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Indy ranked No. 1 in nation in accessibility for the disabled

Advocates laud city's efforts but stress the need to improve job opportunities

By Vic Ryckaert
vic.ryckaert@indystar.com

A national disability group ranks Indianapolis as the most disability-friendly community in the country, but advocates say the city can't get complacent.

The Washington-based National Organization on Disability last week gave Indianapolis its 2009 Accessible America Award, which recognizes the city for its accessibility and inclusion of people with disabilities.

"We've been working really hard to make sure that we're always thinking about how we can enhance inclusion for people with disabilities in this city," said Juli Pains, coordinator of the city's Office of Disability Affairs.

Advocates for the disabled generally praised the city's efforts but said much work remains. Beth DeHoff, who runs a ministry for people with disabilities and their families at Speedway United Methodist Church, said employment opportunities are still lacking.

"That award kind of makes us sound like we have everything figured out, and that certainly isn't the case," said DeHoff, 44, whose 9-year-old son, Kyle, has Down syndrome and autism and is a leukemia survivor.

DeHoff gave the city credit for having many organizations and services available to the disabled.

"Obviously we have some great things going on," she said. "We have a lot to work on. I hope people see that as an opportunity to get more involved and take it further."

Indianapolis, a finalist for the prize the past four years, beat out six other finalists this year: Alexandria, Va.; Denver; Louisville, Ky.; New Haven, Conn.; Sioux Falls, S.D.; and Surprise, Ariz.

The award comes with a \$25,000 check to be used to support the city's accessibility efforts.

Carol Glazer, the organization's president, said in a statement that the award honors "best practices through which communities offer people with disabilities major footholds to an independent lifestyle, such as education and employment."

The organization commended Indianapolis for the creation of the Indianapolis Business Leadership Network, a group of business leaders who promote awareness about employing people with disabilities. It also applauded the accessibility features along the Cultural Trail and other disability-related efforts from the mayor's office.

Kim Dodson, associate executive director for The Arc of Indiana, said city officials and businesses have worked hard to make workplaces, transportation and hotels more accessible.

Last year, Dodson said, her group helped organize a conference that drew more than 3,000 disabled people to Indianapolis. Guests stayed in hotels throughout Downtown, she said, and were able to maneuver wheelchairs and walkers along the sidewalks.

"We had a wonderful experience," Dodson said. "Many had very severe disabilities, and they traveled independently."

Indianapolis lawyer Greg Fehribach has seen firsthand the city's progress since it began addressing disability issues in the late 1970s.

"It was very difficult to even get across the street from the City-County Building and use the City Market in 1977 and '78," said Fehribach, 50, who was born with osteogenesis imperfecta, or brittle-bone disease, and uses a motorized wheelchair.

"I've enjoyed the optimism and the progress that all of our leaders have given us."
