

Award for Programs for the Disadvantaged in Memory of Carolyn Keane

POPULATIONS GREATER THAN 50,000



CARMAN J. CAVEZZA



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ICMA presents the 2003 Award for Programs for the Disadvantaged in Memory of Carolyn Keane in the greater-than-50,000 category to the Columbus Consolidated Government, Georgia, City Manager Carmen Cavezza, and Deputy City Manager Isaiah Hugley.

Thirty years ago—long before the Americans for Disabilities Act (ADA) made sensitivity to the needs of persons with disabilities a legislative necessity—the city of Columbus, Georgia (pop. 190,885) reached out to its disabled population. In 1973, the city established the Mayor’s Committee for Persons

with Disabilities to provide a liaison between these citizens and the city government. Under the leadership and coordination of city staff, committee members (approximately 40 volunteers and one full-time staff person) plan and implement programs and projects to meet the needs of and improve the quality of life for people with various physical challenges.

The group helps disabled citizens connect with organizations and agencies that can supply the goods and services they need. It also focuses on ensuring that the contributions these residents can make are included in the mix of skills and talents that are used to further community goals. To this end, it promotes access for all and to all public facilities, helping disabled persons find productive and creative roles and, in the process, dispelling false notions among the general population about the nature of disabilities.

Historically, the Mayor’s Committee for Persons with Disabilities has helped all persons with disabilities, including those with head or spinal cord injuries; mental or emotional illnesses; cerebral palsy; and visual, hearing, or speech impairments. But it also reaches out to those who don’t fit the traditional notion of the disabled, including those suffering from AIDS, cancer, diabetes, and kidney or liver disease.

The committee has implemented numerous programs and initiatives to assist residents with disabilities; for example, someone needing transportation to therapy or a doctor’s appointment can arrange for a customized vehicle through the “Dial-A-Ride” program. The group also promotes and sponsors events for the disabled community, such as Challenger Little League; the Miss Wheelchair and Jr. Miss Wheelchair pageants; the National Theatre for the Deaf, which enables patrons to experience theater with the help of

interpreters; trips to Six Flags and other nearby venues; the “Spring Fling,” an outdoor event for persons with disabilities and their families; and a host of other activities.

To highlight the importance of facilitating access to buildings and programs, the city sponsors Disability Awareness Days at the Government Center and has held workshops for architects and building contractors to address ADA specifications. In addition, the sheriff’s department issues ID cards for persons with disabilities to help prevent the confusion that can occur when public safety workers are responding to a call for service. These cards have been especially helpful in situations in which the disability makes it appear as though the citizen is disoriented or under the influence of drugs or alcohol.

Public education is a key aspect of the program. The committee focuses on educating the public not only about the needs of persons with disabilities, but also about what disabled persons can accomplish with some support. Accordingly, it has provided disability education training for the local school district and community groups as well as sensitivity training for various city departments and private businesses within the community.

Thanks to the work of the committee, city staff and community residents have a better understanding about the need for and desirability of including persons with disabilities into every facet of community life. Perhaps most importantly, this multifaceted program has succeeded in involving persons with a range of disabilities in community initiatives and activities, and empowering them to make a difference. ■