

2016 KCBA Liberty Bell Award Winners: Lynn O'Shea & The Association for Individual Development

Extending a Hand

by Patrick M. Flaherty, Esq.

Social justice is a simple concept. It recognizes the equality of people in all their diversity. It contemplates equal opportunity for the disadvantaged and essential life services for people unable to stand alone. It arises from a belief that we all share a common humanity and that with it comes a responsibility for people less fortunate than ourselves.

Few people and organizations have done more for so long to promote social justice in Kane County than Lynn O'Shea and the Association for Individual Development ("AID"). Both have been tireless advocates for people with developmental disabilities and people with mental illness, populations largely relegated to the margins and shadows of mainstream society. The KCBA is pleased to bestow the Liberty Bell Award as our salute to your years of advocacy and service. We are proud to stand with you as a helping profession in the common pursuit of justice.

Organized in Aurora in 1961 by parents of eight special needs children, AID has grown into one of the largest and most respected organizations in the State dedicated to helping people with developmental and mental health challenges. AID now serves more than 5,400 in the Fox Valley through housing, health care, employment, community support and crisis intervention. It operates over 40 housing facilities, 7 victim services centers, 5 day programs and 4 mental health clinics. Education programs in Illinois take care of children with special needs through age 21. AID takes care of them for the rest of their lives.

Lynn O'Shea has led AID as its Presi-



dent and CEO for the past 18 years. She is recognized throughout the State as one of the most knowledgeable and effective advocates for people with disabilities and mental health challenges. Understanding and accessing the complex web of federal, state, local and private resources is essential to successful advocacy in this field, and there are few better than Lynn O'Shea. Lynn is also acknowledged for her management expertise in successfully navigating a large organization through the political and economic storms that so directly and uniquely impact social service providers. AID is where it is today because of the intelligence, vision, leadership and compassion of Lynn O'Shea and the talented staff she has assembled.

The importance and challenge of the work done by AID is underscored by increasing need and decreasing resources. Over 1,500 people in the Fox Valley are currently on a waiting list for help. Over the next 15 years, half of the 16,000 students in special education will graduate and require adult services. At the same time, State fund-

ing is expected to be slashed by 54% for 2016 alone. Reimbursement rates have not changed in a decade while the cost of living index has increased by 35%. Before the current funding cuts, Illinois already ranked 46 out of 50 states in providing home and community based services.

Helping people with disabilities and mental illness is often demanding and unappreciated. It involves long hours, low pay and a bottomless reservoir of emotional energy. It also involves a core belief, held contrary to every societal influence from infancy to adulthood, that improving lives is more important than making money. AID is fortunate to be led and staffed by many such people.

AID is also a reminder that the struggle for social justice, the front lines, day to day, grassroots struggle, largely occurs outside the legal profession. It is fought by non-lawyers in the halls of local, state and federal governments and in the clinics, crisis centers, workshops and group homes where people with need actually live their lives. The advocacy and services of AID ensure lives of dignity and purpose for people who are often marginalized or left out. Giving a voice to people with disabilities and mental illness makes government more responsive and democracy more robust. Lifting up the most vulnerable among us, lifts up all of us, and makes our communities stronger and better places to live.

To Lynn O'Shea and to the Association for Individual Development, thank you for extending a hand. You shoulder a responsibility that belongs to all of us. There are so many who could not stand up or stand tall without you.