Welcome to a special Disability Day Edition of Moving Forward. More than 2,900 advocates, family members, and allies gathered at the Capitol steps on a beautiful, warm day to hear speakers Governor Nathan Deal, Jennifer Laszlo Mizrahi, CEO & President of RespectAbilityUSA, and Greg Schmieg, the Executive Director of the Georgia Vocational Rehabilitation Agency (GVRA). This issue highlights Governor Deal’s remarks and his Proclamation of Disability Awareness Day.

In other news at the Gold Dome: SB 397, a bill for autism insurance coverage, sponsored by Senator Tim Golden, was dropped in the Senate Hopper on February 19, passed by the Senate on February 25, and read in the House on February 26. This bill puts a cap on coverage at $35,000 per year and limits coverage to children age 6 and under. Also, HB 700, sponsored by Rep. Krishna Wyants, which seeks to increase accessibility for those with visual disabilities at the Capitol and CLOB, passed out of the House committee on February 24.

The House and Senate resolved any differences in the FY2014 Amended Budget and it was signed by the Governor on February 26. The FY 2015 budget is still being worked on in the Senate subcommittees.

Get involved: (1) If you are not already a member of the GCDD advocacy network, we invite you to join and receive information as we work together to create a better place for Georgians with disabilities. Go to www.gcdd.org and click on Join our Advocacy Network and follow the instructions. (2) Join our weekly legislative update calls on Monday morning at 9:15 AM. Dial 1-888-355-1249 and enter passcode 232357 at the prompt. (3) Go to www.unlockthewaitinglists.com to get the latest Unlock updates

Governor’s Remarks

The following is a transcript of Governor Nathan Deal’s Disability Day speech from February 20, 2014. Printed with permission.

Deal Emphasizes Jobs, Higher Access for Post-Secondary Education for People with Disabilities

It’s a privilege to once again take part in Disability Day with all of you, and I want to extend a warm thank you to the Georgia Council on Developmental Disabilities for sponsoring this event.

My main goal has been to create job opportunities for Georgians, and there’s a reason for that. A job serves as the launching point for independence, financial stability and, in many instances, a sense of purpose. My desire for people to have access to these benefits of employment certainly extends to those in our state with disabilities.

But it’s not just jobs we’re focused on. We long to give Georgians, with or without disabilities, the chance to live in real homes in real communities and to have access to quality learning that leads to meaningful careers.

This is why we have included in our budget new waivers and support services for an additional 500 families through the Department of Behavioral Health and Developmental Disabilities. We have also added 125 new elderly and disabled waiver slots through the Department of Community Health. These waivers provide crucial services and support to those individuals in Georgia who are leaving institutional living to enjoy the benefits of community living.

Yet, true self-sufficiency does start with a job. While the unemployment rate has dropped significantly since I took office, we know that it is still too high for people with disabilities. The majority of high school students with disabilities graduate without work, and end up sitting at home during what should be the most active and productive part of their lives.

To help those with disabilities get the skills needed to find employment, we took an important step last year. We provided funds for post secondary inclusive education to expand the existing program at Kennesaw State University while also funding a new one in South Georgia’s East Georgia State College starting in the fall.

Access to higher learning offers Georgians with disabilities the opportunity to pursue competitive employment, which all individuals in our state should be afforded. As such, we must continue to make sure our education, training and support systems have the policies and resources needed to prepare individuals with disabilities to enter the workforce and become contributing members of society.

To address the barriers to employment confronting people with disabilities, we have a work group in the DBHDD looking into these issues and working on how we can move forward with an Employment First Initiative in Georgia. It is in this way that I hope to see more individuals able to pursue their own path to a job, a career or another form of participation in community life.

This year marks the 15th Anniversary of the U.S. Supreme Court Olmstead Decision. Already, we have made great strides in moving more individuals from institutional care to community-based care, and we’re not done yet. It is for this reason and for the benefit of Georgians that I am committed to finding ways to make an independent life a more attainable reality.

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