

## **Frederick County Commission on Disabilities 2021 Annual Report**

As part of its bylaws, the Frederick County Commission on Disabilities (COD) is required to submit an annual report to the County Executive to address three specific areas:

- (a) The status of services and programs for people with disabilities in the County;
- (b) Recommendations for the more effective delivery of services and programs to people with disabilities; and
- (c) Annual budget and policy priorities for delivery of services to people with disabilities.

COVID-19 continued to significantly impact the COD's work this year. With the County's support and in accordance with the Open Meetings Act, the COD met virtually throughout the year.

The primary focus of COD meetings was to ensure a better understanding of how persons with disabilities were uniquely impacted by the pandemic. We continued to devote a portion of each meeting to presentations from service organizations and advocates to educate Commissioners on issues, challenges, needs and successes within the community. COD Commissioners had the opportunity to ask questions and we used the information to guide our priorities and activities. This year the COD received presentations from:

- Janet Harding, Director of Cultural Awareness and Inclusion, Frederick Health Hospital, provided an overview of the accommodations available for persons with disabilities in the hospital system.
- Joy Rowe, Maryland Access Point, provided an update on services.
- Megan Guzman, Executive Director of L'Arche, discussed the organization's mission to build inclusive living communities among individuals with and without disabilities.
- David Olney, Engineering Supervisor in the Traffic and Transportation Department of Engineering and Construction, provided an update regarding the County's ongoing efforts to mitigate accessibility barriers.
- Joshua Pedersen, Director of 211 Network Operations, discussed the network's operations during the pandemic including trends and challenges.
- Bryan Hisson, Community Engagement Manager, Frederick County Public Libraries, reviewed available accommodations for people with disabilities accessing library services.
- Ashley Van Cleef, Law for Parents, provided an overview of the IDEA, children's rights and efforts to support students as they return to the classroom.
- Shawn Dennison, Frederick County Department of Health, shared information about programs in the community which help individuals with disabilities find employment.

Once again, the pandemic forced the COD to postpone plans to celebrate the anniversary of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) originally scheduled for July 2020. In early 2021, the event was redesigned as a resource fair to be held in October as part of the National Employment Disability Awareness Month. However, in late summer as the community experienced a surge in COVID-19, the COD decided to postpone the event until 2022.

In July 2021, the COD welcomed two new Commissioners to fill all vacancies. In addition, elections to determine a slate of Executive Committee officers resulted in all officers from the previous year being re-elected. The COD voted to modify its by-laws to allow for the re-election

of the Chair for a third term. It is expected that, in the next year, other Commissioners will be available to take on positions of leadership on the COD, allowing the current Chair to step down.

On September 16, 2021, the COD Chair participated in the Human Resources Roundtable to contribute the COD's perspective to the discussion on program ideas and proposals for how to use funding from the American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) to support the community.

COD Commissioners were encouraged to participate in a survey conducted in the Fall by the Stillwork Consulting Group and the Ausherman Family Foundation which was intended to gather community feedback regarding Frederick County's transportation options and challenges. After the survey was completed, the COD Chair attended one of several community forums during which preliminary survey results were shared and participants were given the opportunity to weigh in on next steps. The information shared in that forum was provided to the entire COD and we will continue to monitor this issue to learn more about and provide feedback regarding transportation programs and services that impact people with disabilities.

The COD also formed a workgroup to research and make recommendations to the County about emergency traffic signal devices. The workgroup continues to explore this issue and, if appropriate and necessary, will make a recommendation in 2022.

The COD continues to maintain a social media presence on Facebook to promote reliable and accurate information to individuals with disabilities, particularly related to COVID-19 variants, testing and vaccinations.

Despite the challenges presented to the COD this year, Commissioners remain committed to the effort to build an inclusive community for persons with disabilities in Frederick County.