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ILLINOIS SPOTLIGHT

ADA anniversary marks some steps forward, others in place

By Mary Massingale Copley News Service

SPRINGFIELD, Ill. – Ann Ford remembers going on job interviews as a 1960s high school graduate and being repeatedly rejected for the same reason.

“I was told they couldn’t hire me because of my crutches,” said Ford, who suffered the effects of polio.

Ford now gets around on a motorized scooter as she lobbies for the rights of disabled individuals as executive director of the statewide Illinois Network of Centers for Independent Living. Such community-based centers provide peer counseling to disabled residents and offer information about accessible housing, transportation, jobs, personal assistants, interpreters and readers.

Ford marks the 1990 federal Americans with Disabilities Act as a turning point for residents with disabilities. Celebrating its 15th anniversary today, the landmark legislation grants civil rights protections to individuals with disabilities, guaranteeing them equal opportunity in public accommodations, jobs, transportation, state and local government services and telecommunications.

Streets marked by curb cuts, lower public drinking fountains, automatic doors and wheelchair-accessible bathroom stalls are just a few of the everyday manifestations of the ADA.

“The ADA has just built a lot of strengths that as we move forward, it’s going to result in a more accessible and inclusive society,” said Barry Taylor, legal advocacy director for the cross-disability group Equip for Equality.

However, barriers still remain. Of the estimated 54 million Americans with disabilities, only 35 percent are employed full or part time, according to a 2004 Harris Poll. The National Council on Disability in June cited a 2002 U.S. Bureau of Transportation study reporting that six million people with disabilities have difficulty getting the transportation they need.

In Illinois, advocates point to a high reliance on segregating developmentally disabled and mentally ill residents into state institutions and hospitals or nursing homes. A March 2005 preliminary report to the Illinois General Assembly by a professor at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign

appears to bear out those assertions. Elizabeth Powers of UIUC found Illinois’ policies regarding developmentally disabled and mentally ill individuals show a “marked funding bias strongly favoring the delivery of services in institutional settings.”

Powers found that in fiscal year 2004, nearly 60 percent of all state spending for the developmentally disabled went to state institutions or nursing homes. For the same period, 59 percent of all state expenditures for mental health programs was spent on institutional care. Powers does not include small group homes among institutions.

Powers also noted Illinois’ current funding policy flies in the face of the 1999 U.S. Supreme Court Olmstead decision. That ruling calls for states to provide disabled individuals with community-based living options, rather than nursing homes or institutions.

Don Moss, executive director of United Cerebral Palsy of Illinois, said the role of state-employee unions and nursing-home owners can’t be ignored in state policy-making.

“Decisions are based on political power and money rather than on the philosophy of what’s best for people with disabilities,” Moss said.

An advocate new to the Illinois political landscape, however, said he sees hope in changing the state’s current bias toward institution-like settings. After working as a consultant to 47 states, Allan Bergman a year ago was named president and chief executive officer of Chicago-based Anixter Center, which serves individuals with various physical and emotional disabilities.

“In most every state that has reversed the pendulum, a strong network of grass-roots advocacy made the difference,” Bergman said.

The state has a ways to go. The National Council on Disability in 2003 ranked Illinois sixth in the nation in its rate of institutionalization of individuals with developmental disabilities in public and private facilities.

The executive director of the Illinois Council on Developmental Disabilities said Illinois policy-makers should use today’s ADA anniversary as a jump-start to a bold philosophy change.

“With our celebrating 15 years, it’s one more reminder for us to step up to the plate as a state,” Sheila Romano said.