

City Recognizes Disabilities Awareness Month

Sometimes, it's an effort to just get through the day.

For community members with a disability, that “sometimes” ends up being all the time.

Doorways are too narrow, bathrooms are inaccessible, and the print on the menu is too small.

Those without disabilities are often unaware of the barriers faced by those with disabilities. That's why the City of Huntington observes Disability Awareness Month each year — to get people thinking about what it's like to have a disability, and how some barriers can be removed.

One of the most revealing events each year is the Mayor's Downtown Roll-Around, which puts people without disabilities in wheelchairs and asks them to navigate throughout the downtown.

“In a manual wheelchair, it's brutal; it's hard,” says Ronda Smelser, director of human resources for the City of Huntington. “It gives you an idea how hard it is to even open a door.”

Smelser also serves as the city's ADA (Americans with Disabilities Act) coordinator, and it's in that role that she coordinates Disability Awareness Month each March.

The Downtown Roll-Around, set for March 28 at 3 p.m., will wind up the month-long observance. In addition to Mayor Brooks Feters, past participants have included City Council and Board of Works members, city department heads, community leaders, and members of the Mayor's Advisory Council on Community Accessibility.

But it's open to anyone, Smelser says.

“If we know they're coming, I provide the wheelchairs,” she says.

A new addition to Disability Awareness Month this year targets veterans with disabilities. An employment advisor will visit the Veterans Service Office on March 19 from 9 a.m. to 11 a.m. to provide help with resumes, applications, training, and more.

The Veterans Service Office is in the Huntington County Annex on South Jefferson Street, and veterans are welcome to drop in without an appointment.

Another annual event has undergone some changes this year. Breakfast sessions in the past have offered advice on making older downtown buildings more accessible to customers with disabilities. This year, a lunch session will provide information to employers about making reasonable accommodations for employees and customers with disabilities.

The luncheon, sponsored by the Huntington County Chamber of Commerce, will be held on March 15 at the Pathfinder Service North Campus beginning with registration at 11:30 a.m. The \$10 charge includes the meal, and reservations must be made by March 13 by contacting the Chamber of Commerce- skimmel@huntington-chamber.com or by phone, (260) 356-5300.

Speaker Stephen Metzger will talk about ways businesses can accommodate both employees and customers with disabilities, as well as what is required by the Americans with Disabilities Act.

The observance opens on March 1 with the launch of a YouTube video produced by Riverview Middle School students, based on Riverview TV's interview with Feters about Disability Awareness Month. Feters will issue a proclamation on March 4 designating March as Disability Awareness Month in Huntington.

Throughout March, the Huntington City-Township Public Library will display books focusing on disability awareness. At the Roanoke Public Library, the preschool reading session on March 5 will stress disability awareness. And Feters will be the guest at a Kids Kampus story time on March 8, talking and answering questions about disabilities.

The week of March 11 has been designated as Spirit Week, with participants wearing a different color each day to draw attention to a different disability. Monday is yellow for Down Syndrome; Tuesday is blue for autism; Wednesday is green for cerebral palsy and mental illness; Thursday is orange for ADHD, self-injury, and Prader-Willi Syndrome; and Friday is purple for Disability Awareness Month.

Spirit Week is coordinated by Pathfinder Services and draws participation from both Pathfinder and City of Huntington employees, but all businesses and individuals are welcome to join in, Smelser says.

“We would love to have the whole community join in,” she says.

Huntington's Special Olympians, who form teams of athletes with disabilities, will compete in a basketball tournament throughout March. The first game is March 2 at Taylor University, with sectionals set for March 16 in Parker City. State finals are March 23 and 24 in Indianapolis.

The whole idea of the special month, Smelser says, is to “make Huntington a more inclusive, accessible community.”

To that end, Smelser and the city's engineering office are doing things like increasing the number of curb ramps throughout town and making parks, sidewalks and restrooms more accessible. The City Building has been equipped with automatic door openers, and levers have been installed in other doors in place of knobs. Restrooms on the City Building's first and third floors have been made accessible.

That effort continues, with the help of members of the community.

“If people help us identify the areas they're struggling with, we'll do everything we can to make it accessible,” Smelser says. “But sometimes it's not an overnight fix.”

Smelser can be reached at 356-1400, extension 2026, or ronda.smelser@huntington.in.us.



The Mayor's Downtown Roll-Around, which includes both people accustomed to navigating in wheelchairs and those for whom it's a new experience, is an annual feature of Disability Awareness Month in Huntington. The roll-around will return this year on March 28th.