

The Annual Governmental Affairs Summit

Submitted by Diane Bera, ACSW/CRC , Dan Furton, BA and Barbara Schoen, MA.

The 25th Annual Governmental Affairs Summit was held near Washington D.C. at the Hilton in Alexandria VA. The Summit's main objective is to present critical issues and proposed legislation that have a direct impact on the Vocational Rehabilitation program. This year's event spanned over three days from Sunday, March 12th through Wednesday March 15th and proved to be an extremely effective and educational program with national speakers providing the latest updates. The Michigan Wing of this year's Summit included Harold Wasner, MRA Board member, Diane Bera, MDRA Board member and two Michigan State University students; Barbara Schoen and Dan Furton. Both students are in the Rehabilitation Counseling program and have significant disabilities; Barbara a first year doctoral student has quadriplegia from an auto accident in 1997, and Dan in his second year of the master's program, is legally blind as a result of a progressive eye disease.

This year's conference focused on a number of critical issues facing the VR program. The top concerns the WIA-VR Reauthorization and the funding cuts proposed in the current Administration's Funding Year 2007 (FY07) budget received expansive coverage; with supplemental materials provided to augment presentations and facilitate comprehension of these complex issues. In addition, several sessions centered on methods to increase the visibility of VR programs, with guidance on techniques for publicizing the societal and economic benefits this critical program provides; specifically providing direct guidance to get constitutes more involved in political activities. Further validating this need was significant discussions regarding the vulnerability of the VR programs at this time.

The first two days of the Summit included prominent speakers Aaron Bishop, Director of Disability Policy to Chairman of the Senate Health, Education, Labor and Pensions (HELP) Committee, Senator Mike Enzi (R.WY), Mr. Andy Imparato, President and Chief Executive Officer for AAPD (American Association of Persons with Disabilities), Ms. Kathleen West-Evens, CRC, Director of Business Relations, Council of State Administrators of Vocational Rehabilitation (CSAVR) and Patricia Leahy, Director of Legislative Policy and Governmental Affairs. The last day of the Summit was spent on the Hill with time set aside for congressional meetings augmented by the NRA Award luncheon and a wrap up session at the end of the day.

Personal reflections by the Michigan Wing include feelings of awe, surprise, personal empowerment and concern about the political environment with details about their travels, insights and experiences. Diane Bera, who had attended the 2002 Summit, was dismayed by the VR program changes noting

that in four years the number of states now in order of selection increased by twenty percent to include a total of forty-seven states.

Dan Furton, a politically active and astute individual found the sessions extremely informative. He said, "Patricia Leahy provided a wealth of advocacy knowledge to attendees, drawing upon her eighteen plus years of experience on Capitol Hill. We were informed about legislation pertinent to both NRA's vision and persons with disabilities." Dan was reminded of the fundamental elements of our legislature and lobbyist tactics. The summit's focus on establishing long term relationships with our representative resonated loudly with Dan. He stated, "A fundamental lesson had been taught to us. We can get so wrapped up in trying to create positive change that, after support is given, we forget to thank the legislators." He added that, "a "follow-up" letter thanking the legislator for their support and time is always appropriate; this simple act can reinforce their knowledge of your cause as well as strengthening your relationship.

This "Michigan Wing" took the opportunity to develop or strengthen legislative relationships. The group first met with Senator Stabenow and Lisa Layman (her staff member) at her weekly meet and greet with her constituents. They next met with Lauren Gibbs, staff member of Representative George Miller. Representative Miller is a California legislator who has historically supported our vision. Following a quick stop at the NRA National Summit Award Luncheon the group met with Elizabeth Powell, a staff member for Senator Carl Levin. Senator Levin later posed with the team for a photo opportunity. Their final stop was at Michigan Representative McCotter office where they met with Caroline Elting. Barbara Schoen a constituent of Representative McCotter was pleased and surprised by Caroline Eltings' interest in the VR program. Barbara adds, "Caroline stressed her appreciation of the resources we provided and added that staff members often benefit from point people, like us, that they can rely on to help familiarize them on pertinent issues."

This was only one of many experiences that inspired Barbara's political energy. "This trip has truly changed my outlook and understanding of the political landscape. It was a truly empowering experience." Barbara and Dan also expressed their appreciation of the help that Harold and Diane provided. "Harold really went out of his way to be helpful making himself available throughout the trip serving as a guide, advisor and teacher." Barb Schoen shared, "Throughout the lectures and during our visit on the hill, Harold would fill in gaps, expounding on relevant points made by speakers, giving us a little history and background on important issues and pointing out important landmarks and the many senators and congressman who passed through the halls."

Diane was a true help as well. Having past experience at the Summit she made sure the team had all the relevant materials they would need during the conference and their day on the hill. Dan added, "She helped arrange critical meetings and visits making sure we were all together, organized and that we

made it to appointments on time.” The team was working hard to maximize their time and greatly benefited from her experience as they negotiated from morning meetings to the Hill Awards Luncheon followed by afternoon meeting trailing from one building to another.

Summing up the event, Dan reminds us that, “as Rehabilitation professionals, we all know that much work needs to be done to level the playing field for persons with disabilities. There is an old saying that states that if you don’t get into politics, politics will get into you.” He couples this notion with the following thought from Nash and Crewe, “...society, even an indebted one, is not going to fix itself for you”. Reminding us that if we do not politically advocate for persons with disabilities, this community will invariably be subjugated to policies construed by ill-informed bureaucrats. Finally Dan notes, “We have an ethical obligation to become politically active on behalf of the community we serve. Persistence is, as history has demonstrated, a key element to achieving the positive changes we seek.”

The entire team would like to give a special thanks to John Simon, Jr., an Intern at Senator Levin’s office (Diane’s nephew) who arranged the meeting and photo shoot with Senator Levin. In closing, if you have never attended this Summit, the Michigan Wing highly recommends that you do so. You will be provided with the fundamental tools for creating the positive changes that are needed for persons with disabilities in a clear and concise manner.