

CHOICES

WINTER 2007



Community Options Opens in Santa Fe!
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Caren Franzini and family pose after receiving her award for Person of the Year at the Morven in Princeton, NJ.

On Friday, September 7, 2007 Community Options recognized Caren Franzini, CEO of The New Jersey Economic Development Authority as their 7th Annual Person of the Year. The event was held at the Morven Museum and Garden in Princeton.

Ms. Franzini is a dedicated member of the community, continuously lending her support to non-profit organizations, entrepreneurs, and urban development. For many years she has shared Community Options' goal of employing individuals with disabilities. Ms. Franzini was the catalyst that pushed the first domino to create a chain reaction for Community Options innovative programs, specifically The Daily Plan It in Princeton, NJ.

The event brought close to 200 people from both the NJ, NY, and PA areas. Political leaders such as Tim Carden, Commissioner of the Department of Labor, David Socolow, and realty corporations such as Matrix Development, and Mack-Cali attended showing their support for the work Ms. Franzini has exhibited over the years.

2007 iMatter Conference Santa Fe, New Mexico

Are you a "system shaker?"

This was the question posed to all of the participants who attended the Community Options *imatter* Conference. This year's *imatter* Conference took place in Santa Fe, New Mexico and focused on Medicare and Medicaid Service Initiatives throughout the country.

The conference began with an extraordinary Keynote Address by Michelle Lujan Grisham, Esq. Michelle was previously the Secretary of New Mexico's Department of Health working under Governor Bill Richardson. Michelle's opening address for the conference was not only refreshing but inspiring. Lined with humor and grace, Michelle challenged all of us to participate in a cultural revolution as it relates to our attitudes regarding individuals with disabilities. She challenged us to not only look at our vocabulary as it relates to individuals with disabilities but also focus on how disability affects each and every one of us as individuals.



Michelle Lujan Grisham, Esq., Kim and Peter Dulligan, Dr. Colleen Wieck, Dr. York, and Robert Stack, President/CEO, gather during the Opening Sessions at the *imatter* conference in Santa Fe, NM.

Deborah Armstrong, PT, JD, Cabinet Secretary of the New Mexico Aging and Long Term Services Department addressed the Mi Via (My Way) path to self-direction initiative and the four 1915(c) waivers. The Mi Via program is to New Mexico as Real Life Choices is to New Jersey in that the participants of the program lead the way in designing a program and budget that works for them and no one else. Participants plan and purchase services, supports and goods, develop their plans and budgets, hire, train, terminate and decide on employee pay rates within a suggested range of rates. All of the services and support plans are designed to meet the functional, medical and social needs of the individual. Participants of the Mi Via program are able to purchase any traditional waiver serves and other self-designated goods and services.

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Community Options of El Paso's Open House. Mayor John Cook read the Proclamation declaring October 22th - 26th, 2007 Community Options, Inc. National Disability Awareness Week.



Pittsburgh's Mayor Luke Ravenstahl (Far Right) read a proclamation declaring October 22-26 as Community Options Disability Awareness Week.

Community Options Inc., of Northern New Jersey in conjunction with other offices across the country, declared October 22-26, 2007 as Community Options Disability Awareness Week.

"We are excited about this new beginning. We see the declaration of Awareness week as a building block. We plan on running a fundraiser and other activities that will help raise money and educate others about people with disabilities," said Dr. Jessica Guberman, Executive Director. Over 100 individuals supported by Community Options of Northern New Jersey in residential and employment settings, in addition to family members and staff of Community Options attended the open house and ceremony on the October 22, 2007. The open house showed the beautiful restoration of the Northern New Jersey office as the office was shut down for over 3 months due to severe flooding that took place in April 2007.

The National Development Council of Community Options, chaired by Guberman will also begin an, "iVote because iMatter" Campaign for 2008. The campaign will consist of ensuring that anyone with a disability that has a desire to vote can and will. The council will work to locate accessible polling places, aiding individuals with voter registration and holding local and regional forums on the issues that are most important in this year's upcoming election. In addition to the voting campaign, the Northern New Jersey Community Options Business Advisory Council will be planning the 2008 iMatter Walk for Children with Autism.

Community Options of Connecticut celebrated Disability Awareness Week at our home at 35 Yale St. in Bristol on Friday, October 26th. Residents, their staff and family members attended. We extended an invitation to our neighbors, and were happy to meet some of them that evening.

Our City Councilman in Bristol, Kevin McCauley, attended and read the proclamation from Bristol's Mayor, William T. Stortz. Also in attendance from the City was Anthony Decrisantis, Zoning Officer.

COI's Empire State Building office in New York City added its own touch. Many people we support came by the office and brought family and friends. Everyone was impressed with the views.

In Brooklyn, an open house was held and Borough President, Marty Markowitz read a proclamation stating that in Brooklyn it was Community Options Disability Awareness Week. Seven staff received special awards for completing 10 years of service. Congratulations to Leslyn Mitchell, Milda Torres, Mary Samaroo-Ali, Bernadette Noel, Gilbert Simmons, Ingrid Alexis-Wright and Sherma Rougier.

Binghamton's Mayor Matt Ryan attended the open house and read a proclamation there also stating Community Options Disability Awareness week was official. The newly renovated space was a big hit among the state representatives that attended. The week was capped off by a staff appreciation luncheon.

Syracuse had a proclamation created by Mayor Roy A. Bernardi.

Chattanooga hosted an open houses during Disability Awareness Week at their new office. The Chattanooga Open House was on Thursday October 25th celebrating Community Options 4th year in Chattanooga.

The Cookeville office's participation in Disability Awareness Week began with a cookout at Cane Creek park on October 20, 2007. There was food and a live band playing at the event where attendees made donations to support individuals with disabilities, along with a DJ to host the event. Following that, on Monday October 22 the Mayor of Cookeville Sam Sallee read the proclamation. There were refreshments and tours of the office and some local homes.

Community Options of Nashville received a Proclamation signed by the Governor of Tennessee, Phil Bredesen, declaring the week of October 22-26, 2007 Disabilities Awareness Week. To commemorate this event we hosted an Open House at the Nashville Office inviting individuals supported by Community Options, families, DMRS representatives as well as other supporters and friends.

The Nashville office was honored to have Ms. Jody Folk, Deputy to the First Lady of Tennessee present to read the Proclamation acknowledging Community Options' Awareness campaign.

Anna Gonzalez, Nashville's Director of Employment Services recognized six employers for their outstanding commitment to empower individuals with disabilities to make a difference and contribute to their community. Among those acknowledged were Chili's, Longhorn Steakhouse, Tennessee Air National Guard, Food Staff, and Outback Steakhouse.

The El Paso office had their open house for the new building on October 22nd, 2007. Mayor John Cook read the Proclamation declaring October 22th through October 26th, 2007 as Community Options, Inc. National Disability Awareness Week. It was a huge success attended by our city council and 150 participants from various agencies and local businesses. A special thank you to The Hispanic Chamber of Commerce and the staff who worked hard to make this a successful event. The El Paso Chamber of Commerce honored Community Options National Disability Awareness Week by lighting the star on Mt. Franklin.



Wayne Mayor Scott Rumana shakes hands and signs autographs for Howard Newman after reading a proclamation at our Wayne office on October 22, 2007.



Community Options Cookeville, TN gathers around Mayor Sam Sallee (center) holding the Proclamation declaring Community Options Disability Awareness Week.



Mayor of Binghamton Matt Ryan announced the open house at the Binghamton office with Regional Vice President Todd Hansen and Executive Director Darlene Leonard.

Dr. Colleen Wieck, a long time friend of Community Options, addressed Parallels in Time which is a history of society’s attitudes and treatment of persons with developmental disabilities. Dr. Wieck is the Executive Director of the Minnesota Governor’s Council on Developmental Disabilities of the Department of Administration, a position she has held for the past 24 years. Dr. Wieck is the primary creator of Partners in Policymaking which is a leadership training program for adults with disabilities and parents of young children with developmental disabilities. She has worked on numerous public policy issues including deinstitutionalization, supported employment, family support, self-determination and education.

Secretary Alfredo Vigil, MD closed the first day of the conference with a presentation about his plethora of experience working with the people of New Mexico, specifically, individuals with developmental disabilities. Dr. Alfredo Vigil has 30 years of extensive clinical and management experience specializing in family medicine, geriatrics, emergency medicine and reproductive health issues. He has worked in private practice, community health centers, hospitals and other non-profit organizations. For the past five years, he was chief executive officer of El Centro Family Health, a non-profit primary care organization in Española. Governor Bill Richardson appointed Dr. Vigil in June 2007 to serve as secretary of the New Mexico Department of Health, the largest state agency. The Department of Health works with New Mexicans to prevent disease, prepare for health emergencies, promote sound health policy, protect vulnerable individuals and provide support and advocacy to individuals with disabilities.

Dr. Vigil posed one of the most important questions of the day. “Green or Red?” Which to those of us visiting New Mexico for the first time, this information was invaluable. The question of green or red relates to the type of Chile you would like when ordering at a restaurant. Needless to say, the first day of the conference was filled with insightful and innovative ways to continue to serve individuals with disabilities in our own states and how to gracefully “shake the system.”

The second day of the conference began with an opening presentation by Sandra Barrett, the Assistant Director of the Division of Aging and Adult Services in the state of Arkansas. Mrs. Barrett focused on the past, present and future of the Cash and Counseling Program. Mrs. Barrett pointed out the essential elements of cash and counseling to be person centered planning for personal assistance, individual directed budgets that give that person hiring and budget authority, participant support including financial management and counseling services in addition to quality assurance and improvement systems. There are some expansion states involved with the Cash and Counseling Program and they are Pennsylvania, Rhode Island, Vermont, Washington and West Virginia.

The Individual and Family Forum was last on the agenda of the iMatter Conference and this forum was moving, full of emotion and tears. Individuals supported through the Mi Via program in New Mexico talked about the benefits of the program and how having the opportunity to

participate in the Mi Via program has completely improved the quality of their lives, dramatically. There were three family members on the forum that shared their struggles of trying to locate and identify services for their loved one with a disability in their respective states. Hearing these stories would turn anyone into an advocate. These were real and honest stories of triumph, hardship and the long struggle to find peace, safety and inclusion for the people they love the most in the world.

Walking away from the conference, all of us left asking ourselves the question, “what can I do?” Disability affects all of us either directly or indirectly. Whether you are a professional, parent, relative, public official, business owner, sister or brother, you can be an advocate. You can challenge your state government with your peers to make long term systems change. There is power in numbers – you do not stand alone in wanting to effect systems change within our state governments to advise on how to spend money wisely, implement changes in service

delivery and demand the opening of more community homes in your local communities that promote inclusion to the individuals we support and not isolation in degrading and horrific state institutions.

While the question of “Green or Red” is a good one, a better question to ask yourself is “Are you a system shaker?” Are you willing to step out of your own comfort zone to advocate for individuals with disabilities? What are you willing to do so that individuals with disabilities, our brothers, sisters, friends, colleagues, sons and daughters can live their most independent, fulfilling life with dignity and grace?



Secretary Alfredo Vigil M.D. and Executive Director of El Paso Mario Saenz pause during one of the breaks at the Inn and Spa at Loretto which housed the annual imatter Conference.



(Top)Angela Larkins from Pittsburgh, Shirley Harrison and her daughter Shannon attended the conference to learn more about Medicaid and to participate on the Individual and Family Panel.(Below) Jessica Guttman, Tim Hickman, Angela Larkins, Mary Lourdes Winberry, Glenna Taylor, Marge Brown, Moderator make up the Individual and Family Panel.

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Creative Services, a subsidiary of
Community Options Enterprises,
designed & produced this newsletter as
well as the Community Options website
employing persons with & without disabilities.

www.comop.org

Give the gift of flowers & support employment
opportunities for individuals with disabilities:

www.Vaseful.com

“It was the great love and passion that Diane and Robin had for their daughter and niece that inspired them to advocate for a law, now known as Danielle’s Law. It is their love that inspires them to continue to advocate for the law’s best and most effective implementation. And it is love that has helped grow this beautiful garden that will stand as a fitting tribute to Danielle. All who enjoy this place of beauty and peace will remember the lasting goodness that can come from just one person.”

- Senator Tom Kean Jr.

To be included in Danielle’s Garden will be a bronze wheelchair, where children can sit and imagine what it is like to be disabled, as Danielle was.

- Diane Gruskowski.

Danielle’s Garden

Excerpt taken from “A Mother’s Love”

Danielle’s Law was signed on October 26, 2003, 4 years ago yesterday and has been saving precious lives. November 5, 2007 will be the 5-year anniversary that Danielle is no longer with us.

“Danielle’s Garden” is a beautiful testimonial to my precious daughter Danielle. It is an honor, a tribute, and a lasting legacy. Danielle has made such a difference in so many lives. My daughter had a mission here on earth ... proving that one little girl can make such a big difference.

“Danielle’s Garden” is a very special place for me, a place of remembering a beautiful young spirited girl who gave so much love to everyone unconditionally. The garden is a peaceful place to relax and reflect and think about how precious “a” life is. To me, it is like a little piece of heaven on earth. When I am strolling through the garden I find much peace and serenity because I know that Danielle is here with me in spirit. The garden is a beautiful model of life’s most important lessons ... lessons that stick with you throughout your lifetime.

My hope is that “Danielle’s Garden” inspires the children of today to be compassionate toward other people that might not be as fast as them or who might not be as smart as them, and embrace their friendship of love of life. I feel very honored that God has given my family such a special gift in Danielle.

Danielle has brought a community together, and the community has embraced her and continues to speak out for her and others like her. Carteret is a wonderful community ... full of compassionate and loving people. Danielle has touched the lives of many people and the support of her memory continues to positively impact children like her throughout the country.

Danielle was – and her legacy is – living proof that this garden will memorialize Danielle’s love of life to everyone that visits. Danielle’s spirit and her memory are as alive as ever.

My family and I would like to thank Mayor Daniel Reiman and the Carteret Council members wholeheartedly for honoring my daughter Danielle’s memory with this beautiful living sensory garden. They have always had compassion toward our special citizens. What a tribute and legacy they have left for “our precious Danielle”. I would also like to thank Senator Tom Kean Jr., Senator Joe Vitale, Assemblyman John Wisniewski and Carolyn Fefferman, (*representing Senator Robert Menendez*) for their continued support of Danielle and others like her.



The Gruskowski Family