

GOVERNOR'S COUNCIL ON DISABILITY GCD NEWSLETTER

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GCD ANNOUNCES WINNERS OF 2025 RECOGNITION AWARDS

by Claudia Browner



The Governor's Council on Disability (GCD) is excited to announce the winners and honorable mentions of the 34th Annual Inclusion Award and the 13th Annual Youth Leadership Award.

The **Inclusion Award**, along with one Honorable Mention, is presented annually to private and public employers, individuals, businesses, or organizations in Missouri. Honorees are chosen for their exceptional, proactive, and innovative measures to integrate and mainstream people with disabilities into their programs, activities, and operations. For 2025, the GCD has selected two award winners and one honorable mention.

The **Youth Leadership Award**, also presented with one honorable mention, celebrates outstanding Missouri youths (aged 16-26) with a disability who have exhibited exemplary leadership by making a positive impact on their community.

2025 Inclusion Award Winners:

Ed Pupillo, Pupillo's Wicked Chicken and Grand Slam Restaurants, Fenton

For more than three years, Ed Pupillo, owner of The Wicked Chicken and Grand Slam restaurants in Jefferson County, Missouri, has partnered with Lafayette Industries' STEPUP Employment Training Program to empower young adults with intellectual and developmental disabilities (IDD). By opening his restaurants as hands-on community training sites and seamlessly integrating inclusive practices into his daily operations, Pupillo helps participants develop essential job readiness, teamwork, and communication skills in a real-world environment.

This operational collaboration has yielded remarkable results, with 75% of the STEPUP trainees who trained at his restaurants successfully securing competitive employment in the region. Beyond the doors of his own businesses, Pupillo actively advocates for inclusive hiring throughout the Jefferson County business community, helping to normalize these practices as a valuable local workforce strategy and fostering long-term community inclusion.

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disability.mo.gov/gcd



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Jessica Ratsch, Platte County R3 Schools, Platte City

Special education teacher Jessica Ratsch has spent the past three years elevating inclusivity at Platte County High School. She established "Apartment 20," a specialized classroom setting where students learn essential life skills such as cooking, cleaning, and self-advocacy.

Furthermore, Ratsch advocated for and founded the Platte County Pirates Special Olympics Team, serving as head coach and recruiting mainstream peers to act as assistant coaches for her medal-winning athletes.

To foster social independence, she also helped create "The CREW," an initiative where teachers chaperone special education students at school dances and games, empowering them to fully participate in typical high school experiences alongside their peers.

Inclusion Award Honorable Mention: Joyce Fenner, Jordan's Place, Marshfield

Joyce Fenner has had groundbreaking achievements in accessible housing. Overcoming immense personal tragedy and industry doubts, Fenner successfully secured state and federal LIHTC funding as a single developer to build "Jordan's Place," a \$9.7 million, affordable housing community in Marshfield, MO. She spearheaded this first-of-its-kind, 40-unit development in Webster County specifically designed for adults with disabilities and senior citizens. By uniting local citizens and the County Senate Bill 40, Fenner delivered universally designed, permanently affordable homes that currently house 80 residents in an intentionally circular community built to foster connection and inclusion.

2025 Youth Leadership Award Winner: Luke McKeon, St. Charles

Luke McKeon is being recognized for his remarkable integrity, academic achievements, and steadfast dedication to empowering others. Demonstrating a profound commitment to continuous growth and independence, he is the first blind student at his school to enroll in an AP course and apply to the Bridge to Success Program through the Embassy Suites Hotel in St. Charles. To further build his independence, Luke also successfully completed the S.O.A.R. program through the Lighthouse for the Blind to enhance his travel and adapted daily living skills. A passionate advocate and volunteer for accessibility, he evaluates digital materials for textbook publishers, secures audio descriptions for community events, and tutors younger students in the use of assistive technology. Driven by his compassion, Luke plans to continue improving the lives of individuals with low vision by pursuing certification as an Assistive Technology Instructional Specialist.

Youth Leadership Award Honorable Mention: Izabella Uccello, Springfield

Izzi Uccello, a dedicated advocate from Springfield, Missouri, works to improve the lives of individuals with disabilities. After facing isolation in public schools, Uccello utilized educational choice programs to find an environment where she could truly excel both socially and academically. She now uses her personal story to seek legislative reform, testifying before government officials to support school flexibility and inclusive policies. Beyond the classroom, she champions the construction of accessible playgrounds to ensure all children can experience a sense of community and belonging. Her leadership roles, which include hosting a podcast and representing the Children's Miracle Network, highlight her commitment to empowering others through resilience. Ultimately, Uccello's efforts demonstrate how young leaders can spark systemic change and foster a more integrated, empathetic society.

The awards will be presented to the winners at the Missouri Rehabilitation Association (MRA) Conference in Lake Ozark on May 28, 2026.



MISSOURI YOUTH LEADERSHIP FORUM PREPARES FOR YEAR 22 IN COLUMBIA

by Reece Ellis



With the arrival of spring, preparations are officially hitting high gear for the 22nd annual Missouri Youth Leadership Forum (MO-YLF). This year, the forum will return to the University of Missouri campus in Columbia from July 14–18, 2026.

MO-YLF is a unique, weeklong leadership experience designed specifically for high school students with disabilities. Each summer, approximately 30 delegates from across the state gather to build a foundation for their futures. Through intensive workshops on self-advocacy, careers, post-secondary education and goal-setting, participants develop the "Leadership Plans" they will use to navigate life after high school.

While the curriculum is rigorous, the forum also emphasizes community. Between adaptive sports, talent shows, and mentorship from successful adults with disabilities, delegates find a supportive environment where they can explore disability culture and forge lifelong friendships.

Delegate and volunteer applications for the 2026 forum are now closed. Our staff is currently reviewing a high volume of applications to select this year's class of student leaders and our team of dedicated mentors. We would like to thank the educators, parents, and service providers who helped us share this opportunity throughout the winter.

For those interested in following the Class of 2026 during their week at Mizzou, or to view highlights from previous years, please **follow us on Facebook** or visit our website disability.mo.gov/gcd/ylf.



RECORD ATTENDANCE FOR LEGISLATIVE EDUCATION PROJECT

by Laura Mueth

The Legislative Education Project webinars are complete for this year. It was a record turnout with one hundred seventy-nine (179) participants. Thank you to everyone who participated and made it a success.

If you attended a 2026 webinar, please provide feedback via the evaluation form link that was sent to you by email or scan the QR code below. The link will remain active through the end of May.

If you were unable to attend this year, 2027 dates will be announced in the fall.

A graphic for the Legislative Education Project Webinars. It features the logo of the Governor's Council on Disability (a stylized map of Missouri) and the text "LEGISLATIVE EDUCATION PROJECT WEBINARS". Below this is a computer monitor displaying a scene of the Missouri State Capitol building with a circular seal overlaid. A red banner at the bottom of the monitor says "WEBINAR FEEDBACK" with a white arrow pointing to a URL: <https://tinyurl.com/LEP-Feedback>.

A LOOK BACK AT DISABILITY RIGHTS LEGISLATIVE DAY 2026

by Laura Mueth

Disability Rights Legislative Day (DRLD) 2026 was held on Wednesday, February 25. This was the 25th year the event was held. According to the Capitol Police, the first-floor rotunda reached capacity and a record 1,200 people attended the event overall.

Attendees were able to meet with legislators through individual appointments, visit tables to learn about advocacy opportunities from organizations with a statewide presence, attend a rally, watch a slideshow of memories from past DRLDs, and visit a sensory room/accessible restroom trailer.

Speakers at the rally included members of the House of Representatives, people with disabilities, and the state auditor. Two frequent topics for the speakers were the needs of people with disabilities as related to programs and services and the state budget. While he was unable to be present, Governor Kehoe provided a proclamation recognizing the event. If you did not have the opportunity to participate or would like to relive the rally experience, it can be watched at [DRLD rally](#).

DRLD received more media coverage than ever before with stories and articles published across the state before and after the event. You can view/read some of the coverage* at the following links: [KRCG segment/article](#), [KCTV segment/article](#), [Columbia Missourian article](#), and [KYTV segment](#).

To make the event happen it took a collaborative effort between the Capitol Police, the State of Missouri's Office of Administration's Facilities Management Design and Construction division, the planning committee, and the sponsors. Thanks to all of them for their contributions.

Although the planning committee believes this year was a resounding success with substantial upgrades in sound quality and greater accessibility, improvements can still be made. The feedback survey is now closed. However, if you have not already provided any feedback but would still like to, contact Laura Mueth at Laura.Mueth@oa.mo.gov.

**Disclaimer: The published news pieces do not necessarily reflect the views of the Governor's Council on Disability, its staff, Council members, the Office of Administration or the Governor's office and the information contained in them related to the state budget proposals was accurate at the time they were published.*



SSA UPDATES: STREAMLINING DISABILITY CLAIMS AND ENHANCING DIGITAL ACCESS

by Reece Ellis

In early 2026, the Social Security Administration (SSA) introduced several significant changes aimed at modernizing service delivery and reducing the time applicants wait for decisions. These updates represent a major push toward efficiency, particularly for Missourians navigating the disability claims process and the service providers who support them.

As of March 2026, the agency reported a 30% reduction in pending initial claims compared to the previous year. By transitioning to fully digital medical records and searchable text files, the SSA has cut the average processing time for initial claims by approximately 45 days.

To further speed up new applications, the SSA moved medical "Continuing Disability Reviews" (CDRs) to a centralized federal office on March 12. This shift allows state-level Disability Determination Services (DDS) to focus their resources exclusively on processing initial claims and reconsiderations, which is expected to result in even faster decisions for new applicants.

On March 7, the SSA officially transitioned to a National Workload System. In the past, customer service and appointments were primarily managed by local field offices. Under this new model, phone calls and claims are routed through a nationwide network of staff. This change is designed to ensure that cases are handled by the first available representative, regardless of their location, significantly reducing phone wait times.

While the system is now nationalized, the SSA maintains that appointments for complex cases can still be scheduled with experts at local field offices when necessary.

The "**my Social Security**" portal continues to be the primary hub for managing benefits online. Recent updates focus on security and ease of use:

- **Digital Document Uploads:** A new feature allows applicants and beneficiaries to upload medical records and other evidence directly to their online account, bypassing the need to mail or hand-deliver physical paperwork to a field office.
- **Payroll Information Exchange (PIE):** For individuals receiving Supplemental Security Income (SSI) or Social Security Disability Insurance (SSDI), the PIE program is now fully implemented. With beneficiary permission, the SSA can receive monthly wage information directly from participating payroll providers, reducing the manual reporting burden on the individual.

The SSA encourages the use of online services as the first point of contact, but several options remain available for those needing direct assistance:

- **Online:** Visit ssa.gov to check claim status, manage benefits, or request a replacement Social Security card.
- **By Phone:** Call the national toll-free number at **1-800-772-1213** (TTY 1-800-325-0778) between 7:00 a.m. and 7:00 p.m., Monday through Friday.
- **Local Offices:** To find the nearest field office, use the Office Locator at ssa.gov/locator.



APRIL IS AUTISM ACCEPTANCE MONTH

by Dara Sailer, Office of Equal Opportunity



April is Autism Acceptance Month, a time to not only raise awareness but also to promote understanding, inclusion, and acceptance of autistic individuals in our communities, workplaces, and schools. While awareness is an important first step, acceptance encourages us to take meaningful action to ensure that autistic individuals are respected, supported, and valued for their unique perspectives and abilities.

Autism is a developmental condition that affects how individuals communicate, interact, and experience the world around them. Because autism exists on a spectrum, every autistic person has their own strengths, challenges, and ways of navigating daily life. Some individuals may communicate differently, prefer routine and predictability, or experience sensory sensitivities, while others may demonstrate strong attention to detail, deep focus on areas of interest, and creative problem-solving abilities.

Autism Acceptance Month encourages us to look beyond stereotypes and see the wide range of experiences in the autistic community. Acceptance means creating environments where individuals feel comfortable being themselves and where differences are understood rather than judged. This can include practicing patience in communication, being mindful of sensory environments, and ensuring accessibility in both physical and digital spaces.

In workplaces and communities, promoting acceptance also means listening to autistic voices and learning from their experiences. By facilitating inclusive practices and understanding, we can help ensure that autistic individuals have equal opportunities to participate, contribute, and succeed.

Autism Acceptance Month serves as a reminder that inclusion benefits everyone. When we create spaces where people feel respected and supported, we strengthen our communities and encourage a culture of empathy and understanding.



POSTER CONTEST FOR NATIONAL DISABILITY AWARENESS MONTH NOW OPEN

by Claudia Browner

It's not too early to begin creating your artwork for the Governor's Council on Disability's poster contest in honor of National Disability Employment Awareness Month (NDEAM).

Each year, the GCD invites artists from Missouri to submit their original pieces that highlight the significance of disability employment and celebrate the valuable contributions that individuals with disabilities bring to the workforce.

The selected artwork will be showcased on the GCD's 2026 NDEAM poster, which will be distributed across the state.

For more details and to access the entry form, visit disability.mo.gov/gcd/PosterContest

Governor's Council on Disability POSTER CONTEST

Open now - entries due 8/31/26

Submit your creative artwork for a chance to be featured on the Governor's Council on Disability's 2026 National Disability Employment Awareness Month (NDEAM) poster.

This contest aims to raise awareness about the significance of disability employment and to spotlight the valuable contributions that individuals with disabilities make to the workforce. Additionally, this year's contest will celebrate the 250th birthday of our nation.

disability.mo.gov/gcd/PosterContest





2026
ACCESSABILITY BUSINESS SUMMIT
MAY 7
9AM-3PM

BOONE ELECTRIC COOPERATIVE COMMUNITY ROOM
1413 RANGLINE ST. | COLUMBIA, MO

Outreach, Connection, and Solutions
for Employers Recruiting Quality Job
Candidates with Disabilities.

TOPICS INCLUDE:

- ✓ KEYNOTE KICKOFF
- ✓ DISABILITY AWARENESS AND ETIQUETTE
- ✓ ASSISTIVE TECHNOLOGY
- ✓ ACCOMMODATION IDEAS
- ✓ EMPLOYER PANEL
- ✓ MEET WITH JOB SEEKERS WITH DISABILITIES THROUGH STRUCTURED NETWORKING

*HR Professional Certification Credit Availability Pending
- Human Resources Association of Central Missouri (HRACMO)

REGISTER HERE:
[TINYURL.COM/ACCESSABILITY-BUSINESS-SUMMIT](https://tinyurl.com/AccessAbility-Business-Summit)

SPONSORED BY:



Register Now!

The **AccessAbility Business Summit** is coming to Mid-Missouri — and you won't want to miss it!

This powerful event brings together local employers and talented job seekers with disabilities to build meaningful connections, open doors, and create more inclusive workplaces.

- Discover untapped talent
- Learn inclusive hiring best practices
- Network with community leaders & advocates
- Be part of a more accessible future

Save the Date: May 7, 2026, 9 AM to 3 PM

Location: Boone Electric Cooperative, Columbia

Register Here: tinyurl.com/AccessAbility-Business-Summit

Whether you're an employer ready to grow your team or a job seeker ready to shine — this summit is for you!

UPCOMING EVENTS

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

April 26, 2026

[Missouri Digital Accessibility Summit, Jefferson City](#)

May 7, 2026

[Missouri Mental Health Foundation - Mental Health Champions Banquet, Jefferson City](#)

May 11 - 12, 2026

[Association on Aging with Developmental Disabilities Conference, St. Charles](#)

May 27 - 29, 2026

[Missouri Rehabilitation Association \(MRA\) Conference, Lake Ozark](#)

July 14 - 18, 2026

[Missouri Youth Leadership Forum, Columbia](#)

August 23 - 25, 2026

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

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



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