



GOVERNOR'S COUNCIL
ON DISABILITY

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GCD NEWSLETTER

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[Governor's Council on Disability](#)

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GCD HOSTS ANNUAL MISSOURI YOUTH LEADERSHIP FORUM

by Reece Ellis



This July, the Governor's Council on Disability successfully completed the 21st annual Missouri Youth Leadership Forum (MO-YLF) for high school students with disabilities. There's no universal way to measure success—not in life, and definitely not at MO-YLF. Some years, it's about the goals delegates set. Some years, it's about the connections they make. And some years, it's just about surviving the humidity and getting to the capitol in Jefferson City on time.

But if we did try to measure it, our week, July 15-19, 2025, might look something like this:

- ⇒ Over 36 miles traveled (about 83,845 steps) - that's about 10 miles more than a marathon
- ⇒ Enough donations to fill the bed *and* every seat in a full-sized pickup
- ⇒ 176 photobooth pictures
- ⇒ 160+ PowerPoint slides
- ⇒ 157 cold sandwiches
- ⇒ 136 slices of pizza
- ⇒ 129 minutes of talent show performances
- ⇒ 114 t-shirts
- ⇒ 73 bottles of Gatorade
- ⇒ 60 hours of programming
- ⇒ 55 cups of Tiger Stripe ice cream
- ⇒ 20 delegates
- ⇒ 9 sponsors
- ⇒ 8 facilitators
- ⇒ 7 team leaders
- ⇒ 6 community volunteers
- ⇒ 4 teams
- ⇒ 2 golf carts
- ⇒ 1 amazing week of self-advocacy, disability pride, and fun



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GCD HOSTS ANNUAL MISSOURI YOUTH LEADERSHIP FORUM

(Continued from page 1)

This year's Missouri Youth Leadership Forum, hosted by the Governor's Council on Disability, brought together 20 high school students with disabilities from across the state for a weeklong experience that's part leadership training, part personal development, and part summer camp. Held once again at the University of Missouri in Columbia, the MO-YLF gave delegates the opportunity to explore topics like disability history, advocacy, career readiness, and independent living; all while building lifelong friendships and laughing harder than any leadership manual ever prepares you for.

This year's keynote speaker was MO-YLF alumna Colleen Young, who returned to share her journey since she last addressed the forum. In 2024, she represented Team USA at the Paralympic Games in Paris, where she earned a bronze medal in the SB13 100m breaststroke. Her story of perseverance, focus, and pride in identity set the tone for the week.

Delegates participated in a full day at the State Capitol, where they explored the legislative process and held a mock bill hearing with the support of Senator Mike Bernskoetter (R-Jefferson City) and Representatives Kathy Steinhoff (D-Columbia), Raychel Proudie (D-Ferguson), Martin "Marty" Jacobs (D-Liberty), and Becky Laubinger (R-Park Hills), as well as legislative staff Penny Mueller, Trey Fauchaux, and Mark Cozart.

The week also included an adaptive sports night, hosted in partnership with the Mizzou Men's Wheelchair Basketball Team and the Venture Out program from the Mizzou Rec Center, giving delegates the chance to build confidence, trust, and teamwork in a high-energy, inclusive setting. For this year's community service project, delegates collected donations to support the WAGS Therapy Dog Program at MU Health Care—and were even treated to a visit from the therapy dogs themselves during the week.

On Friday, delegates took part in a College and Career Day organized by Missouri Vocational Rehabilitation, which included games, panel discussions, and practical tools to help them think about life after high school. The week wrapped up with a resource fair and graduation ceremony, where organizations from across the state shared information about services supporting independent living in the disability community. Delegates then had the opportunity to present their reflections from the week to their families, staff, and friends, ending the forum on the highest of high notes.

There was karaoke. There was dancing—some practiced, some spontaneous, all joyful. There were late-night conversations over delicious food, quiet moments of encouragement, and bright flashes of discovery. Delegates worked with mentors from the disability community, practiced public speaking, mapped out their goals, and learned how to grow into their leadership, their voice, and their place in their community.

Of course, none of this happens without a whole lot of planning and heart. Behind every activity and detail are alumni, facilitators, team leaders, volunteers, healthcare professionals, and community partners who make the week possible and meaningful.

Each year, MO-YLF sends students home a little more confident, a little more informed, and a little more connected. And for many, that's just the beginning.

Alumni often return in future years as staff and leaders, helping to carry forward a program that continues to grow and evolve—one delegate, one mentor, and one Olympic medal at a time.

To learn more about the Missouri Youth Leadership Forum, visit <https://disability.mo.gov/gcd/ylf/>



CALLING ALL ARTISTS, ADVOCATES, AND CREATIVES

by Claudia Browner

The Governor's Council on Disability is inviting you to participate in its Poster Contest in honor of National Disability Employment Awareness Month (NDEAM). Don't miss the **August 31 deadline** to participate.

This year is extra special as we celebrate 80 years of NDEAM, 35 years of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), and the powerful 2025 NDEAM theme: **Celebrating Value and Talent**

Your Challenge:

Design a poster that captures the spirit of disability inclusion in the workplace—highlighting the talent, value, and contributions of workers with disabilities. Whether you're a seasoned artist or a passionate newcomer, we want to see your vision of access and opportunity.

The winner will have their art featured during NDEAM events and across social media—and will help spread awareness about the importance of inclusive employment for people with disabilities.

How to enter: Submit your artwork and entry form by the August 31 deadline. Download the entry form and get detailed information at disability.mo.gov/gcd/PosterContest/

Prizes & Recognition: The winning artwork will be featured on the GCD's 2025 NDEAM poster and shared statewide. The winner will be recognized at the NDEAM celebration event in Jefferson City in October.

This is more than a contest—it's a celebration of progress, pride, and potential. Let your creativity help shape the future of inclusive, accessible employment!

Governor's Council on
Disability

POSTER CONTEST



SUBMIT ENTRIES BY
AUGUST 31, 2025

CALLING ALL MISSOURI ARTISTS

Submit your creative work for a chance to be featured on the Governor's Council on Disability's 2025 National Disability Employment Awareness Month (NDEAM) poster.

The contest theme is **Celebrating Value and Talent** in honor of the 35th Anniversary of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA).

ADA35

FULL PARTICIPATION - EQUAL OPPORTUNITY -
INDEPENDENT LIVING - ECONOMIC SELF-SUFFICIENCY



LEARN HOW YOU CAN PARTICIPATE AT
disability.mo.gov/gcd/PosterContest

QUESTIONS? CALL
573-751-2600



SUMMER LEGISLATIVE HAPPENINGS

by Laura Mueth

Governor Kehoe has taken action on all General Assembly's Truly Agreed To and Finally Passed bills concerning disability related issues. Eleven are non-appropriation bills while four are appropriation bills. The four appropriation bills included vetoes of some money. You can view the letters explaining the vetoes at [Veto Letters](#). The bills signed by Governor Kehoe are [Senate Bill 43](#), [Senate Bill 218](#), [Senate Bill 63](#), [Senate Bill 68](#), [House Bill 567](#), [House Bill 594](#), [House Bill 419](#), [Senate Bill 79](#), [House Bill 595](#), [House bill 262](#), and [House Bill 737](#). To read press releases for these and the other bills signed by Governor Kehoe, see [Governor's office press releases](#). The final issue of the GCD's [Legislative Update](#) for the 2025 session summarizes the bills that were signed into law.



House and Senate committees and taskforces have held a few hearings this summer on various topics.

While our office does not follow federal activity as a part of our legislative publications and programs, the GCD has been and will continue to learn more regarding implementation of the federal budget reconciliation bill and its potential impacts on people with disabilities in Missouri.

The GCD will be releasing the annual Legislative Priorities Poll later this month. Please take time to complete it and share it with others. This provides us with a means to gather thoughts from many individuals throughout the state on a multitude of disability related topics. An announcement will be made through our email lists, social media, and website once it is available.

MEET THE GCD'S NEW COUNCIL MEMBERS

by Claudia Browner

The Governor's Council on Disability (GCD) is overseen by twenty Council members and a Chairperson. On June 27, 2025 Governor Kehoe reappointed five of the Governor's Council on Disability's (GCD) current Council members Wayne Crawford, Betty Davidson, Ron Hack (Chairperson), Katie Jones, and Sue Orton, and issued two new appointments, Aaron Durso and Jennifer Meyer.



Aaron Durso, of Taneyville currently serves as Bull Creek Village Clerk. He has previous experience as borough manager and the municipal authority manager in Birdsboro, Pennsylvania, and Senior Pastor at LOVE Christian Fellowship. A disabled veteran of the United States Air Force, Aaron was honorably discharged in 1993. He holds a Doctor of Ministry from Newburg Theological Seminary, Master of Ministry at Chesapeake Theological Seminary, and Bachelor of Religious Education at the University of Valley Forge.

Aaron moved to Missouri in 2019 with his wife Michelle of 32 years who is a special education teacher. He has two children and a service dog named Brody, who is a Seizure Response Service Dog. Aaron enjoys the outdoors and loves to archery hunt. Aaron states that it is important to his family to advocate for people with disabilities and that he is blessed to have a great support network of family and friends in his life.



Jennifer Meyer, of O'Fallon serves as principal at J. Meyer Strategies, a consulting group which entails political campaign work and corporate consulting work. She holds a bachelor's degree in political science from the University of Missouri – St. Louis. Jennifer has worked in Missouri politics for over 25 years for officials including Senator Kit Bond, Senator Roy Blunt and Congressman Blaine Luetkemeyer. In addition to her professional experience, Jennifer serves as an executive board member for both the Freedom 13 and the North County Police Business Association

Jennifer lives in Winghaven in O'Fallon with her husband Andrew and three boys Ted, Henry and Spencer. Spencer is 19 years old and was diagnosed with Autism at the age of 3. Since that diagnosis, Jennifer has been involved in many programs in the St. Louis area which benefit people with disabilities and had done extensive research on autism working with doctors as well as using functional medicine to help Spencer live his best life. She is looking forward to working with the council and making a difference.

Congratulations on your appointments! The GCD team is looking forward to working with our new Council members and continuing our work with the reappointed members.

The GCD currently has five vacant Council member positions. If you are interested in serving on the Council, you may apply on the Boards and Commissions website at boards.mo.gov

NEWS AND UPDATES FOR THE DISABILITY COMMUNITY

by Claudia Browner

APSE MO Employment Summit—Empowering Excellence: Navigating the Future of Employment First



The Missouri chapter of the Association of People Supporting Employment First (APSE MO) hosted its annual conference on July 24-25, bringing together employment providers, employment professionals, families and individuals who support employment as an important component of self-determination. The conference offered keynote speakers and breakout sessions discussing best practices in advancing employment opportunities for people with disabilities.

I had the opportunity to represent the Governor's Council on Disability and Office of Equal Opportunity by participating in an employer panel discussion with colleagues from Missouri Vocational Rehabilitation, Department of Mental Health—Division of Developmental Disabilities and Division of Behavioral Health, and Rehabilitation Services for the Blind. In a session titled *Working Together, Working Forward: Advancing Employment for All* we discussed the efforts and strategies of state agencies to implement the Model Employer and Employment First legislation in Missouri government.

To learn more about the work of APSE MO, please visit the website at apsemissouri8.wildapricot.org

Missouri State Fair offers Disability Assistance, Military Appreciation Day, and Senior Appreciation Day



The annual Missouri State Fair will be held August 7—17 in Sedalia and offers many fun activities, shows, and entertainment.

Disability Assistance is provided to ensure all fairgoers can participate and enjoy the events. Check out the [Disability Assistance website](#) to learn about available accessibility features and accommodations.

Military Appreciation Day will be on August 10, featuring military appreciation events, a resource fair, and a concert by the 135th Army Band.

Senior Appreciation Day will be held on August 13, featuring senior activities including BINGO, line dancing, a dance contest, free health screenings, and reduced admissions.

Governor Michael L. Parson Arena Site Tours

This is a unique experience offered to fairgoers this year! Visitors can get a sneak peek at the construction site and chat with the contractors of the state-of-the-art arena that is scheduled to open in July 2026.

Tours are available August 8, 9, 14 and 15 between 9 AM and 1 PM.

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News and Updates for the Disability Community

The Ride Ahead—Film Screening with virtual Q&A



The St. Louis Arc, UMSL Office of Inclusive Postsecondary Education, and UMSL College of Education are hosting a screening of *The Ride Ahead*. Co-Directors Dan & Samuel Habib will join virtually after the screening for a Q&A session.

Date: September 3, 2025

Time: 6—8 PM

Where: UMSL Millennium Student Center, Century Room A
17 Arnold B Grobman Drive, St. Louis, MO 63121

All are welcome to attend and admission is free.

If you are unable to attend the screening at UMSL, you may also watch *The Ride Ahead* on PBS at pbs.org/pov/films/rideahead/

Second Annual NDEAM Celebration



The Office of Administration's Office of Equal Opportunity and Governor's Council on Disability will be hosting the second annual National Disability Employment Awareness Month—NDEAM celebration on Friday, October 10, 2025 at 11 AM at the Harry S Truman State Office Building in Jefferson City. The celebration will feature keynote speakers and entertainment as well as state agency resource exhibits. The event will be open to the public.

Additional details will be available soon at oeo.mo.gov/statewide-awareness-events-celebrations

2026 Disability Rights Legislative Day



Mark your calendars now for next year's Disability Rights Legislative Day (DRLD), held on Wednesday, February 25, 2026!

Hosted annually by a network of state agencies and disability organizations, DRLD brings together advocates from Missouri's disability community to engage with state legislators and hold a rally in the capitol rotunda.

More information will be available soon on the DRLD website at drlld.org

Missouri Governor's Council on Disability—Council Members

- Ronald Hack, Council Chair, St. Louis
- Steve Ahrens, Jefferson City
- Charles Comstock, Kirksville
- Aaron Durso, Taneyville
- Stacey Elster, Wildwood
- Wayne Crawford, Marshall
- Betty Davidson, Ph.D., St. Louis
- Katie Jones, St. Charles
- Kim Lackey, St. Louis
- Elijah Mayfield, Jefferson City
- Jennifer Meyer, O'Fallon
- Susan Orton, Creve Coeur
- Andrew Sartorius, Jefferson City
- Jason Schott, Ste. Genevieve
- Lesia Shelton, Buffalo
- Robert Wallace, St. Louis

Missouri Governor's Council on Disability—Staff Members

- Claudia Browner, Executive Director
- Reece Ellis, Senior Program Specialist
- Laura Mueth, Senior Program Specialist
- Jennifer Pettit, Administrative Support Professional

UPCOMING EVENTS

Check out these upcoming disability-related conferences and events! Click on the links to learn more or register.

August 24—26, 2025

[Real Voices, Real Choices Conference](#), Lake Ozark

September 21—23, 2025

[MO-CASE—Missouri Special Education Administrators Conference](#), Osage Beach

September 25, 2025

[Disability Inclusion Summit](#), Kansas City

October 16—17, 2025

[MACDDS Conference](#), Columbia

October 23, 2025

[Starkloff Disability Employment Summit](#), Kansas City

If you know of additional events you would like us to share with the disability community, please contact our office.



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