

To: Frederick County Board of County Commissioners
From: Linda Werner, Chair of Frederick County Commission on Disabilities
Re: 2009 Report from Frederick County Commission on Disabilities
Date: December 18, 2009

The year 2009 was a very productive and exciting one for the Frederick County Commission on Disabilities. Considerable progress was made in several critical areas, including: the printing and distribution of the very informative *Keys to Independence* booklet, advocating for County residents who felt they were the victims of disability discrimination, and providing valuable assistance to governments and private businesses when their construction projects involved access requirements under the Americans with Disabilities Act.

In the past year the Commission on Disabilities ordered and distributed more than 500 copies of its *Keys to Independence* booklet. This is a high quality publication that provides nearly 40 pages of information about services, resources and other assistance available to persons with disabilities in our community. It covers housing, employment, medical and local service agencies, as well as state and national resources. This year the *Keys* booklet was also made available on the Commission's website. That is good, because after a local newspaper referred to it in an article the Commission received nearly a hundred requests over the next few days.

Commission on Disabilities members attended and participated in the Ft. Detrick EEO Conference in March, and also participated in the regional Elder Expo in October. These opportunities provided Commission members with a chance to discuss their work, distribute the *Keys* booklet and other information, and also hand out key rings, jar openers, magnets and other items that publicize the Commission and its efforts.

Twice during the year the Commission on Disabilities presented Distinguished Service Awards to individuals and businesses in our community that have truly gone "above and beyond" in their service to people with disabilities. We are extremely grateful that the Board of County Commissioners once again allowed these presentations to be made during its public meetings, and took the time to personally congratulate and thank each recipient. That truly makes these awards so special to each recipient. In April, Eric Zimmerman was honored for his work with the "Buddy Project", which makes personal computers available to persons with disabilities. The local architectural firm of Proffitt and Associates was also recognized for its outstanding design work on the Catoctin Creek Nature Park. And in October, Whitesell Pharmacy of Frederick received this much-deserved award for its valuable efforts.

The Commission on Disabilities also moved from a separate URL to a location on the Frederick County website, with the considerable (and much appreciated) help of Public Information Officer Robin Santangelo.

During the past year the Commission on Disabilities was contacted by a host of Frederick County residents who complained about various forms of discrimination they had experienced in connection with their disabilities. While the Commission does not have the authority to institute any kind of formal proceedings in these cases, we always make sure to inform people of the county, state and federal agencies that do, and how to get in touch with them. Instead, the Commission on Disabilities reaches out to explore each situation, to see if a mutually satisfactory resolution is possible. And in some cases,

it is. During the past year, we investigated and answered questions and complaints about each of the following matters:

- whether vehicles with valid disabled parking tags can park at City meters without paying
- what are the actual fines for violating disabled parking laws, and how can they be increased
- a "big store" greeter was fired for pushing her wheelchair backwards, after an injury to her arm made it difficult for her to roll it forward
- a County resident's disabled daughter moved here from California, and the mother wanted to make sure that the daughter's social security benefits weren't interrupted or reduced.
- a disabled, single-parent with two children who fell \$2400 in arrears on her electrical bill
- a County resident with a brother with a brain injury, who lives in a facility that called to say, "He's too much for us to handle. Either come get him by 5 pm today or we'll deliver him to your house."
- a hair salon that refuses to install a wheelchair ramp to assist its disabled patrons
- a resident who was told she wasn't welcome to join a local fitness club because of her disability.

As you can imagine, it continues to be a source of frustration and embarrassment that so many people with disabilities still encounter unfairness and discrimination on a daily basis.

The last major area of the Commission's work that I would like to report on involves our long-time member Gil House, who is truly a fountain of information about the architectural requirements of the Americans with Disabilities Act, and a passionate community resource who willingly volunteers many hours of his time to critically review and analyze the complex building and remodeling plans that are submitted to the County, city and state. Here are just a few examples of the major projects that Gil evaluated in 2009, and on which he has pointed out changes that needed to be made in order to avoid ADA violations:

- Frederick County Adult Detention Center Expansion, Phase IV
- Animal Control Shelter
- Brunswick Branch, Frederick County Library system
- Board of Education office building
- Parking Deck #6, near the Board of Education building
- Citizens Nursing Home new construction
- Ballenger Creek Park building
- Hope VI Project on Bentz Street
- Libertytown Park
- Winchester Hall – 1st floor meeting room renovations, as well as disabled parking signs outside
- disabled parking signs and striping at the County courthouse

In 2009 a state senator contacted Gil to get his perspective on legislation to require that all disabled parking spaces be made the same width as regular parking spaces, instead of being made narrower as is often the case. The Frederick County Office of Project Management now solicits Gil's input on all County building projects as early as possible. It like so many other jurisdictions and private businesses in the area, have found that Gil is often more knowledgeable about the architectural barrier prohibitions in the ADA than even the most experienced architects are. Gil truly deserves our thanks and recognition because he has done all of this work at no charge.

While Gil is being “term-limited” off the Commission, we have managed to convince him to continue his work reviewing and commenting on construction plans, and we’re hopeful that he will return to membership as soon as permitted.

We’re losing another very valuable member, Jamey George. She is the Director of The Freedom Center here in Frederick, and is also an incredibly valuable resource for all persons with disabilities. Jamey has generously shared her time and provided many hours of hard work in her service. We’re very sad to lose her, and are hopeful she will consider another term or two on the Commission in the future.

Despite all of our achievements, we have an abundance of work that needs to be done in 2010. We continue to struggle keeping all of our membership positions filled, and would be happy to meet with any members of the community who have an interest in helping accomplish this work.

Finally, we would again thank each member of the Board of County Commissioners for your support and participation during the past year. We are very grateful for the funds that you budgeted for us to use, and we’ve done our best to spend each dollar wisely.

At this point, I am done with my report to you, but would be happy to answer any questions you might have.