



*The Florida Housing Coalition maintains a focus on the housing needs of people with disabilities*

# Increasing Community-Based Affordable Housing Opportunities for People with Disabilities



*South Florida Grassroots delegates discuss housing needs.*

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The Florida Housing Coalition maintains a focus on the housing needs of people with disabilities. Since 1997, the Coalition has worked in partnership with the Florida Developmental Disabilities Council with the goal of increasing community-based affordable housing opportunities for people with disabilities. During the past year, a series of housing workshops for the disability community and ongoing technical assistance have helped sustain a great momentum for the understanding of what specific strategies are needed to accomplish this goal.

There have been several important developments on the subject during the past Summer and Fall. First, advocates from the disability community converged on Orlando during



the Grassroots Forum conference in July. At the state level, the Florida Legislature created the new Agency for Persons with Disabilities. In addition, the governor created the Developmental Disabilities Blue Ribbon Task Force, which will generate recommendations to help the new agency successfully serve people with disabilities.

## GRASSROOTS FORUM

On July 11-13, 2004, over 300 people with disabilities attended the Florida Grassroots Forum, the fourth statewide conference planned by and for persons with disabilities. Modeled after similar conferences in Pennsylvania and Kansas, the concept of the Florida Grassroots Forum was established in 1997 by the Florida Independent Living Council. The biennial forum offers



*Jack Humburg talks with Florida Independent Living Council Director Beth Schultz at the Grassroots award luncheon.*

Floridians with disabilities an opportunity to meet others who share their concerns about four subject areas: affordable housing, education, employment and transportation. Conference participants are called delegates and make a two-year commitment to advocacy work. They are expected to take the action agenda created at the Forum back to their local communities. After the conference, the Centers for Independent Living and other support organizations in the community provide the disability advocates with a base to use for organizing at the local level.

Michael Chaney from the Coalition participated in the Forum as one of the “content experts” on the subject of housing. The content experts took turns meeting with delegates, who were organized into four regions across the State. A number of housing challenges for people with disabilities were identified and discussed. Many delegates, especially in South Florida, discussed the importance of Section 8 vouchers for securing affordable rental housing. They voiced concern about the long waiting lists for vouchers and the need for additional funding to create new vouchers. The housing content experts discussed how some local public housing authorities have amended their administrative plans to offer priority attention on people with disabilities on waiting lists for vouchers. The content experts also discussed the impact of the Florida Housing Finance Corporation’s programs in financing the development of more affordable rental units. Delegates were informed about the Rule Development workshops for the Housing Credits, SAIL, HOME and Multifamily Bond programs. These workshops provide a forum for delegates to advocate for increased attention on the housing needs of people with disabilities specifically.

The forum delegates also considered several housing-related action steps to undertake at the local level. Many voiced an interest in participating in the planning process for their communities’ comprehensive and consolidated

plans. In addition, delegates learned about the SHIP local housing assistance plan and discussed how to advocate for the creation of new SHIP strategies focused solely on assisting people with disabilities.

A large number of other potential advocacy issues were discussed. One visually impaired delegate stressed the importance of educating rental property managers on the assistance provided by Service Animals to avoid paying a large pet deposit. Others identified a need for educating city and county housing inspectors about the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) and fair housing building requirements. In the end, all these potential advocacy issues have been summarized and prioritized into a final report. This document, as well as guidance for contacting forum delegates in your area, is available from the Florida Independent Living Council, (850) 488-5624.

### FHC BOARD MEMBER RECEIVES GRASSROOTS FORUM AWARD

The importance of affordable housing was emphasized on the final day of the Grassroots Forum, when the Florida Independent Living Council presented its “Outstanding Community Advocate” award to housing professional Jack Humburg. As a Florida Housing Coalition board member and the housing development director for Boley Centers for Behavioral Healthcare, Jack works to address the lack of affordable, accessible housing for very low income people with disabilities. On several occasions, Jack has battled NIMBY opposition from neighborhood and condo associations fighting to keep “those people” out of their communities. Ever the advocate, Jack’s knowledgeable voice of reason has prevailed every time, even in one case that was heard in Federal Court. Humburg has helped many cities throughout Florida with their ADA compliance efforts, authorizing the ADA Transition



*Jack Humburg accepts his award at the Grassroots Forum.*

Plans of Hillsborough County and the City of West Palm Beach among others. He also provides consultation and training to private employers, advocacy organizations, and individuals with disabilities throughout the Southeast. This level of dedication impressed the Florida Independent Living Council enough to give Jack public recognition and a heart-felt “thank you.”

### A NEW AGENCY IS CREATED

Last Spring, the Florida Legislature approved the creation of the Agency For Persons with Disabilities. Starting on July 1, the Developmental Disabilities Program—which had been located at the Department of Children and Families—became a stand-alone agency, although the transition to the new agency was only fully implemented on Oct. 1, 2004.

Shelly Brantley, director for the Agency for Persons with Disabilities, notes that the agency has about 3,800 employees and serves 32,000 Florida residents with developmental disabilities, including persons with cerebral palsy, mental retardation, spina bifida, autism and Prader-Willie syndrome. The focus also will not change: to help Floridians with developmental disabilities live as independently as possible.

The creation of this agency is a victory for social service advocates who have worked for years for a separate state agency to help disabled Floridians. From their perspective, the unique needs of Floridians with developmental disabilities often received too little attention within the large Department of Children and Families. With the governor’s support, the legislature has now established a separate agency with a director who reports directly to the governor and a \$1.2-billion budget.

### DEVELOPMENTAL DISABILITIES BLUE RIBBON TASK FORCE

Concurrent with the creation of a new agency, Governor Bush has also established the Blue Ribbon Task Force (BRTF) on Inclusive Community Living, Lifelong Transition, and Employment of Persons with Developmental Disabilities. This task force is designed to assist the new agency with its mission by developing a recommended plan of action for expanding and improving inclusive community living options, coordinating the provision of transition services for student with developmental disabilities when they leave school and seek employment, and improving opportunities for competitive, inclusive employment.

The issue of most interest to housing professionals is the task force’s attention on community living options. There are still many people living in nursing homes and other institutions who have the ability and an interest in living in a less institutionalized setting. They may wish to locate an affordable apartment to rent, purchase a home, or live with one or more roommates. The Florida Housing Coalition and the Florida Housing Finance Corporation are assisting the task force as it considers recommendations to expand community living options.

The task force is comprised of individuals with disabilities and their families, advocacy groups, private service providers and representatives of the Department of Education, the Department of Vocational Rehabilitation, the Agency for Health Care Administration and Department of Elder Affairs. Since June, the BRTF has been meeting on a monthly basis. The task force must deliver its recommended plan of action to the governor by Dec. 15, 2004.

Taken together, all these developments over the past months illustrate progress on the subject of community-based housing options for people with disabilities. For more information on the subject, contact the Coalition at (850) 878-4219.

