

## **Including Those With Special Needs**

**The Dallas Morning News (December 2008)**

Repercussions from the current financial crisis are affecting everyone. For the 60,000 people with disabilities in Collin County, life-altering challenges are nothing new. The outlook for 2009, however, shows great potential for change.

For example, parents seeking after-school programs are often rejected because their special needs children do not conform to the required guidelines. Today, however, McKinney is piloting the first ISD-sponsored after-school program for students with significant disabilities.

In Plano, senior ISD administrators are working with their PTA's Special and Gifted Education (SAGE) committee to enhance parent training and collaboration. To help the transition from high school, My Possibilities opened with day programs for young adults, while Plano's Therapeutic Recreation department continues to provide a diverse array of activities.

Businesses are discovering that people with disabilities are extremely brand loyal. Studio Movie Grill provides complimentary first-run screenings for special needs families. Recognizing that people with disabilities are hard working employees, Target stores in Frisco and Willow Bend's Glen Eagles Country Club are leaders in offering careers to people with diverse skills.

Churches are expanding their ministries. Prestonwood Baptist recently opened a new state-of-the-art facility for its special congregants, while Custer Road United Methodist continues to provide parents, including non-members, with quality respite.

Elected officials are becoming versed in disability issues. State Senator Florence Shapiro, County Commissioner Kathy Ward, and Plano ISD Trustee Missy Bender, among others, actively seek to understand what these constituents need. Their leadership will bring broader perspectives to our political institutions.

Creating quality solutions is surprisingly easy, because they all start with a simple question:

“How can I better serve my neighbors and customers who happen to have a disability?”

For thought starters, here are nine Disability Goals for 2009:

1. Business owners make their products and services more appealing to people with disabilities. Some customers require personalized attention or alternatives to long waiting lines. Others need items physically redesigned or adapted. As a role model, the Disney theme parks are unmatched in serving people with disabilities, and Disney is rewarded accordingly at the ticket booth.

2. Employers diversify their workforce. People with physical disabilities are in leadership positions throughout our country. Meanwhile, area companies are hiring people with cognitive disabilities in a wide range of careers, including customer service, clerical positions, distribution, and retail.
3. School administrators develop innovative programs that leverage the best technology, while teachers seek special education training beyond the state mandates. Private schools, including faith-based, create programs for all children inclusive of those who learn differently.
4. Our cities provide the same amenities to everyone, with accommodations as necessary. Working with local non-profit agencies can reduce costs and provide valuable disability-related expertise.
5. Developers, lenders, and city leaders create affordable residential options which promote independence and maintain dignity.
6. Physicians expand their skills. People with disabilities are living longer, so doctors for adults are dealing with conditions once confined to pediatricians.
7. Churches and synagogues build bridges to deliver God's word. Targeted outreach, partnering with group homes, and delivering services in the community are examples.
8. Texas legislators bring Collin County up from the bottom in state funding, while creating a timeline to end the decade-long waiting lists for services.
9. Families with disabilities assume the ultimate responsibility for change. We should support businesses that support us, and join non-profit organizations to create momentum. We must also participate in the school board, municipal, and legislative processes. After all, it's hard for our leaders to serve the invisible.

God has blessed Collin County in many ways. Now let's serve each other with the blessings he gave us.

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