

Tenth Annual Disability Caucus Highlights

By Nancy Scott, Working Healthy and WORK Program Manager

The 10th Kansas Disability Caucus was held in Topeka on August, 8, 9, and 10. More than 500 people with all types of disabilities of every age and representing every county in Kansas met to become educated about new programs, develop leadership skills and identify emerging issues and solutions for Kansans with disabilities.

The title of this year's caucus was "Pathways Out of Poverty Working Towards Our Future." Speakers and Caucus sessions focused on employment opportunities for Kansans with disabilities through a panel of people with disabilities who discussed their employment experiences, sessions on the new WORK program, self-employment opportunities, and information from the employer's perspective. Key-note speakers stressed the importance of competitive, integrated employment to increase the health and overall wellness of people. Most notable was Mike Donnelly, the Director of Kansas Vocational Rehabilitation Services, who spoke to issues regarding poverty and the need for changing attitudes toward employment of people with disabilities within and outside the disability community.

Conference participants were urged to complete a conference evaluation and asked to reflect on what they heard and how they would make changes when they returned home. These include:

- From committed staff members of Independent Living Centers: "I plan to recommit to work options as a way for consumer's independence."
- From a consumer who was hesitant, but honest: "Maybe look for a job, but I don't know, I get very nervous."
- From consumers who were empowered by what they heard, "When I get home I plan to advocate for change regarding employment and real jobs" and "I appreciate the intent of the conference to empower people to realize they can work..."
- And by some taking the challenge and recognizing that they hold the keys to their own future: "By trying to get something started and keep at it and stay off of my couch potato rear end."

Opinions of Kansas Young People with Disabilities

By Carrie Greenwood, Kansas Youth Empowerment Academy

Employment has become a very important topic in the disability community. After chatting with young people with disabilities, the Kansas Youth Empowerment Academy (KYEA) discovered that employment is a topic for all ages. Not just that, but the concerns and experiences seem to be very similar amongst all groups.

KYEA has conducted events over the past couple of years, which have proven to be very helpful in obtaining feedback from youth with disabilities regarding employment. The most recent event was held at this year's Kansas Disability Caucus. While the overall Caucus theme revolved around employment, KYEA held its own gathering to talk about this topic with young adults. On August 9, 2007, a group of 16 youth who were attending the

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Benefits Specialists' Corner

This issue features *Working Healthy* Benefits Specialist Karen Baessler from the Pratt Area SRS office. Karen started as a Benefits Specialist in January and as you will see from her article this month, has been through a lot in her first 9 months with the *Working Healthy* team. She has worked for SRS for 18 years, starting as a front desk clerk and continuing in areas including foster care, TANF, General Assistance, Elderly & Disabled, and Food Stamps, just to name a few. She believes strongly that her work at SRS is to help others. Karen covers the southwest area of Kansas for *Working Healthy* and can be reached by phone at (620) 672-5955 ext. 211 or by email at GKSB@srs.ks.gov.

FRIDAY MAY 4, 2007.....GONE WITH THE WIND

It started out as any normal day for a Working Healthy Benefits Specialist. I spent the day in Great Bend at Job Olympics and it was a great day. On the return trip to Greensburg I noticed the heat and humidity. Clouds were building in the southwest sky as occurs regularly on a summer's day in Kansas.

I arrived at the Greensburg SRS office around 6pm, unloaded my vehicle and left all of my Working Healthy supplies and equipment at the office for the weekend. I set up my schedule for the next week, put away files, locked my file cabinet, turned out the lights and took one last glance around the office before locking the door behind me. All was in order and I remember thinking, "I can check my emails on Monday. I am tired and want to go home." My day was ending like everyone else in Greensburg. On the drive home I noticed how dark and stormy and angry the sky looked. But growing up and living the majority of my adult life in Kansas, I was not alarmed. Finally home in Coldwater, I tuned into television and radio to discover we were in a severe thunderstorm area and under tornado watches. It would probably be a bumpy ride with weather this evening.



My husband, Gale, and I sat down to eat in front of the TV. The coverage of the building storms was almost continuous during the evening hours. We did go outside several times to check the sky. It looked like any other severe thunderstorm brewing up in Kansas. Tornadoes were touching down across the country's midsection all evening. Later I received telephone calls from my sister and a co-worker, Dan Hallacy, warning me of the tornado in the area! How thoughtful my sister and Dan were to take time to make sure I was safe! I gathered the cats, hubby, a few precious items and a cell phone and to the lower level we went. The local TV said the storm was headed on a direct path to hit Greensburg now! Over 20 minutes of warning helped the rural town I had come to love and had worked in for 18 years prepare for the onslaught of the pending disaster.

The news bulletin came at 9:50 pm. Greensburg had suffered a direct hit. The town was gone. Gale and I started preparing to go to Greensburg knowing our EMT/firefighting experience would be needed. We left on a 2 hour course to Greensburg through flooded dirt roads, driving rain, wind and lightning strikes - a drive that usually takes 25 minutes. The highway between Coldwater and Greensburg was closed because the path of the tornado went right along Highway 183. We did not stop to think of our own safety or if other tornadoes would occur during the night. We had family and friends in Greensburg who needed help.

Debris was everywhere. Landmarks were gone. We came in on the north side of town. We drove around downed trees, grain bins, power lines and poles, vehicles and mangled debris of unknown sorts. Our horror was fully realized when we reached Main Street where there was so much debris it was impossible to tell if you were on the roadway. Small flickering lights started to appear. Cell phones were being used for flashlights. People were walking around, dazed, wet, confused, bewildered but ALIVE in the midst of total destruction. As we drove along barely moving, we would ask, "Are you okay, do you need medical attention?" It took me a minute to realize we were upon Main and Highway 400—right beside the "used to be" SRS office.

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... 'Benefits Specialist Corner' continued...

I saw many familiar faces in the crowds that were forming. My customers were coming up to me, giving me hugs and thanking me for being there. We exchanged tears and fears, each telling the other all would be okay. We spent the entire weekend helping with clean-up and search and rescue. I walked through the remains of the school buildings, and businesses. I kept thinking that life is so precious and how fast it is taken from us. I had worked and shopped and done business in Greensburg for 18 years and I was lost! There were no landmarks left, no trees, no homes, and no streets without debris. I helped rescue a dog, and in the end broke down in tears as it all became so overwhelming. The weekend brought about the reality of the loss and magnitude of destruction.

Monday, I went back to the SRS office in Greensburg to help with recovery. To our surprise, much of the office furniture and belongings were still there. I could see my bulletin board with pictures on it, my chair with my sweater on it. Recovered items included telephones, computers, fax or copy machines and files cabinets. Even Working Healthy cups, pens and pill dispensers were found. My little 2 drawer file cabinet and 2 Kodak pictures were all that could be recovered from my office as the floor was buckled beneath and huge I-beams and tons of brick landed in my office space. It was a feeling of loss and helplessness. I cried again.

Life is to go on and it did and has. Pratt SRS set me up in a temporary office as they did for the other two Greensburg SRS employees. Customers from Greensburg came to Pratt SRS and other area offices for help. I would go to the lobby, greet them, give them a hug and then we would cry together and talk about the tornado and the future! None of my customers was severely injured. All were left homeless but had found temporary shelter in surrounding towns including Pratt.

Now, 4 months later, the memories are still vivid, the wounds still healing but Greensburg is rebuilding. Many of my customers are living in FEMA trailers or have relocated temporarily to other towns. They are picking up the pieces and moving forward.

I have stayed at the Pratt SRS office and will continue to make stops to work in Greensburg as needed by customers that have returned there. I have not lost a single customer to the tornado. The bond we share is greater than worker/customer. Now we share life experiences and it has made me more sensitive to how precious life is.

I end with this: Take time to CARE and share it with others!

- Karen Baessler, Working Healthy Benefits Specialist

... 'Kansas Young People continued from page 1...

Caucus gathered to discuss employment issues. The youth age range was approximately 16 – 30 years old. During this gathering, the overall consensus among the group was that they feel judged in the employment world. Many comments were made about feeling judged when applying for a job. Some youth felt discriminated against because of their disability. Participants even cited that the discrimination starts in school when teachers judge them. Another topic that was brought up was the concept of volunteering. Many youth saw volunteer experience as a positive alternative or introduction to working. They also feel that more programs need to be created in local communities for youth with disabilities, especially in rural areas. One participant cited what she feels as the most important factor in employment and life in general—your attitude. She stated that we all need to have a mindset of empowerment and building our confidence. This will lead to success in the world of employment.

It became obvious that many employment concerns are shared among people with disabilities of all ages. By using some of the suggestions above, young adults feel that they will become more successful and empowered in the workforce.

Coming in the next issue...

Watch for a new section on Employment Initiatives in Kansas!

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