATORS: Please join more than 1,800 disability advocates from across the state for "Real Communities Make a Difference 10 Years Since Olmstead" Rally on the Capitol steps February 25 at 11 AM.

- Discover the issues facing the disability community
- Meet constituents from your district
- Speak to hundreds of voters with disabilities
- Be recognized as a supporter of the disability community in *Making a Difference* magazine

Sponsored by the Governor's Council on Developmental Disabilities, the day will also feature opportunities for you to visit with your constituents over breakfast or lunch.*



**Real Communities Make a Difference
10 Years Since Olmstead**



FOR MORE INFORMATION, VISIT WWW.GCDD.ORG OR CALL 404-657-2126 OR 888-ASK-GCDD.

* Please check in at the legislative/media table to receive your information packet and to have your photo taken for *Making a Difference* magazine!



Attendee RSVP Form

Disability Day at the Capitol • February 25, 2009
Please register to attend the breakfast OR luncheon.

RSVP: 404-657-2126, Toll Free 888-ASK-GCDD, FAX 404-657-2132

Name: _____

Organization: _____ Total # attending: _____

Mailing Address: _____

City: _____ State: _____ Zip Code: _____

E-mail: _____ Telephone: _____

I plan to attend (please check one): Breakfast Lunch

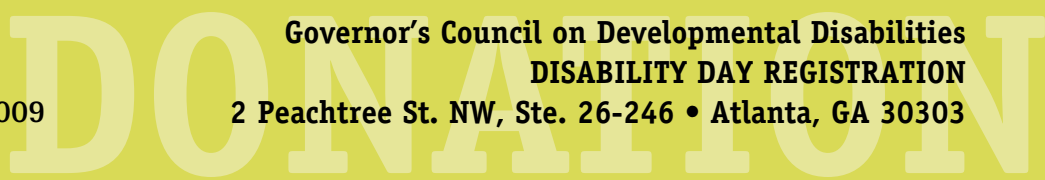
Optional \$10.00 donation per person to support breakfast or luncheon is appreciated, but not required.

Total payment amount: _____ Total amount enclosed: _____

Please note special accommodations we should be aware of: _____

PLEASE MAKE CHECK PAYABLE AND RETURN TO:

**Governor's Council on Developmental Disabilities
DISABILITY DAY REGISTRATION
2 Peachtree St. NW, Ste. 26-246 • Atlanta, GA 30303**



2009 Legislature: Get Ready for a Bumpy Ride

By some reports, the 2009 Legislative Session will be dealing with the worst state budget crisis in 35 years. The combination of the mortgage crisis, high unemployment rates, volatile gas prices and the decline in consumer spending in reaction to the meltdown on Wall Street has had a dramatic effect on more than 30 states' budgets, and Georgia is no different. Due to Gov. Sonny Perdue's (R) fiscal prudence, we do have a bit of a cushion with the revenue shortfall reserve, but it will not be nearly enough, and the Governor never wants to exhaust this emergency resource. The word at the Capitol is that we will see 10% cuts to all agencies' budgets, or \$2.5 billion dollars less than last year. In addition, most of the adds to last year's budget have been cut.

Revenue Estimate:

The Governor sets the revenue estimate against which the budget will be built. During the summer, the monthly revenue collections ran 6-7% behind those months a year ago. Agencies had to take a number of steps to adjust – immediate freezes on spending, travel and new hires; holding back spending on new allocations from last year's session; and, constructing the 2010 fiscal year budget on 6%, 8% and 10% reductions. October's revenue estimate was nearly flat in comparison to

October last year, which was actually a reprieve. But the economy is so unstable right now, state government is being very cautious and conservative, and preparing for the worst.

What We Lose:

In the Department of Human Resources budget, at 6%, we have lost 56 New Options Waiver services (NOW – formerly the Mental Retardation Waiver Program) from the 500 appropriated in the last session. Of those 444 remaining, 150 must be used to transition individuals with developmental disabilities from the state hospitals, leaving less than 300 home and community-based services to meet the needs of 6,500 individuals on the waiting list. Providers lost their hard-won rate increase. Many community-based contracts were reduced or eliminated. Dollars for training providers and families on practice and services were reduced. At 8% cuts, we will lose another 112 services, and at a 10% reduction, we will lose all the community-based service funding. To compound the problem, the division of Mental Health, Developmental Disabilities and Addictive Disease had been able to use waiver dollars that became available through attrition for individuals who came into crisis and needed immediate assistance. Now service dollars that become available through attrition will be redirected to pay for the services awarded in the last budget.

In the Department of Community Health budget, Commissioner Rhonda Medows is hoping to make use of a change in federal law

By some reports, the 2009 Legislative Session will be dealing with the worst state budget crisis in 35 years.



that mandates collecting a quality assessment fee on all Care Management Organizations and Health Maintenance Organizations in the state, rather than just on the CMOs (as is currently the case), to avoid a shortfall of \$90 million dollars and also earn an additional \$100 million dollars for the 2010 FY budget. If she is unable to get that change legislated, we will lose the Independent Care Waiver Program (ICWP) provider rate increase, the Medical Assistance Only access to Medicaid and the Katie Beckett option, as well. GCDD will monitor this issue closely as the debate continues.

The Need is Real

Dollars may have evaporated, but the need has not. The budget ask for Unlock the Waiting Lists! is based on the real need in the community, not available funding. First, we want NO CUTS TO EXISTING SERVICES. Then, according to the multiyear funding plan, we need 2,500 home and community-based services for this year. Unlock is also supporting a 7% rate increase for providers, 630 ICWP services and \$6 million in state-funded family support, to help families meet immediate, but modest, needs. Unlock also supports the funding necessary to move 150 people with mental retardation and developmental disabilities and 100 with physical disabilities out of institutions under the Money Follows the Person Grant.

Governor's Council on Developmental Disabilities Legislative Priorities

Each year prior to the start of the legislative session, GCDD invites the community of interest

to submit their legislative agendas for its consideration for support. During its October meeting, GCDD members reviewed the issues from the community. Decisions to support are based on four criteria:

- Issues must directly or indirectly affect our constituents or GCDD itself;
- Supporting or opposing the issue is in concert with our mission, vision, values;
- The issue draws upon our knowledge and expertise as an organization;

- We have the capability to develop a realistic plan for how to implement the policy stand, communicate the plan to the appropriate people and make use of the stand in our work.

After discussion, GCDD votes on each issue, assigning it to one of 5 tiers:

- **TIER I:** GCDD initiates, is the lead agency
- **TIER II:** Other agency is the lead, but GCDD assists
- **TIER III:** GCDD allows use of name, but otherwise, no action
- **TIER IV:** GCDD has neutral position, won't fight or support
- **TIER V:** GCDD opposes, fights against

TIER I INITIATIVES: The Unlock budget asks are always the priority in the Tier I activities. In addition, GCDD has assigned the following legislative initiatives to Tier I status.

- **Children's Freedom Initiative:** GCDD would like to propose legislation to deter the institutionalization of children under the age of 21. Under the Children's Freedom Initiative resolution, HR 633, the five major service providing agencies were urged to work together on a plan to transition children under the age of 21 from the state hospitals to permanent, loving families. However, there are no state rules or laws prohibiting children from being admitted to institutions. We only want to do this work once.
- **New Home Access Legislation:** This is the first year of a new, two-year session, so all legislation that did not pass last session will have to be reintroduced. In the interim, the House Study Committee on Accessible Housing met, and a report was prepared. The New Home Access Act requires all new homes on slabs to have three basic access features – one zero step entrance; 32" wide interior doors and blocking in the bathroom for grab bars.
- **Individual Development Account Legislation:** This is a new effort, modeled on federal IDAs which provide a mechanism for a person to save money in a designated, matched account

The Unlock budget asks are always the priority in the Tier I activities.



which they can then use toward higher education, purchasing a home or investing in a career. We want to expand the authorized use in state law to include purchasing assistive technology, communication devices, home modifications or adapted vehicles, since these items are unaffordable for many people, but necessary for them to be able to work.

- Employment First Georgia: GCDD members support a resolution stating that work is a primary, meaningful life activity that provides individuals with disabilities economic independence and social interaction. The resolution would urge all state agencies to support, through funding and best practices, services that provide individuals with supported employment or pathways to employment.

TIER II: In Tier II initiatives, another organization takes the lead, but GCDD provides support through information, communication or testimony. The following activities are on this agenda:

- Amend the Medicaid Buy-In guidelines to tie unearned income limits to the Cost-of-Living increase in Supplemental Security Income (SSI); this would expand the pool of individuals eligible to receive Medicaid through the Buy-In.
- Propose legislation to streamline the Medicaid appeals process so appeals move from the Office of State Administrative Hearings directly to Superior Court.
- Seek e-text legislation (HB 898 last year) to enable students with print access disabilities to receive their college textbooks in an accessible and timely way.
- Support \$6.3 million for Community Care Services Program (CCSP) and \$4.0 million for Home and Community-Based Services (HCBS) funding in the Division of Aging budget so seniors can stay in their homes.
- Support legislation for additional surcharge on helmet and handicapped parking violations for the Brain and Spinal Cord Injury Trust Fund.
- Support a state resolution to urge Medicare to eliminate the 24-month wait period for Social Security Disability Income (SSDI) recipients.

- Support the Parent Protection Act, which allows working parents 48 hours of unpaid leave a year to attend school events or medical appointments.
- Support legislation to increase minimum wage to \$7.25 per hour; adjust to cost-of-living; thousands of Georgia workers are exempt from federal minimum wage laws and cannot earn a livable wage.
- Support additional funding for Deaf-Blind services contractors in the Department of Labor budget.
- Track and provide input as necessary to DHR restructuring legislation.
- Support legislation to expand private insurance coverage to autism-related conditions.

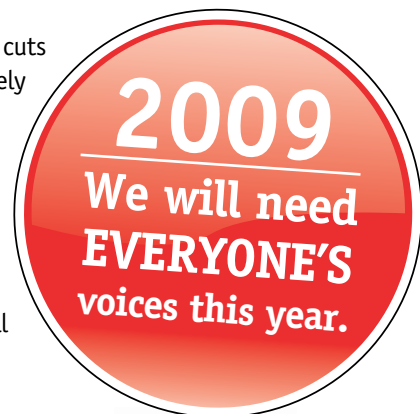
TIER III: For Tier III initiatives, GCDD allows the use of its name, but otherwise provides no action

- Support legislative outcomes of Senate Neuro-behavioral Study Committee.
- Track potential changes in rules guiding the ICWP waiver.
- Support legislation to establish a high-risk insurance pool in state for people uninsured by employers, Medicaid or Medicare.
- Support legislation for the Commission for the Blind and Visually Impaired.
- Support Blind Person's Braille Literacy Act.

TIERS IV and V are neutral or opposition positions. The only issue GCDD is opposing is cuts to existing services. We will be watching closely for further threats to the levels of funding.

The official legislative agenda is posted on the GCDD Web site. Make sure you are signed up for Capitol Impact and to receive *Moving Forward*, the weekly legislative update. Our first issue, which reviews changes to House or Senate seats, or to leadership, will go out the second week of December. And remember Disability Day at the Capitol, scheduled for Wednesday, February 25th.

We will need everyone's voices this year. Be sure to stay in touch, and contact your legislators! ●



Employers Discover Talent of Employees with Disabilities

“If you’re not going to hire me, I’ll hire me.”

That message of Discovery Day’s keynote speaker Neil Romano was enough to encourage attendees that people with disabilities have the drive, determination and skills to be valuable employees who contribute to company profitability.

Romano, assistant secretary of the U.S. Office of Disability Employment Policy since March 2008, was just one of the many inspiring speakers at the 8th Annual Discovery Day on October 30. Held in a new location this year at the Crowne Plaza Ravinia Hotel, employers and advocates packed one of the grand ballrooms to learn how employees with disabilities can positively impact businesses’ bottom lines.

Moderator Richard Warner, the host of Georgia’s Business on GPB-TV and CEO of What’s Up Interactive, explained how Discovery Day personally touched him. “My father had a disability,” Warner said to the crowd. “I grew up seeing how important it was to him to add value to the world around him.” Warner continued to say that Discovery Day would help employers learn how employees with disabilities could bring value to their workplace.

“All people have gifts and talents to bring to your company,” said Eric Jacobson, executive director of the Governor’s Council on Developmental Disabilities, which presented Discovery Day. “Most of us don’t grow up thinking, ‘Hey, we’ll stay on government assistance.’ We all have hopes, dreams and goals.” Jacobson continued to emphasize how employers and employees with disabilities can work together for the betterment of the workforce.



Jim Lientz

Jim Lientz, chief operating officer for Georgia, spoke on behalf of Gov. Sonny Perdue (R). “You can never do enough,” he stated. “But we’ve worked on several accomplishments.” Lientz applauded the state of Georgia, explaining that the state has moved up from 50th in the nation to 9th for services provided for people with developmental disabilities and the recent reorganization of the Department of Human Resources as some of the improvements the state has made.

“And let me tell you – years later, it was a real pleasure to buy some of the companies who wouldn’t hire me way back when.”



Neil Romano, assistant secretary at the U.S. Department of Labor’s Office of Disability Employment Policy, shared his background with dyslexia.

“There’s still more to be done,” he said to the crowd. “That’s where you all come in!”

Building on the theme of hard work and perseverance, Romano shared his struggle with dyslexia that ultimately hindered his ability to find a job. “I had graduated from college and couldn’t find

"It's time to get past the paper to the person, and address the issues of people with disabilities in the workplace once and for all!"

a job. I applied to over 2,000 companies and received only two responses," Romano stated, blessing those who had responded to what had to have been a mistake-laden resume.

Instead of sitting around being depressed about his futile job hunt, Romano started his own business. "And let me tell you – years later, it was a real pleasure to buy some of the companies who wouldn't hire me way back when," he confessed to the crowd with a sly grin.

Romano appealed to both the logical and emotional instincts of listeners. "The best businesses in America recognize diversity," he said. "But we have a history in America of marginalizing people. 'If you're different, we'll marginalize you.' But once you bring a diverse array of people to the table, everything is made better – the country grows as new ideas and new ways of doing things are brought to the table."

The key message behind Discovery Day was that people with disabilities have just as much value to offer to job positions as anyone else. "I don't look like a corporate type person," said Angela Mackey, a job recruiter for Walgreens. Mackey, who has cerebral palsy, explained how she graduated from college with a perfect grade point average of 4.0 but still had difficulty finding employment. She summed up what many people with disabilities feel while job hunting: "I was ready for the world, but the world wasn't ready for me."

Mackey was hired by Walgreens two years ago to serve as a Career Outreach Coordinator at their distribution center in Williamston, S.C. "We plan to hire 1,000 people with disabilities by the year 2010," Mackey informed the crowd to much applause.

Another company with a strong experience of hiring employees with disabilities was the

host company for Discovery Day, InterContinental Hotels Group (IHG). Roslyn Dickerson, senior vice president of corporate affairs and diversity of IHG spoke about how she attended last year's Discovery Day expecting it to be just like any other conference – uninspiring and, frankly, boring. She ended up finding herself interested and inspired. "I was struck by the many personal success stories from last year," Dickerson said. "Then I started thinking about how we have many stories just like that within our own company." Dickerson concluded by challenging listeners to engage in the dialog of bringing people of all types – including those with disabilities – to the table.

"When I was a college student 20 years ago, I wish I had a conference like this," said Carmen Jones, president and founder of The Solutions Marketing Group. Jones advised businesses to test the waters in hiring employees with disabilities by internally assessing the commitment to include people of all abilities in their fold.

"I was ready for the world, but the world wasn't ready for me."



Kate Brady





The Employer Assistance & Recruiting Network (EARN) is a free service provided to connect employers with job openings to skilled job candidates.

Carmen Jones, president and founder of The Solutions Marketing Group (SMG), explained that employers conversing with potential employees with disabilities is “not just the right thing to do, it’s the smart thing to do.” Jones, a graduate of Hampton University, was injured in an automobile accident during her junior year, which resulted in paraplegia.

“EARN is a great resource that opens up that conversation,” Jones said. “It helps employers who are just beginning to hire people with disabilities as they learn about what resources are available to them, and it helps employees find these jobs in a timely manner.”

EARN is a national service that operates like a job search engine, much like Monster.com. However, EARN specifically works to provide job search support for people with disabilities. By working with employers, providers and jobseekers, EARN is able to provide tools and resources that may not be available elsewhere, such as interview techniques and the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) guidelines.

Funded by the Office of Disability Employment Policy (ODEP) under the Department of Labor, you can learn more about EARN at www.earnworks.com.

“By working with employers, providers and jobseekers, EARN is able to provide tools and resources that may not be available elsewhere...”



Carmen Jones

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Kate Brady, the director of employment policy and programming in the Office of Developmental Disabilities at the Department of Human Resources, called the 75 percent unemployment rate among people with disabilities the “last frontier of civil rights in America.” “We’ve addressed the issues brought up by race, gender, sexuality and any other possible differences we all might have with each other,” Brady elaborated. “It’s time to get past the paper to the person, and address the issues of people with disabilities in the workplace once and for all!”

Another part of this year’s Discovery Day was a panel of four leaders to discuss “What Businesses Want to Know: A Conversation About Tools, Resources and Incentives.”

Richard Keeling from the Internal Revenue Service spoke about some of the more practical ways that the IRS can assist employers and employees with disabilities with tax benefits. “There are a lot of exemptions, such as the earned income tax credit for individuals who make less than \$40,000 a year,” Keeling explained. He also mentioned other various tax credits, including the Disabled Access Credit and the Work Opportunity Credit.

Keeling advised people to go to the IRS’ Web site, www.irs.gov, to learn more about what credits might be available to them. He also discussed the hiring initiatives that the IRS has in place for hiring people with disabilities at jobs.irs.gov. “The IRS has hired over 1,000 people and veterans with disabilities,” Keeling informed the crowd.

Other panelists discussed the importance of employees with disabilities having a strong mentor in the workplace. “How many professionals in here have had a mentor?”

David Hale of the American Association of People with Disabilities asked attendees. "AAPD hosts the national Disability Mentoring Day every October to encourage professionals to mentor an employee with a disability."

Fellow panel member Ruby Moore of the Georgia Advocacy Office agreed. "There is nothing like a good, solid mentoring program," she said. Moore went on to explain that companies that hire an eclectic array of employees thrive. "Morale actually improves when employers hire a diverse culture," she explained. "People with disabilities help their employers grow and expand by bringing new perspectives to the table."

The final panelist Phil Chase of the Georgia Association for Persons in Supported Employment summed it up very simply. "Disability is a natural part of the human experience," he stated. "Let's encourage employers to embrace that fact!"

"People with disabilities help their employers grow and expand by bringing new perspectives to the table."

Tifiny Nash, a new council member for GCDD, was one of the attendees of the annual Discovery Day. "It's so important that we have something like this in place for employers and employees to come together and discuss how we can bring more people to the table," Nash said. "This has been a great experience!"

The majority of attendees were businesses that have been incorporating various strategies, including Roswell High School in Roswell, Ga. "We're all looking to make that connection and that transition," said Chris Bray, a staff member at RHS. Bray continued to say how students with disabilities at RHS have excelled with career experiences at local businesses.

The 2008 Discovery Day also welcomed new technology to get the message out to a broader audience. "This year we added a live Web cast in anticipation of high interest in Discovery Day subject matter," said event organizer Valerie Meadows Suber, the public information director for GCDD and editor-in-chief of *Making a Difference* magazine. "This allowed us to nearly double our audience via the



Georgia's Chief Operating Officer, Jim Lientz (second from right), made a surprise appearance on behalf of Governor Sonny Perdue.



Internet and each presentation is being archived for streaming on GCDD's Web site for future access."

Dickerson wrapped up the day's events with a call to action for all employers. "There is not one gender, not one ethnicity, not one ANYTHING with a monopoly on talent," she said. "Data tells us overwhelmingly that when we hire people with disabilities, we're hiring talent that helps our organizations to grow."

"It's not an accommodation," Dickerson continued. "It's doing what's best for your company – and for society." ●

"It's not an accommodation...It's doing what's best for your company – and for society."



Panelists Phil Chase, David Hale, Ruby Moore and Richard Keeling chat with moderator Richard Warner about incentives and opportunities for businesses wanting to learn more about hiring people with disabilities.

Assimilate People with Disabilities in School, Community

By Harrison Saylor



Harrison Saylor is 16 years old and is a junior at Flowery Branch High School where he is involved in the National Honor Society, the Academic Team, the Fencing Club and the Band program.

Every generation, someone, somewhere, is fighting the government about civil or human rights. Two generations ago African Americans were pursuing civil rights, last generation was about homosexual rights and this generation is mostly about the rights of people with disabilities.

People with disabilities are often viewed as incompetent shells who lack intelligence and the capacity to make their own choices. People with disabilities are many times excluded in their schools and communities, forcing a life of reclusion upon people. Because exclusion reinforces the idea that people with disabilities should be kept away from “normal” people, the “normal” people often avoid people with disabilities, talking down to them, judging them by their appearance and by what they cannot do, as opposed to what they can do. The best way to fix this would be to better assimilate people with disabilities into schools and communities.

“There are so many ways to include people with disabilities into our lives.”

One way we can address this problem of exclusion is to reform the language we use with people who have disabilities. This is called People First Language, which is just respectful language. The technique is all about putting the person before their disability. For example, instead of saying someone is mentally ill it would be better to say that the person has a mental health condition. Using this language will not make the person with a disability uncomfortable and it will help you, and those around you, to see the person for who they really are.

At schools a great way to help assimilate people with disabilities is to be active in a Partners’ Club. A Partners’ Club is a club where kids with and without disabilities interact at social and community service events together. My school, Flowery Branch High, started its Partners’ Club three years ago as part of the Governor’s Council On Developmental Disabilities’ Partnerships for Success grant. Kids in the club go to movies together, have parties, and even, in some cases, go to prom together. It has successfully served its purpose of assimilating kids with disabilities into the mainstream student body.

In many communities people with disabilities cannot get around very well because of inadequate accommodations, and that is the reason for their reclusion. We can help people by building wheelchair ramps and such. Not only will this help people get around, but in the process you will get to know the people you are building accommodations for, which helps them assimilate into the community.

People with disabilities are often barred from sports too. We can remove barriers by asking kids with disabilities to play sports with us. Many sports are modified to let people with disabilities participate in them. Just like in the Olympics many different countries come together and break down barriers through sports, kids with and without disabilities can also come together and break down barriers through sports.

There are so many ways to include people with disabilities into our lives. But people don’t do it. Some people complain that “It’s too much effort” and those people are just being stubborn and ignorant. If those people actually got to know some of the people with disabilities their opinions would change. If they were in the shoes of a person with disabilities, they would want to be a part of society because, after all, people with disabilities are a part of society, too. ●

Two young men share their thoughts on the role people with disabilities play in society.

Careful Consideration Helps Recent Grad in Voting Booth

By Cody Smith

With the passing of November 4, 2008, an election of great historical and political importance came to a close. In this significant election, a large group of people were called upon to exercise their right to vote; new voters. During the previous four years, I, among many others, passed 18 years of age, the legal voting age in the United States of America. Choosing to vote is an important part of America's democratic system, and elections are held every few years to allow citizens the right to choose representation on the local, state and national levels of government. Americans are encouraged to vote through television and radio ads, and nonprofit organizations, such as Rock the Vote. With such encouragement, many citizens are beginning to realize the one key reason to vote: it has a direct effect on their lives.

America's voting system has come a long way since its beginning. Great strides have been made and many barriers have been overcome. The first large steps were the passing of the 15th amendment in 1870 which granted formerly enslaved men the right to vote and the 19th amendment in 1920 which granted the right to vote to women. The civil rights movement followed with the National Voting Rights Act of 1965. Though our system has come so far, there is still another group that faces difficulty in our voting system – people with disabilities. The disability rights movement was inspired by both the women's rights and civil rights movement. The Rehabilitation Act of 1973 and the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 legislated equality for people with disabilities. This legislation along with the Voting Rights Act of 1965, have slowly integrated people with disabilities into a voting system that accommodates them so they can enact their right to vote without difficulty.

My journey as a new voter began at the end of 2007. I watched the news and listened to speeches and debates to pick a candidate worthy of my vote. After choosing a candidate, I found my polling place and voted for the first time in Georgia's 2008 Presidential Primary. From August to November of 2008, I watched both national conventions, listened to speeches made by each candidate and watched the presidential and vice presidential debates to take in as much information as possible before making my final decision. On Election Day 2008, I waited in line to vote, thinking about the previous year and all that I had learned, and finally, as I stood in front of the voting machine, I cast my final ballot for the 2008 general election.

"...many citizens are beginning to realize the one key reason to vote: it has a direct effect on their lives."

Looking back, two things come to mind; first, while the disability movement is succeeding, there is still much to be done, such as having accessible polling places for people with physical disabilities, as well as having educated polling officials present who will not judge a person's intelligence or their ability to vote because they have a disability. I believe that, in time, when disability awareness and understanding has been reached, and people are able to know a person by who they are instead of what their disability is, then our country will be better both socially and politically. And second, I find gratification in the fact that, although I am only one person, I took the time and made the effort to participate in this important part of America's Democracy. ●



Cody Smith is 20 years old and is a recent graduate of Flowery Branch High School. Cody participated in Partnerships for Success by serving as a student representative on the leadership team. He was a member of the Partners' Club and came up with the club motto "Empowered in Our Abilities". Cody also participated in a self-determination curriculum and person-centered planning. He was enrolled at Gainesville College taking classes to become a pharmacist, but has decided that this is not right for him. Cody thinks he might be interested in writing so he is now going to enroll in a journalism class.

Open Dialog on Disabilities

By Carly Sharec

As human beings, we typically come equipped with five senses – to see, to smell, to taste, to hear and to feel. Not realizing it, from infancy into adulthood, we rely on certain senses more so than others – particularly sight.

This is the premise of one of Atlanta’s newest exhibits – Dialog in the Dark. As small groups of eight to 10 people file into a dimly lit room, they are handed canes and told to get ready for an experience they will never forget – losing their sense of sight and having to rely on their other senses (and the camaraderie of their teammates) to maneuver through everyday situations.

Expectations varied at first. “This is actually really scary,” Maureen Jones, one of the tour takers, said after the lights went off.

“I’m not sure if I can handle this for an hour!”

“I can smell potpourri!” screamed her teenage son, Ted, prompting nervous laughter from the rest of the group.

As the room goes entirely pitch black, you meet your guide as he or she ushers you into a park...a grocery store...a busy city sidewalk. People you can’t see yell in your ear. The smell of coffee hits you like a wall. You rub up against a piece of felt – it’s

soft, softer than you remember felt being. Your guide jokingly asks, “What color is it?”

Perhaps the most interesting part comes when you are led onto a ‘boat.’ Seagulls fly close to your head as you grasp your way onto the boat – don’t miss the step and fall into the water! Once you find a seat, the boat takes off.

“I think it opens the eyes of participants to realize what they have,” Gloria Fisher, a tour guide at Dialog in the Dark, said. Fisher, who is currently employed as a social worker with Blind and Low Vision Services of North Georgia, initially heard about the Dialog in the Dark exhibit through a friend. “I thought that some of my clients would have a ball there, and then I started thinking – how great would it be for me to be involved?”

“If you can set aside your fears for just an hour and really try and explore with your other senses, you become so much more aware of your surroundings in everyday life.”

Dialog in the Dark was conceived in 1988 by German Andreas Heinecke, Ph.D., following his career as the vice director of the Stiftung Blindenanstalt (Foundation for the Blind.) Shocked by the lack of career opportunities for people who are blind or visually impaired, Heinecke concluded that the only way to replace prejudice was with experience. Taking people with normal vision through a world – just like the one they live in – but without their sight.

As the tour winds down, your group goes to a café where you can order bottled water or a soda. You and your group are able to discuss the experience. The guide asks if you’re going to respect your eyes a lot more from now on. Just as you are making a solemn vow to yourself that

Powerful
and life-
changing.

Photo Credit: Ben Rose



Guests are led into the ‘immersion chamber,’ where dimly lit boxes of light slowly fade away until participants only see total black. This is the beginning of the ‘Dialog in the Dark’ experience.

Georgia Aquarium Promotes Inclusive Event

The Georgia Aquarium is many things – the world’s largest aquarium being one of its most notable qualities. Fairly soon, however, it may be known as being one of the most accessible locations for people with disabilities in the United States.

“The Aquarium meets all of the ADA (Americans with Disabilities Act) requirements at this point, but we want to do more,” said Elizabeth Williams, the assistant manager of the guest programs department at the Aquarium. “We want to be the world’s most engaging aquarium experience, and that means we want to make sure EVERYONE has an engaging time at the Aquarium, regardless of ability.”

To that end, the Aquarium plans to host its first all-inclusive event in early February. “It’s going to be a four to five-day event,”

explained Williams. “We want to highlight the abilities of various people, so we’re bringing in a variety of speakers and performers.” Williams stated that a variety of talents will be on display, including a dance troupe of people who use wheelchairs, an appearance by Ms. Wheelchair USA and a book signing by an author with autism.

Also to be debuted is a book that Williams has worked on to make the Aquarium a pleasant experience for guests with autism. “It’s primarily geared toward children because we have many school groups that come through,” she explained. “But it will be a useful tool for anyone of any age, as there’s so much going on in the Aquarium that we want to make sure all of our guests are able to have an enjoyable time.”

The event will be similar to the annual one at the Aquarium of the Pacific in Long Beach, California. Williams explained that the Georgia Aquarium has worked closely with the Aquarium of the Pacific, which has put on a similar event for approximately five years.

“There are many different improvements that we are hoping to unveil at this event,” Williams said mysteriously. “We want the aquarium to be accessible to people of all abilities.”



“We want to be the world’s most engaging aquarium experience, and that means we to make sure EVERYONE has an engaging time at the aquarium, regardless of ability.”

And just what are those improvements? “Many are still in the developmental stages right now, so you’ll just have to wait and see!” Williams laughed.

Visit www.georgiaaquarium.com for specific dates and times of this inclusive event.



you will visit an optometrist every other week, the guide has you up on your feet going through a hallway...to a dimly lit room that gradually gets brighter as you regain your sight.

What was the final verdict? “Powerful and life-changing,” Jones said. “It was a great experience, and I’ll definitely be recommending this exhibit to my friends.” Her teenage son agreed. After regaining your sight, everything seems like a new experience, even if it’s just a random street that

you’ve seen countless times before.

“I think Dialog in the Dark is fabulous,” Fisher said. “It makes participants so much more humble as they realize how fortunate they are, as well as learn what it’s like to live in a world without vision. If you can set aside your fears for just an hour and really try and explore with your other senses, you become so much more aware of your surroundings in everyday life.” ●

DIALOG IN THE DARK is located at The Premier Exhibition Center at Atlantic Station and is running until March 1, 2009.

GCDD Learns the ABC(D)'s of Community Organizing

While an economic downturn, shifting priorities and shrinking budgets may lead to fewer government-funded services for Georgians with disabilities, they shouldn't have to go without the support they need to live full lives in their communities.

"States across the country are realizing we have a crisis of resources, but we also have a crisis of imagination. It's a time that calls for change, for doing new things. If the service system can't do something, it doesn't mean we don't do it. We just have to be more inventive and experiment with other options," explained Mike Green of Asset Based Community Development in Denver, Colo.

"For so many problems, there are not sufficient resources to solve them. One good thing to do is advocate for more funding, but what else can you do?"

The Governor's Council on Developmental Disabilities has created the Real Communities Initiative to help advocates create more community support across Georgia, and recently had a training session with Green December 10 on how to successfully motivate communities to action.

"For so many problems, there are not sufficient resources to solve them. One good thing to do is advocate for more funding, but what else can you do? That's the question I'm working on with GCDD," Green said.

About 30 GCDD members and staff, and graduates of Partners in Policymaking, Georgia Voices that Count and the Organizing Institute attended.

"Mike uses a variety of community-building models. He showed us how to take those ideas and create a Georgia model based on what's already in place," said GCDD Executive Director Eric Jacobson. "He really connected with the people in the room by helping us recognize and understand the need to try to do collective thinking, learning and acting. We hope they'll take what Mike brought us and put it to use in their communities - there's power in doing things together that results in better communities for everyone.

"We've done a good job of trying to address service system issues that impact people with disabilities. We've been focused on person-centered activities. The Real Communities Initiative helps bridge the gap between person-centered and community-centered advocacy that strengthens where we all live and what we all care about," Jacobson said.

Green said the three most important building blocks of successful community organizing are:

- Paying attention to assets in the community that can be used to solve problems.
- Building relationships to connect people and build more collective action.
- Ensuring the answers come from within the community and the people who are affected by the problem, instead of by an outside agency.

"If the problem is determined from the outside, with the solution determined from the outside, it doesn't give the community members ownership. If the people with the problem determine the solution, it's more likely to work," Green said.

He points out that the most successful community organizers are those who care enough about the problem to move into action on it.

"Imagine there are a few parents with young adult children with disabilities in Athens having

“The Real Communities Initiative helps bridge the gap between person-centered and community-centered advocacy that results in better communities for everyone.”



a hard time finding work. They can't solve the problem alone, so they form a group of about 10 to 15 parents. Those people would be in a position to decide strategy – we need to build more relationships with local businesses and understand what stands in the way of them hiring people with disabilities and what the incentive would be for them to hire people with disabilities.

“How do they do that? By having conversations and building relationships. The group commits to act together, then they start to figure out what to do about the problem through listening, conversations and relationships. It's really important to start those conversations with a question, not an answer,” he said.

“The current developmental disabilities system doesn't have enough people to make it happen one person at a time.”

Through those conversations in the community, the group can begin to identify existing resources and define personal motivations of community members to move them into action and improve the lives of people with disabilities.

Bruce Anderson of Community Activators in Vashon, Wash., said building one-on-one relationships in the community is always the place to start, and he points to the benefits of reaching larger groups, too.

He said there are two strategies to pursue. The first is to work on behalf of particular individuals. “The other opportunity is to work with groups about how they can be more welcoming to everyone, not just people with developmental disabilities.

“The current developmental disabilities system doesn't have enough people to make it happen one

person at a time. They need to get the community to be more welcoming to all people so social services doesn't have to do all the work,” he said.

“Human services have failed to get out of the rut of only working on behalf of the people being supported by their particular type of social service agency,” he continued.

In the example of people in Athens looking for jobs for their children with disabilities who are transitioning out of high school, Anderson suggests supplementing the one-on-one relationship building.

“There's a lot of people in Athens who can't find work – there's power in unifying those people with other townfolk. You could get people in the community together for a town hall forum – “Athens is a Welcoming Place” – that might generate half a dozen ideas to make the community more welcoming. Employers attending the forum who were interested in creating a more welcoming and diverse workforce would become the primary advocates for employment in the community instead of social services,” he explained.

Reaching whole groups of people starts with asking questions, too. Anderson explained the process, using an example of how to make a church more inclusive.

“The very first thing you do is go to the minister and ask for the names of the three most welcoming people in their church. It could be anyone – young or old, secretary, custodian, church member or church-school teacher. Then, you have one-on-one conversations with all three people to find out: who they learned to be welcoming from; why welcoming is important to them; and, how their church could benefit from being more welcoming.

Reaching whole groups of people starts with asking questions, too.





“...we need to pay attention to services, but there’s a lot we can do in addition.”

“Then you look at the information you’ve gathered, see what was similar or different, then have a meeting with all three. Out of that meeting will be specific strategies they identified that they can take back to their whole church and make happen.”

Anderson said the group might then have a general church meeting to discuss the issue. “If I were advocating on behalf of people with developmental disabilities, I would make sure that some of those folks were in that room so their voices could be heard. Then they become part of the action. For example, if the church was going to have a greeter at the front door every Sunday, or needed someone to help orient new members, they could volunteer to do those tasks. That’s where my agenda would come into play and how I would meet the interests of both the Church and citizens with disabilities.”

“We can take a very traditional, American approach – what we as citizens in a democracy can do together to invent an alternative.”

Both Anderson and Green are in agreement that solutions must come from the whole community to be successful, not just human services.

“Families are in the habit of thinking (government-funded) services are the only answer. The attention is there, and we need to pay attention to services, but there’s a lot we can do in addition,” Green said. “We can take a very traditional, American approach – what we as citizens in a democracy can do together to invent an alternative. It’s the best of what our country is about.” ●

Second Group of Organizers Hard at Work

By Valerie L. Smith

Armed with information on how to organize people around disability issues, the five current Organizing Institute (OI) participants are applying what they learned in communities across Georgia.

A collaborative project between the Governor’s Council on Developmental Disabilities and Project South, the institute is divided into classroom time, where participants learn the history of the disability movement and the fundamentals of grassroots organizing, and project time, where participants use what they learn to make a positive impact on people with disabilities in their communities.

“The training was awesome. I felt like what I had to say was valued,” said Gloria Chamlee, whose 23-year-old son has Down syndrome.

Participant Sharon Chung agreed. “They did a really good job preparing us. We all had a really positive experience.”

The class is now busily at work on projects they hope make a difference in their communities.

Clarietha Allen Family Member • Atlanta, Ga.

After Clarietha Allen’s husband was injured at work, resulting in a disability, she began her work as an advocate.

“Project South trained us in community advocacy so we could advocate on behalf of injured workers,” she said.

Allen is working on three projects as part of her OI training, including a get out the vote effort, an employment network and a housing initiative.

“I did a lot around the presidential election,” she revealed. “We facilitated voting for people with disabilities and the



elderly by getting them registered and providing transportation or absentee ballots.”

Allen also provided the same support for the runoff election for U.S. Senate.

While her voting efforts were time consuming, she managed to find time to get two other projects under way, as well.

“I’m creating an employee network with the Ticket to Work Recruitment and Outreach program,” Allen, who works in conjunction with the Georgia Employee Association, explained.

She hopes to help young people, ages 18 – 25, to transition from school into permanent jobs.

“My responsibilities will be to help them develop resumes, teach interviewing skills and act as a facilitator to help them find jobs.”

In addition to the employment program, Allen is in the initial stages of working with the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development to create low cost housing for people with disabilities.

Gloria Chamlee Family Member • Flovilla, Ga.

Rural areas of Georgia are sometimes starved for new information on disability issues, and Butts County is no exception. Since her son was born 23 years ago with Down syndrome, Gloria Chamlee has tried to do something about that.

Chamlee recognized a need in her area for students transitioning from school to work.

“The school system writes up transition plans, but there’s no follow through,” Chamlee explained. “The school system, student and parents can make plans, but if the service provider has no clue, the plans won’t be implemented. I want to bring everyone to the table.”

So Chamlee is working with schools, local businesses, service providers and families to assure better outcomes for transitioning students.

Chamlee, who has been reaching out to other parents of children with disabilities for years, is working under “Support Health Advocacy Resources and Education”, or SHARE, which she formed in 2000 as a parent support organization.

She has recruited 15 members of her community to serve as an advisory board and hopes to start impacting students who plan to graduate in spring of 2009.

But Chamlee doesn’t plan to stop with this project. “I have a five-year plan, too, to open a sort of one-stop for families to get assistance navigating the system without all the red tape to help their loved ones reach their potential. I have been doing this out of my home for 23 years, but I want to move into a location where people can come to find the information.”

She is already seeking grants and raising funds to get an office for SHARE. “This has been a vision of mine for a while. The Organizing Institute gave me what I needed to try.”

Sharon Chung Advocate • Duluth, Ga.

Sharon Chung worked at a camp for adults with disabilities while in college and found her calling. She worked with children with disabilities in the Gwinnett and Dekalb school systems, but found there was a limit to how much she could help.

“I need to help the parents first, so their children can benefit,” she said. And that is exactly what she is doing within metro Atlanta’s Korean community, as her OI project.

Working with the Disability Resource Group, Chung has coordinated two summits for Korean parents whose children have disabilities to educate them on the services available.

“When I’m not coordinating summits, I’m working one-on-one to help parents advocate for different services their children should get, such as Supplemental Security Income (SSI) and Medicaid waivers. I even translated for one parent whose child wanted to join the band,” she said. “Typical American families could do these things on their own, but if the family can’t speak the language and don’t understand the system, it’s hard.”

Chung is also regularly writing articles on disability for Korean newspapers. “Parents need ongoing information. This is the fastest, most effective way to reach a large number of people.”

In addition to her OI work, Chung has participated in a needs assessment of the Asian community of people with disabilities, coordinating focus groups to determine what their experiences were like in schools and doctors’ offices. She also identified what barriers prevented these families from being more

“We facilitated voting for people with disabilities and the elderly by getting them registered and providing transportation or absentee ballots.”

CLARIETHA ALLEN

“I have a five-year plan, too, to open a sort of one-stop for families to get assistance navigating the system without all the red tape...”

GLORIA CHAMLEE

“I need to help the parents first, so their children can benefit.”

SHARON CHUNG





“I plan to have a bigger event in the spring where we’ll have organizations, agencies and businesses that provide the services the people have identified as what they need.”

BETTY HASAN-AMIN



“I hope to spread awareness that kids who are different, whether culturally or because of a disability, that it’s not their fault.”

JORDAN SCHWARTZ

knowledgeable about the services available to them and interviewed service providers as to what barriers keep them from better serving Asians in metro Atlanta.

**Betty Hasan-Amin
Self-Advocate • Clarkston, Ga.**

A Georgia Voices That Count graduate, Betty Hasan-Amin is no stranger to advocacy.

“Just in my day-to-day travels around Clarkston, I began to see people in wheelchairs, using canes and walkers, parents pushing babies in strollers and elderly people with mobility problems. I addressed the issues at the Clarkston City Council meetings, and to my amazement, got a very quick response to my pointing out the need to make the sidewalks accessible,” Hasan-Amin, who uses a wheelchair, said.

With her existing work in Clarkston, Hasan-Amin realized her community had some unique challenges. “Our residents come from 50 nations and speak 47 different languages. These people are from countries where no laws exist for people with disabilities. They are in a new country and don’t know what we have available. They’ve never heard of ADA (Americans with Disabilities Act),” she said.

Thus, Project ACCESS (Achieving Community Commitment Empowerment Sensitivity Services) was born.

Hasan-Amin has put together a multilingual committee of community members from Somalia, Ethiopia, India, Nigeria and America to help reach out to immigrants and refugees living in Clarkston who have a family member with a disability to let them know about services available to them.

She plans to hold seven meetings around town to determine what families’ needs are. Upon the completion of the meetings, she plans to hold a larger event.

“I plan to have a bigger event in the spring where we’ll have organizations, agencies and businesses that provide the services the people have identified as what they need,” she said.

“It’s wonderful work to fill as much as we can of our human potential.”



**Jordan Schwartz
Self-Advocate • Marietta, Ga.**

Most high school sophomores are more worried about what to wear to school than the effects bullying has on students with disabilities, but not Jordan Schwartz.

The 15-year-old has Turner syndrome and is the youngest member of the current Organizing Institute. But this isn’t her first experience with advocacy.

“I worked with the governor’s council after being diagnosed (when she was 11) and had trouble getting the Katie Beckett waiver,” she explained.

Schwartz wants to work within schools to promote acceptance of students who are medically fragile or have developmental disabilities, through a play she wrote, called Mr. Ooba’s TEAM (Together Everybody Achieves More).

“The play is a classroom short for grades K-4 about bullying students who are medically fragile or have developmental disabilities,” she said. “There are many ways the play can be done, as a reader’s theatre, with avant garde costuming, as a full fledged production or as a workshop.”

Schwartz sent letters to schools to let them know about the availability of the play, which teachers can choose to have performed for their classes or have their classes perform themselves. She also has a bilingual version available in English and Spanish.

While kicking off her project in her community, Schwartz’s play is taking off in other areas, as well. “I’ve been in contact with a woman from a school district in South Carolina who is interested in it there,” she revealed.

“I hope to spread awareness that kids who are different, whether culturally or because of a disability, that it’s not their fault,” she said. ●

Journey to NOW:

New Waivers Roll Out With Few Problems

By Carly Sharec

“Most of his therapeutic activities are now taking place within the community.”

The state’s New Options Waiver (NOW) and Comprehensive Supports Waiver Programs (COMP) went into effect on November 1, 2008 without much of a hiccup – except one. “The Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services (CMS) in Atlanta made a change literally 48 hours prior to November 1,” explained Dr. Stephen Hall, director of the Office of Developmental Disabilities out of the Department of Human Resources. “Because of the billing system, we needed to immediately change 1,400 folks to have their waivers rolled out by December 15.”

There is a silver lining in the cloud. “The good news is that the work was going to be divided up month by month, but now it’s all accomplished!” Hall stated. “So that’s a bit of good news.”

Sherry Richardson, an employee of Parent-to-Parent of Georgia and mother to 12-year-old Micah, is one of the first recipients of the waiver. “Because everything is so new, we haven’t really seen all

that’s left to come,” Richardson explained. The waiver is used for support for her son, who has autism.

“Initially, I am very hopeful that the changes we were told that are going

“Initially, I am very hopeful that the changes we were told that are going to take place will be of a benefit to our family.”

to take place will benefit our family.” Richardson continued to say that the New Options Waivers allows her to have more control over the providers and services that she can access for her son.

“We’re at a new level with my child,” she said. “Most of his therapeutic activities are now taking place within the community.”

Hall explained that an enormous number of families are happy with the changes that have been made. “These waivers empower them to be able to choose among providers now, instead of the state,” he said. He also stated how the unbundling of the natural support enhancement services have made the services that were once available to only 179 people now available to approximately 12,000.

Susan Reddaway, Micah Richardson’s service coordinator, explained that families shouldn’t notice too much of a difference other than a positive change. “As the waivers continue to go into effect, people will start seeing that they have more options,” Reddaway explained.

Richardson also said that communication between DHR and families receiving the waivers could be a little clearer. “A lot of families got caught off guard because a lot of services that they were using were put on hold,” she explained. “Some families can live with that, but others – those supports are critical to their child functioning. I think that it’s important for everyone to simply understand the process and to make sure that information about the waiver gets out through many different avenues so families can understand what’s going on.”

Hall stated that the Department of Human Resources has already held 54 community forums explaining these waivers to over 9,000 families, and has five additional scheduled forums beginning in January. “We also have a ‘Frequently Asked Questions’ section on our Web site,” he said. “Additionally, we ask family members to not hesitate to give us a call directly at our offices with any problems that they might have.” ●



“These waivers empower them to be able to choose among providers now instead of the state.”

PUBLISHER’S NOTE:
Making a Difference will follow the Richardsons over the next year to see how NOW has affected their family. The series will include perspectives from the family, state and private service providers.

Take Advantage of Tax Credits and Free Preparation

By: Richard Keeling, IRS



Richard Keeling began his career with the Internal Revenue Service in 1982 and worked several years in the compliance division of the government as an auditor, instructor and manager. In 2001, Richard was selected to his current position as a Senior Tax Analyst in Stakeholder Partnerships, Education and Communication (SPEC) of the Wage & Investment Division. His primary responsibility is working with the "Taxpayers with Disabilities" program. This program strives to provide more widespread access to tax information and free tax preparation to taxpayers with disabilities as well as asset building strategies to improve their economic well-being.

The Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC) is a refundable federal income tax credit for low-income working individuals and families. The U.S. Congress originally approved the tax credit legislation in 1975 in part to offset the burden of Social Security taxes and to provide an incentive to work. When the EITC exceeds the amount of taxes owed, it results in a tax refund to those who claim and qualify for the credit.

It's easy to see how EITC can make life a little easier in these hard economic times. A married couple with two children and an income ranging from \$12,060 to \$18,740 could be eligible for the maximum tax credit of \$4,824.

Generally, income and family size determine a taxpayer's eligibility and the EITC amount a taxpayer can receive. The maximum credit amounts of the EITC for 2008 are:

- Two or more children – \$4,824
- One child – \$2,917
- No children – \$438

To qualify for EITC, taxpayers must meet certain requirements and file a tax return, even if they did not earn enough money to be obligated to file a tax return. Rural residents, self-employed people such as farmers, workers with no children and people with disabilities are among those who may be eligible, but fail to claim, EITC.

The EITC has no effect on certain benefits. In most cases, EITC payments will not be used to determine eligibility for Medicaid, Supplemental Security Income (SSI), food stamps, low-income housing or most Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) payments. Nor does it count as a resource for nine months after the month of receipt for SSI purposes.

For more information on EITC, please visit the IRS EITC website at www.irs-eitc.info.

Free Tax Return Preparation

Puzzled by the tax law or which credits and deductions to take? Need assistance with your tax return? The IRS Volunteer Income Tax Assistance (VITA) Program or the Tax Counseling for the Elderly Program offer free tax help for which people with disabilities may qualify. Trained community volunteers can help determine if taxpayers are eligible for special credits, such as EITC, Child Tax Credit and Credit for the Elderly. In addition to free tax return preparation assistance, most sites also offer free electronic filing (e-filing). Individuals taking advantage of the e-file program will receive their refunds in half the time compared to returns filed on paper – even faster if the refund is deposited directly into a bank account.

The VITA Program offers free tax help to low- to moderate-income (generally, \$42,000 and below) people who cannot prepare their own tax returns. Certified volunteers receive training to help prepare basic tax returns. To locate the nearest VITA site, call 1-800-829-1040.

In Georgia, the Center for Financial Independence and Innovation is hosting several VITA sites geared specifically to assist people with disabilities prepare their tax returns. Confirmed sites include: Walton Options (Feb. 2, 3, 20); Center for Visually Impaired (Feb. 5); Columbus Library (Feb. 6); Shepherd Center (Feb. 10); Bobby Dodd Institute (Feb. 13). Visit www.thecfii.org or call 1-888-541-CFII (2344) for additional dates, locations and eligibility.

It's easy to see how EITC can make life a little easier in these hard economic times.



StraightTalk

Savings Program Inspires Artist By Kenneth Martin

After an automobile accident in 1965 that left me with spinal cord injuries, I participated in art classes which started the art journey.

Though I have sold several paintings, I wasn't able to make a living as a working artist. The Individual Development Account (IDA), will enable me to reach the next level as a successful working artist.

The IDA is a federal program that allows people with low incomes to participate in a savings match. The money saved and the match must be used to start a business, purchase a home or continue your education.

“The Individual Development Account (IDA), will enable me to reach the next level as a successful working artist.”

The IDA program is run by the Economic Opportunity Authority in Savannah. I have saved \$1,000, and they will match my savings in a four to one ratio, so I will end up with \$5,000 available to me to help start my business. I plan to use the money for reproductions of my original artworks.

The IDA requires a 12-week course on financial literacy and a four-week course on how to create a business plan. If you miss more than three classes, you won't qualify for the program. It took a lot of discipline.

The IDA program made me focus on whether I could make a living with my paintings. Was it a hobby or a progressive business? Developing my business plan helped me identify my competitors, target markets and price my work.

The matched funds, which come from the city of Savannah and the U.S. Department of Human Services, will go directly to the vendors that are listed in my business plan. Once you've identified how the money will be used in your business plan, the IDA funds can only be used for that purpose.

Without the IDA, it would have taken me at least five years to save \$5,000. Many people have creative, entrepreneurial ideas to make money so they can be more independent. The IDA gives them the money they need to start their own businesses. ●

Kenneth Martin is a coordinator at LIFE Center for Independent Living in Savannah where he helps people with physical disabilities find services. His art can be seen on the Web site klmartinstudio.com.



PUBLISHER'S NOTE:

As part of its legislative agenda, the Governor's Council on Developmental Disabilities is proposing IDAs in Georgia allow savers to purchase assistive technology, make their homes more accessible or buy accessible cars, in addition to what IDAs can be used for now (buy homes, start businesses or continue education). See page 10 for more details.



Mia Wants a Real Community

By Patricia Nobbie, Ph.D., Mia's Mom

In our last column, Mia and I wrote about the circle of support that gathered to help her move into her own apartment, and my relief that I didn't have to think of all the details on my own, that many people cared enough about Mia to help her achieve this milestone. In the interim months, so much stress has occurred in the system, budgetary, provider, NOW implementation, that it seems like we will enter yet another round of putting out fires instead of being able to thoughtfully plan the future. Whenever chaos reigns, there is potential for convenient solutions to rise up and seem more preferable than they ought, because the other alternatives look so bleak. We stand between a rock and a hard place now, and the only way through is having faith in people with disabilities who want to live their lives in real communities, AND, putting our unequivocal philosophical and financial support behind that faith.

Lately, I've had the opportunity to listen to some parents talk about their young adult children and where they would like them to live, and to my dismay, they desire placement in planned communities, where all the residents have disabilities, where there are organized services and activities, group living, group transportation, on-site nurses and therapists, etc., and I have listened to their frustration that these places can't be paid for with Medicaid funds. That is the hard place. I understand where they are coming from, because they desire safety and longevity, and the rock is the instability

around them, the lack of high quality providers in every community among which they would have truly viable choices that they can trust to support their family member. They are bone-tired, worried about the future, and I get that too.

Into this void, another planned community may step, and I know there are parents who will pay for it even if they cannot get funding. But I cannot go there. In a sillier moment, seeking a metaphor, I imagined a society that thought it might be a good thing to plan a community for blondes. After all, we are reputed to be ditzy, scatter-brained, naïve, with uncontrollable shopping impulses, too many shoes and the misguided notion that work was something we only had to do until we got married. We need structure and guidelines to keep us productive

and protect us from our vulnerabilities. I'm kidding, of course. But somehow, it seems to be OK that we always come around to planning these places for people like Mia.

Any time we plan places for certain people that separate them from everyone else, the community loses something. If we are smart enough to raise millions of dollars and convince a developer to invest in this planned placement, aren't we

smart enough to plan supports in businesses and homes that already exist in the same community that everyone else lives in?

If we take that leap of faith now, and finance it, in 10 years, it'll seem that that's the way it's always been. For now, Mia and I, and her circle, are going to try the real community first. ●

In a sillier moment, seeking a metaphor, I imagined a society that thought it might be a good thing to plan a community for blondes.

JANUARY

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www.parenttoparentofga.org

January 15 – 16
Governor’s Council on
Developmental Disabilities
Council Meeting
 404-657-2126
www.gcdd.org

January 23 – 24
Interpreting in
Mental Health
Co-sponsored by the National
Deaf Academy and the Gallaudet
University Regional Center
at Flagler College, this two-day
conference is for advanced level
training for interpreters who
work in a mental health setting.
 Orlando Renaissance Airport Hotel
 The Registry of Interpreters for
 the Deaf
 703-838-0030
www.rid.org

FEBRUARY

Early February
Georgia Aquarium’s
All-Inclusive Event
www.georgiaaquarium.org

February 10
What a Great IDEA!
A Brief Overview of
Special Education for
Parents and Families
 Pre-K Resource Center
 Hinesville, GA
 Sponsored by Parent to Parent
 1-800-229-2038
www.parenttoparentofga.org

February 25
Disability Day
at the Capitol
 404-657-2132
www.gcdd.org

MARCH

March 4
2009 AAPD
Leadership Gala
 The National Building Museum,
 Washington, DC
 202-457-0046, ext 24
www.aapd.com

March 7
What a Great IDEA!
A Brief Overview of
Special Education for
Parents and Families
Sponsored by Parent to Parent
 1-800-229-2038
www.parenttoparentofga.org

March 24
Sifting Through Your
Parental Rights
 Pre-K Resource Center
 Hinesville, GA
 Sponsored by Parent to Parent
 1-800-229-2038
www.parenttoparentofga.org

APRIL

April 16 - 17
Governor’s Council on
Developmental Disabilities
Council Meeting
 404-657-2126
www.gcdd.org





Below, please find further resources of information related to the articles in this edition of *Making a Difference* magazine.

Governor's Council on Developmental Disabilities (GCDD)
www.gcdd.org
 404-657-2126 or
 888-275-4233 (ASK-GCDD)

State Government

Department of Community Health
www.dch.state.ga.us
 404-656-4507

Department of Human Resources
www.dhr.georgia.gov
 404-656-4937

Georgia Senate & House of Representatives
www.legis.state.ga.us

Georgia Governor's Office
www.gov.state.ga.us
 404-656-1776

Department of Community Affairs
Georgia Housing Search
www.georgiahousingsearch.org
 877-428-8844

Department of Labor
www.dol.state.ga.us

General Information
www.georgia.gov

Georgia Lieutenant Governor's Office
www.ltgov.georgia.gov/02/ltgovhome/0,2214,2199618,00.html
 404-656-5030

Atlanta Events

Dialog in the Dark until March 1, 2009
www.dialogtickets.com
 Courtesy of Premier Exhibitions:
 404-842-2600

Georgia Aquarium
www.georgiaaquarium.org
 404-581-4000

Discovery Day
American Association of People with Disabilities (AAPD)
www.aapd.com
 800-840-8844

EARNWorks
www.earnworks.com
 1-866-327-6669

Legislative Agenda

Unlock the Waiting Lists!
www.unlockthewaitinglists.com
 1-877-WAITLIST

Organizing Communities

Asset Based Community Development
www.mike.green.org
 303-477-2686

Community Activators
www.communityactivators.com
 206-463-3666

Project South
www.projectsouth.org
 406-622-0602

Tax Info

Earned Income Tax Credit
www.irs.gov/eitc
 Tax Preparation Assistance

IRS
www.irs.gov
 800-829-1040

Center for Financial Independence and Information
www.thecfii.org
 404-541-9005

FREE TAX PREPARATION!

The Center for Financial Independence and Innovation will provide free tax preparation assistance for people with disabilities around the state:

- Walton Options (Feb. 2, 3, 20)
- Center for Visually Impaired (Feb. 5)
- Columbus Library (Feb. 6)
- Shepherd Center (Feb. 10)
- Bobby Dodd Institute (Feb. 13)

Visit www.thecfii.org or call 1-888-541-CFII (2344) for eligibility.



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JF&CS Division of Disabilities

- Residential - Highly individualized, community support with all ADL skills
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- Day Program - Creative alternative to supported employment
- Transition Program - Life Skills Development

For information call 770.677.9379 or email

DisabilitiesServices@jfcs-atlanta.org

www.YourToolsForLiving.org

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Division of Disabilities Services



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