Are You Eligible for the ABLE Act?

By Britt Biscone

There's a new law around that just might benefit you! On December 19, 2014, President Barack Obama signed the Achieving a Better Life Experience (ABLE) Act into effect. What does this law mean for you? Well, if you have a disability, or a family member with a disability, and qualify for this new program it would allow you to create a tax-exempt savings account. This account will help you pay for your disability-related expenses without affecting your governmental or public benefits.

This law comes 8 years after a fight for more financial security for the disabled community. Previously, programs like Medicaid and Social Security had requirements for eligibility, like preventing people with disabilities from having assets worth more than $2,000. This means that people with disabilities weren’t able to save the money needed to pay their healthcare and day to day living needs without fearing that they would lose their benefits.

The ABLE Act attempts to solve this issue by allowing people with disabilities to save while maintaining their benefits. This money allows them to provide better healthcare, independence, and a higher quality of life for themselves. Are you eligible? Take a look at the links below to find out.

Summary of Congress   http://bitly.com/113Congress

National Disability Institute   http://bitly.com/ndiableact
Agitation isn’t always a bad thing. One of the most important things we do as an Independent Living Center, and as the disability community, is agitate for change. We do this to make the community, or a piece of it, work better for everyone, and that includes those of us who have disabilities. “Agitation” usually starts with the identification of a physical barrier or policy that keeps people from participating in community life. We do research on the issue, identify what we want to see happen differently that is legally acceptable, and figure out who can make that change happen. Then we begin to ask, to write letters, to educate, ask some more, start pushing stronger, negotiate and sometimes consider filing a complaint or a lawsuit. But we persevere as a group to make the change happen. This is a group thing…we work together to make a change that best benefits the most people, not just one of us.

Over the past 12-18 months, several “agitations” have been successful in improving the lives of people with disabilities. A local advocacy committee called Access the Community Today (ACT) has successfully worked to get Colorado Springs and El Paso County to hire an ADA Coordinator and start to create a Title II Self Evaluation and Transition Plan to correct barriers in facilities and programs run by either entity. Another local advocacy committee, The Transit Coalition, has worked hard to get the Mayor of Colorado Springs to add funding to the transit budget for more bus service. The IC’s Emergency Services Manager, working with a small group of interested persons with disabilities, has been able to improve the emergency services planning effort to include our community. The IC’s Home Health staff, working with others around the state have been able to change state Medicaid regulations to allow spouses to be paid to provide in-home support services as well as allow consumers to receive those services outside the home, such as at work, school or even in the park at a picnic.

Now we are beginning two new initiatives, or “agitations”: a statewide conversation on whether the Division of Vocational Rehabilitation (DVR) should be housed within the State Department of Human Services or the State Department of Labor and Employment; and increasing/improving the accessible, affordable housing stock in our 6 county service area (El Paso, Teller, Park, Lincoln, Cheyenne, and Kit Carson). With regard to DVR, there is a national move to integrate our specialized employment services within the state (think workforce centers). Will such a move improve and streamline services? Will we be able to get more and better jobs? See what you think by checking out our first Issue Brief which tackles this subject. You can find it online at Issue Brief http://bitly.com/marchissuebrief. Then, share your opinion with your state legislator or Colorado Springs’ Senator Kent Lambert who is chair of the Join Budget Committee where this proposal first surfaced. On average, people are waiting 3 to 5 years for accessible public housing. If you are interested in advocating for more and better accessible housing that’s integrated into the community, contact Carrie Baatz at cbaatz@the-ic.org or by calling 719-471-8181.
Bowling with Peers  
March 13 from 2PM to 5PM  
Harmony Bowl  
3845 N. Academy Blvd  
Colorado Springs, CO 80917  

Stand up for Transit Day – A fundraiser and outreach event of the Community Transit Coalition!  
April 9  
Email cstone@the-ic.org or call 719-471-8181 ext. 197 for more information.  

Therapeutic Horseback Riding  
April 23 at 10AM  
RSVP by April 16 to Tim Ashley at tashley@the-ic.org or call at 719-471-8181  
3254 Paseo Rd  
Colorado Springs, CO 80909
The IC Gives Back in an Unusual Way  - By Britt Biscone

Local nonprofits give back to our communities through their services, dedicated employees, and so much more. Each one is committed to making Colorado a better place to live, but one of these incredible organizations is giving back in an unusual way. The Independence Center, as a Home Health Agency and Independent Living Center for people with disabilities, decided to create their own fund to support other nonprofits through awarding grants to organizations who are working towards increasing accessibility so that all may thrive.

This fund is called The Independence Center Fund and was responsible for awarding $74,075 in grant money to five lucky nonprofits in 2014. Patricia Yeager, CEO of The Independence Center, said “The board and staff are delighted to physically expand the accessibility for our region through these funds. We expect to see great things over the next few years.” The recipients were Amblicab, Friends of the El Paso County Nature Center, Blue Star Recyclers, the Colorado Veterans Resource Coalition, and the Lake George Community Park. With these funds the recipients will work on community projects to increase accessibility including:

Agency Name: Friends of the El Paso County Nature Center
Amount Awarded: $20,000
Reason: Renovate the Songbird Trail.

Agency Name: Lake George Community Park
Amount Awarded: $3,875
Reason: Install two accessible picnic tables, build a walkway and shelter.

Agency Name: Blue Star Recyclers
Amount Awarded: $20,200
Reason: Purchase conveyor belt to simplify electronic equipment sorting process and allow room to hire more employees with disabilities.

Agency Name: Amblicab
Amount Awarded: $25,000
Reason: Purchase vehicle to allow for weekend services to people with disabilities.

Agency Name: Colorado Veterans Resource Coalition
Amount Awarded: $5,000
Reason: Remodel shower units in downstairs of Crawford House to make them accessible.

Teri Ulrich, Development Director at The IC, said “It was a hard process as there were so many great applications. We’re excited about the proposals we were able to support and look forward to growing our partnerships and opportunities for people with disabilities in the future!”
The IC provides training for the American Red Cross
- By Britt Biscone

Colorado has suffered many natural disasters over the past few years. Fires and floods have plagued the state and caused many to trade the comfort of their homes for the comfort of a shelter. These shelters are placed where they are needed most, to help all people in a difficult time. Recently, The Independence Center has joined the efforts to help make these shelters fully accessible to people with disabilities.

The Disability-Benefit Support Contract Committee (DBSCC), which is comprised of 13 governor appointed members, has awarded The Independence Center an $86,000 grant. This grant provides the necessary funds for The IC to create ADA awareness throughout Colorado shelters. This awareness will include educating Red Cross personal and first responders about ADA requirements for an accessible shelter and answering any questions necessary for the success of the program.

Funds from this generous grant will be used to create a CD (or digital media) that demonstrates what an ADA compliant shelter looks like. The Independence Center will create the product and distribute it to the American Red Cross Chapters in Colorado and additionally conduct workshops on ADA accessibility.

Over the next year The Independence Center will develop a memorandum of understanding with the Red Cross, a shelter checklist, disability etiquette materials, and a facilitators guide. These activities will be followed by contacting chapter managers, setting appointments for Red Cross training, conducting trainings, and evaluating the effectiveness of the program. This grant brings Colorado’s government and disability assistance together to make Colorado a safer state for every citizen.

Tim Ashley measuring whether or not a bathroom is ADA compliant
Changes to Critical Vocational Rehabilitation Programs

The following information is an abbreviated version of a full Issue Brief. An Issue Brief is a relatively short document that discusses an issue, provides a recommendation for action, lists references, and provides contact information. The point of Issue Briefs is to inform people about a problem within the community and how we can solve that problem together. The Independence Center hopes that as a part of the disability community, we can agitate for change, and you will join us.

During the 2015 legislative session, changes to critical Vocational Rehabilitation programs for persons with disabilities in Colorado will be debated - changes that will significantly impact supports and services. The question is whether to move Colorado's state and federally funded Division of Vocational Rehabilitation (DVR) and the associated programs out of Human Services and into Labor and Employment. By taking the best practices of both employment systems, Colorado could build one system that truly serves people with disabilities alongside everyone else. Success will be measured in the increased numbers of employed adults with disabilities who are working in sustainable-income positions.

Current Issues Facing DVR

- Lack of program management practices to ensure that it carries out both its responsibilities under federal and state laws and its duty to taxpayers
- Lack of leadership over the years as several directors have come and gone in their attempt to make the program more responsive and effective

Moving Programs

Careful thought and advance planning must be given to effect such a change. In addition to all the services involved in DVR’s employment programs, consideration must be given to where in state government will the following programs be housed:

- Independent Living Centers – 10 centers in Colorado that provide resources to people with disabilities to ensure they can live independently
- School To Work Alliance Program – Serves approx. 2,500 youths per year age 16 to 25 with job services and job stability in the job for one year
- Business Enterprise Program – Places qualified legally blind business persons to manage food service operations in federal and state government office buildings and facilitates
- Older Blind Grants – Community grants distributed to community agencies in the support of individuals 55+ who are blind
- Traumatic Brain Injury Trust Fund – Established to help people with brain injury and their loved ones by assisting with accessing needed supports.

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Call to Action

The Independence Center in Colorado Springs believes that the time for much needed improvements to the State Vocational Rehabilitation system is now. One of the goals of the Disability Civil Rights movement over the past 35+ years has been to integrate services for people with disabilities into mainstream programs. We know that separate services are never equal services. We applaud the efforts to examine the programs and to determine how best to structure the administration so that programs are aligned with all labor and employment initiatives. We agree with the move to the Department of Labor and Employment, which mirrors changes that are starting to occur at the federal level. However, we believe that careful planning and coordination needs to occur so that changes are thoughtful and purposeful. There will need to be considerable attention given to building respect and team behaviors between DVR staff and the Workforce Development staff to achieve the goal of meaningful jobs for Coloradans with disabilities across the state. Finally, the placement of related VR programs needs to be thought about in terms of where can these programs be supported to provide their best work.
Grant Money Available for 60 and Older

The Pikes Peak Area Council of Governments Area Agency on Aging has awarded The Independence Center with an incredible grant. It is available to seniors age 60 and older with low vision or blindness. The goal of the grant is to improve the quality of life and independence for seniors living with low vision, and blindness, in El Paso, Teller, and Park Counties through the purchase of material aids and assistive devices.

The qualifying equipment includes devices that can assist in helping individuals live as independently as possible. Some equipment ideas include talking watches, clocks, timers, scales, magnifiers of all kinds and strengths, braille writers, canes, adaptive kitchen items, as well as iPads and iPhones.

Please contact our Older Individuals with Blindness (OIB) Specialists for more information and to begin the process of qualifying for this grant.

Anne Ferlin 719-471-8181 x103 aferlin@the-ic.org
Jeanette Fortin 719-471-8181 x126 jfortin@the-ic.org
Lorraine Denison 719-661-0105 ldenison@the-ic.org
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