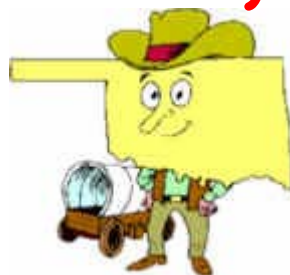


OFFICE OF HANDICAPPED CONCERNS

WILL'S CORNER, OKLAHOMA



Volume 5, Issue 4

October, 2004

(Serving the Disability Community of Oklahoma)

ELECTION TIME AGAIN!

It is a fact that people with disabilities vote in lesser percentages than other minority groups nationwide. This is probably a result of a lot of things. Just dealing with a disability on a day-by-day basis consumes our energy where there is little time or energy left to deal with something which may not promise immediate returns. Learning about candidates, pressing candidates for a position on issues, and learning about issues themselves can be an intimidating experience in itself. Add to this accessibility issues of the polling place itself and you have formidable obstacles which discourage us. Is the effort it would take me to become an informed voter and registering to vote really worth it all? You bet it is. We may have other concerns to occupy us as persons with disabilities for the immediate future, but in the long range we have much to gain from actively involving ourselves in the democratic process. Let's look at some of the things we can do.

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ACCESSIBILITY News from Stillwater, OK.

So, what's going on in Stillwater, Oklahoma as far as accessibility for people with disabilities? Apparently a lot is going on. I've been talking with Jason Gage who is the City Manager of that city, and he's been letting me in on some interesting things. Let me share with you a little.

The City of Stillwater is interested in serving all their citizens. That may or may not sound like a noteworthy phenomenon. Government is charged with serving its citizens. But some citizens may have special needs. That word "special" scares me. Is it going to cost more to serve citizens with special needs? It may cost more but the advantages are present to all citizens regardless of ability. Let's look at an example of that.

Jason says that in Stillwater they're discussing changing the building codes on new and renovated sidewalks to make them five feet wide instead of four feet wide. Obviously that would help individuals in wheelchairs get out into the community, but it also helps young families who take their baby out in the stroller. It also helps bicycle riders who legally can ride on Stillwater sidewalks. That extra width costs more to construct, but that initial cost pays off in a better quality of life for everyone—not just people with disabilities.

Stillwater has a Community Center which they have converted out of an old junior high school. They are renovating the theater and west wing of the Community Center, and in this renovation they are dedicating 20% of the

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OHC web site:

www.ohc.state.ok.us

***ACCESSIBILITY* News from Stillwater, OK. (continued)**

funds to making that theater and community center more accessible to people with disabilities. Jason says that the City of Stillwater needs to look at more than just physical accessibility, but they also need to look at program accessibility. For instance, people who are hearing impaired need assistance in hearing at meetings in community conference rooms. Jason wants the main meeting room equipped with assisted listening devices for the hearing impaired, and he wants a portable listening device to take to other conference rooms which the city operates. Good idea.

The biggest area in the Stillwater budget impacting public programs is the Stillwater Parks, Events, and Recreation Department. Recreation includes a number of programs to teach the arts to Stillwater citizens. Jason suggests we look at how we teach painting, weaving, and glassblowing classes that would make these classes accessible to people with developmental disabilities. What if that person had only limited use of their hands? How could the class be structured which would permit that individual to participate as well? I like those kinds of questions. How can we serve everybody when everybody is not alike? Let's broaden our programs to meet everyone's needs. Steve Stokes, the Director of the Office of Handicapped Concerns always says, "We are all only temporarily able bodied." If we broaden our services today, we may actually help ourselves in the future. Something to think about.

You say, well, it's nice to talk about all this theory, but how does it translate into real life. How is life in Stillwater, Oklahoma going to change? How can theory help me? I need to be able to get my wheel-

chair into City Hall today. I need to be able to use a public restroom if I am out in the community. I would like to use a public sidewalk and to be able to cross the street with a curb cut. I want to go to a play at the Community Theater. These are legitimate desires of citizens with disabilities who want the right to participate in community affairs but who have long been excluded.

Jason Gage tells me that the City of Stillwater has allocated \$50,000 just to work on accessibility issues on sidewalks and ramps. The City hired the company *Complete Actions Solutions, L.L.C.* of Wichita, Kansas to survey all the Stillwater facilities and property looking for structural barriers to people with disabilities. This survey was completed in February of this year and is to be used in guiding planning to eliminate structural barriers. Stillwater found out that even in newer buildings, they are not 100% compliant with the Accessibility Guidelines of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA). With this in mind, Jason is recommending the establishment of an *Accessibility Advisory Board* to the City of Stillwater, and this board would include members of the disability community.

The City of Stillwater has also adopted the Accessibility Guidelines of the ADA into their city codes for public parking. As the Accessibility Guidelines become stricter, city code will follow automatically. Stillwater is serious about this issue. Elected officials are open to improving accessibility to all citizens. Jason talks about educating the city building staff on the Americans with Disabilities Act and how this federal legislation impacts what they do locally in Stillwater. He talks about bringing in the business community with what the city is doing and the needs for accessibility locally. He talks about being in communication with the Disability Coordinator of Oklahoma State University. Leadership. People working together to help people. Communication. These are things necessary to change a community. Jason Gage, the City Man-

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State of Oklahoma
www.youoklahoma.com

P.A.L.S. (Practical Assistive Living Services)

You've got a pal in Mel Nowland, and I'll bet you never even knew it. Mel is a retiree from AT&T and has spent the last forty years building and repairing equipment to make life easier for people with disabilities. It started out in 1962 when his wife quite suddenly became disabled with rheumatoid arthritis. He built her a knob turner out of a block of wood which would catch on the knob to turn the stove on. The long handle magnified her grasp. Back in the 60's bouffant hairdos were popular, and one day Mel walked in on his wife bent down trying to activate an aerosol can of hairspray. She couldn't depress the small button. Mel thought about things awhile and came up with a gadget which fit on top of an aerosol spray can and had a three-inch trigger attached which she could pull and easily activate the spray. Not only was she able to use her hairspray, but she was also able to use the Windex bottle to clean the bathroom mirror. She had felt so helpless after developing the arthritis, but now she began to be able to function in the world Mel was creating for her.

That's how it all got started. But maybe I should go back even further than that. Maybe I should go back to the time Mel Nowland was thinking about what he could do to serve the Lord. Mel thought about preaching, but his audience went to sleep. Nope, that wouldn't work. Mel thought about laying on of hands, but he found out he didn't have the gift of healing. Mel was stumped for awhile until he looked around and said to himself, "God has given me technical ability to work with my hands. Let me use that ability to help others. That's what my calling really is."

Sure enough, Mel had overlooked his strong suit by trying to fit himself into someone else's mold. He could fix things. He could make things. Now he had to find out how to channel this talent to help other people. He and his wife had good friends who worked at Easterseals in Oklahoma City. In 1964 Mel began adapting toys for children with disabilities. A speech therapist came to him in desperation that she worked with an eleven year old

boy who absolutely did not speak. He did not utter a sound of any kind, and she had to figure out how to get this boy to talk so that he would be able to find a home in foster care. What can I do. Everything fails. Can you help me?

Mel's brain went into gear. He bought an N-gauge electric train and mounted in on a big piece of plywood. He hooked the train up to a voice-activated switch and set the whole thing in front of the boy. Now he demonstrated how he could make the train run through his voice. Nurses at the facility did the same, but it seemed like all efforts were ignored. This young man was not going to be able to talk—ever. Never say never is how the saying goes. Two days later nurses walked in on the boy shouting "Yeah, yeah, yeah" as the train sped along the tracks. Ten days later the boy could use eight words meaningfully, and within six months the nurses couldn't shut him up. Mel had had his first great success. A boy whom everyone had given up on began to talk and when he was able to talk, he found a foster home to live in. Success. Let's see what else we can do.

Some parents of children with severe visual disabilities decided they'd like to have an Easter egg hunt for their children. One problem—their children couldn't see. What to do? Mel bought a cart full of plastic Easter eggs at Target and proceeded to install a blinking LED, a buzzer, and a battery in each one. Guess what—the eggs began to beep and

(Continued on page 4)



**You know it's the
21st century
when you just
tried to enter
your password on
the microwave.**

***ACCESSIBILITY* News from Stillwater, OK. (continued)**

ager of Stillwater says, "Stillwater prides itself as a progressive and educated community, and as a result we believe improving community accessibility for all our citizens is the right thing to do."

Now is a good time to contact your city commissioners about structural accessibility and program accessibility in city government in Stillwater. You may want to get a copy of the accessi-

bility study done back in February. Call the Office of the City Manager at 405-742-8209. Mary Rupp, the Assistant City Manager, is also the ADA Coordinator for the City of Stillwater. You may have a concern to share with her. Stillwater has 525 employees with an annual budget of \$84 million. This city is serious about making its buildings and programs accessible to everyone.

P.A.L.S. (Practical Assistive Living Services) (continued)

could be located by that constant sound. Some blind kids got to go on their first Easter egg hunt, and it was fun, fun, fun. Mel's reaction? "Can you think of a better way for an old man to play with toys and not get laughed at?" Go guy.

In 1994 Mel worked on a technical project for the Oklahoma City United Cerebral Palsy which they submitted at the national convention in Chicago. I guess you already know who won that competition. Channel 5 in Oklahoma City featured Mel in their *Five Who Care* series. He has been interviewed in numerous articles for the *Daily Oklahoman* down through the years. Recently an instructor at the University of Central Oklahoma has been taking her special education students to visit Mel and learn about the things he does.

And by the way, all the things Mel has done have been done in his off-duty time while he was still working at AT&T and as a volunteer after he retired. You see, Mel did this in addition to being a husband and father and provider for his family.

Today he is 70 years old and still making and repairing equipment for people with disabilities. Mel wasn't good with words to keep an audience alive. He didn't have any special talents, but he could work on things and figure out how to help people live better lives. That's no special talent—or is it?

Which brings us back to the title of this article, P.A.L.S. P.A.L.S stands for Practical Assisted Living Services. Mel founded P.A.L.S as a non-profit organization to create and repair adaptive equipment for people with disabilities. He works out of his home, and his garage is filled with materials and things he has created to make life easier for people with disabilities. No patents. No government money. He works on the shouts of that eleven year old boy, "Yeah, yeah, yeah!"

P.S. Maybe you'd like to talk with Mel awhile yourself. He can be reached at 405-752-4241 or pals12345@aol.com.

Read All About It!

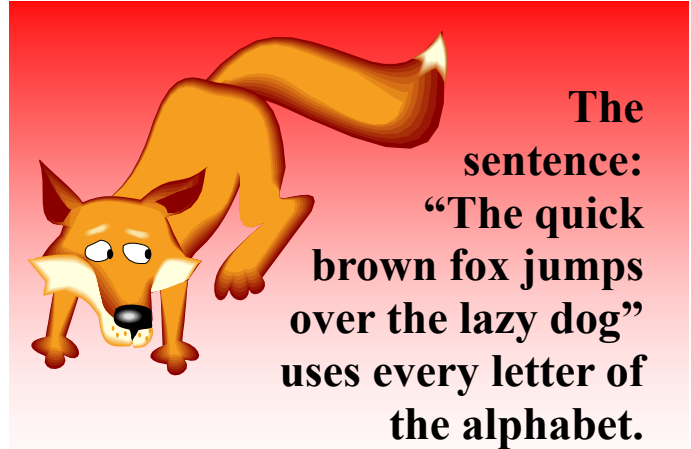
The Office of Handicapped Concerns has published its new book on housing for people with disabilities. Download it from the website www.ohc.state.ok.us or call 800-522-8224 to reserve your copy.

PRESCRIPTION ASSISTANCE: RSVP Please

Please RSVP for your prescription assistance. Yea, sure, like it's that easy. All I need to do is call in with a dial of the fingers and instant relief from the high cost of prescription medications. It is hard not to scoff at hope when it comes after long delay—delay in which suffering is acute and painful. Maybe a spark of hope comes after we had long ago given up hope in our efforts to afford the medications we need.

The high cost of prescription medications continues in the public eye earlier this year with the passage of Medicare prescription assistance for Medicare beneficiaries. Americans have asked themselves why the cost of prescriptions has been so much higher for them than for the same medications in other countries. They have been told various stories that prescription medications were not as safe from other countries and that offering Americans the same deal that other countries had would undercut the research and development of new medications. The argument goes that if we pay less, we will sacrifice the continuing development of ever more sophisticated medications to control the suffering of disease. And yet

With this in mind, let me share with you a new program in Oklahoma run by the Norman R.S.V.P. (Retired Senior Volunteer Program). Julie Lovegrove has been operating a Prescription Assistance Program out of the Norman R.S.V.P. since February 18 of this year. She works along with the Oklahoma Pharmacy Council established by the Oklahoma Legislature to begin this pilot program in Norman to see what can be done to get people the prescriptions they need at a reduced cost. One stipulation of any planning was that the program would operate legally and with the full cooperation of the large drug manufacturers, most of whom are headquartered in this country. Sound impossible? Too good to be true? Well, 500+ people who have been assisted in receiving over \$3 million worth of medications at reduced charge say different.



One 55 year old man with disabilities says, “(It) changed my life, I can spend some quality time with my family and not be afraid of my seizure disorder causing problems.” A 48 year old single mother of two with severe, chronic depression says, “I am now able to work and support my family because I don’t have to choose between food and shelter and my medication. I used to feel so helpless because my children only knew about the problems we have. I can be a fun Mom sometimes now.”

And what about the couple who are both hearing impaired and have diabetes? The husband works full time, but like many working Oklahomans, has no prescription coverage. He appreciates RSVP saying, “(It) helped out a lot, and my wife feels much better now.” Affordable prescription medications is an issue right here in Oklahoma as well as the rest of the nation.

Julie Lovegrove of the Norman R.S.V.P. office sought funding from the United Way and the local Community Action program to get this program off the ground last February. Staff is provided through volunteers who work in the Retired Senior Volunteer Program to assist other Oklahomans receive affordable medical prescriptions. Julie tells me that the Norman R.S.V.P. technically serves only

(Continued on page 6)

PRESCRIPTION ASSISTANCE: RSVP Please (continued)

Cleveland and McClain Counties but that the Prescription Assistance Program of R.S.V.P. has had customers from across Oklahoma who have heard about the program and come to learn more. The Norman R.S.V.P. has helped consumers from as far away as Woodward in the northwest or Altus in the southwest. Since they are the only pilot program of prescription assistance in the state, they are not turning people away. Let's see how the program works.

When you come to Norman, you will be given a simple form (two pages) to be completed giving basic demographic information and a list of your medications. (You may receive this form through the mail if driving into the office is inconvenient.) R.S.V.P. has special computer software which connects with a website from the various drug manufacturing companies. Applications for the prescription assistance programs of all the drug manufacturers pop up on the computer screen, and the volunteers are able to merge your demographic information onto the application of the manufacturer of your particular medications. You sign the application after it is printed out and take the application to your doctor who in turn attaches a prescription to mail to the pharmaceutical company. Depending on the company, the filled prescription is sent either to your doctor or to your home and generally comes within three weeks.

Through this program you receive only brand name medications. For some of the pharmaceutical companies, your application is good for only 90 days. For some it is good for a year. The Prescription Assistance Program of R.S.V.P. asks that you have an income of less than 200% of poverty for your county. They also check to see that you have no other prescription assistance program such as Medicaid or private insurance. If you do have Medicaid, they will assist you in getting prescriptions only if you need more prescriptions that what Medicaid will pay for. Julie Lovegrove explains that this program helps the working poor who have no health insurance through their jobs.

**Amazing!...
You just hang
something in your
closet for awhile, and
it shrinks two sizes.**



Julie continues, "This is a win/win program for pharmaceutical companies, doctors, emergency rooms, the individual and the community. We can help people who are barely getting by obtain their medicine and continue to be productive." As the pilot prescription assistance project demonstrates success, it will spread to other Retired Senior Volunteer Programs across Oklahoma. For now we can use the Norman chapter to assist us to meet our prescription medication needs.

If you have computer access, you can actually do some of this search for meds on your own without the assistance of the Prescription Assistance Program of the Norman R.S.V.P. Go to the website www.rxassist.org and you will find out how to search for medications by brand name, generic name, drug class, or drug manufacturers. Many companies have prescription assistance programs to help low-income individuals who do not have other programs to pay for their medications.

We want to thank the Norman chapter of the Retired Senior Volunteer Program for piloting prescription assistance as one of its services. If you want to learn more about this program, contact Julie Lovegrove at the Norman R.S.V.P. office—1125 E. Main Street in Norman. You may ask for her at 405-701-2185 or email her at jlovegrove@cocaa.org. You may be seeking prescription assistance or you may want to volunteer your time and/or money to help others. The Norman R.S.V.P. operates with volunteers. People helping people makes a difference.

ELECTION TIME AGAIN! (continued)

In past issues of *Will's Corner, Oklahoma* we have addressed voting and accessibility of polling places several times. To recap some of that information, a person can register to vote at the county election board or at any authorized tag agency. You may also make changes in your registration there. If you want to vote in a particular election, you must register at least 24 days prior to that election. For most of you reading this article right now, it is too late to register to vote for the upcoming presidential election, but don't worry about this. Register anyway. You'll be able to vote in future elections.

Some people with disabilities may find it more convenient to vote absentee. To vote absentee you may request an application from the county election board. (County election boards are in each Oklahoma County and can be located under county government in the phone book.) You may choose to vote absentee in a specified election or in all the elections held in a given year. The election board will mail your ballot a reasonable time before the election. For your absentee ballot to be counted, it must be received in the mail at the election board by 7 p.m. on the day of the election. The advantage of absentee voting is the convenience of voting in your own home and mailing your ballot. This avoids problems of accessibility at the polling places.

Polling places across Oklahoma are reporting that 91% are accessible to all people with disabilities. The Disability Law Center is receiving information on accessibility of individual polling places in our state. If you have information to share, contact Melissa Sublet at 918-743-6220 in Tulsa or 800-226-5883. If you feel your polling place is inaccessible to you, you may request to be transferred to another voting location that is accessible. This request is addressed to the local county election board and should be done well in advance of an election.

What other accommodations are possible? A voter may ask for an assistant to help them vote. This assistant may be either a polling official or an assis-

tant of the voter's choice. For individuals unable to enter the polling station, assistance is available curbside. The voter may choose as their assistant someone they bring with them or a polling official. If you feel you will need special accommodations, it is important that you contact your local election board. Tell them what your disability is and how this affects your voting. **Ask for what you need.** Election officials are there to serve you and to allow you to exercise your right to express your political opinion.

We have a major election coming up in Oklahoma and nationwide on November 2. There will be nine state questions on the ballot. You will have the opportunity to approve or disapprove of each of these questions. You may call your county election board to find out what these issues are before you actually cast your ballot.

In the U.S. presidential race, you will be able to choose between the Democratic and Republican candidates. We have a Republican, a Democrat, and an Independent candidate running for the U.S. Senate. All five Oklahoma congressional districts will be electing a representative to go to Washington, D.C.

We will be electing many state senators and state representatives in November to represent us in state government in Oklahoma City. You may call the county election board to receive a sample ballot in advance of the election to prepare yourself for Election Day. Radio, television, and newspapers continue to cover national, state, and local political campaigns. Issues affecting people with disabilities are present in federal, state, and local elections. How do you stand with the issues and with the candidates?

The superior man is slow in his words and earnest in his conduct.
Confucius

CALENDAR OF EVENTS

- October 26, 2004** The Mayor's Committee on Disability Concerns is having their annual awards luncheon at the Clarion Hotel in Oklahoma City. Contact Milly Tibbits for more information at 405-553-3482.
- November 2, 2004** Election Day statewide. Register to vote at the county Election board or local tag agency.
- November 4-5, 2004** Transformations for Recovery: 2004 Best Practices sponsored by the Oklahoma Dept. Mental Health and Substance Abuse geared for mental health professionals. The conference will take place at the Reed Conference Center in Midwest City. For more information call 405-522-8300.
- November 20, 2004** First-ever conference on Parkinson's Disease free to the public. The conference will be at Mercy Health Center room C in OKC. Call 405-752-3600 for more information.
- December 4, 2004** The Wrightslaw Special Education Law and Advocacy Training Program will be sponsored by the Disability Law Center at the Nigh University Ballroom of the University of Central Oklahoma. Free registration for parents or primary educational caregivers of students with disabilities. Call 405-409-5761 or 405-409-5759.

If you have an event coming up relating to disability, let us know at 800-522-8224 and we'll help you publicize.

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