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**2002-2003**

## **Catholic Campaign for Human Development**

### ***Profile of a Funded Group***

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## **Hear Our Voice: Maryland Disabilities Forum**

What does someone with multiple sclerosis, someone who is legally blind, someone with a spinal cord injury or someone with a mental illness have in common? In the state of Maryland, they might all be members of the **Maryland Disabilities Forum**. Organized in January 1994, MDF's purpose is to unite Maryland's citizens with disabilities into a single, powerful statewide ***cross-disability organization***. The Maryland Disabilities Forum promotes a common agenda and marshals statewide support to influence government policies. MDF is an advocacy group ***run by persons with disabilities***.

***Cross-disability?*** MDF achieves this by advocating on behalf of all persons with disabilities regardless of

the type of disability or the age of the person when the disability occurred.

***Run by disability activists?*** MDF is a unique organization with a Board of Directors led by people with disabilities. It does this because people with disabilities are the ones most affected by policies and policy changes. The Board draws from its 100 affiliated disability organizations in Maryland.

According to recent census figures, there are **854,345 persons with disabilities** in the state of Maryland. They are between the ages of 5 and 65 who live in community settings outside institutions. The **American Disabilities Act**, passed by Congress in **1990**, prohibits discrimination against people with disabilities. It guarantees them equal access to public services, employment, public accommodations and telecommunications. However, access for many individuals with disabilities is a civil right yet to be realized.

## **Recent Successes!**

With help from **Catholic Campaign for Human Development**, MDF sponsored a **2002 Gubernatorial Candidates' Forum** with Lieutenant Governor Kennedy Townsend and Congressman Ehrlich. Over 1,000 disability activists and advocates attended. Governor-Elect Ehrlich later requested MDF to make recommendations regarding the implementation of his ***New Freedom Initiative***. This opportunity allowed MDF leaders to offer a blueprint for a **cabinet-level department of disabilities** in the Governor's office.

Joel David Myerberg, MDF  
Chairperson, was named to Governor-  
Elect Ehrlich's transition team.

## Did you know?

According to MDF reports, people with mental illness and people with physical disabilities are the **highest users of tobacco in the U.S.** The MDF "Cigarette Cessation Symposium" on 10/15/2001 informed Marylanders with disabilities of funding available for **smoking cessation** (as part of the settlement of Maryland's tobacco lawsuit). People with disabilities also experience **high unemployment levels** (near 50%). In partnership with Independence Now, Inc., **MDF hired its first student with disabilities** in 2002 to work in advocacy during the summer. Erika Twitty attended an invitation-only conference sponsored by the US Depts. of Labor and Transportation. She had no means of transportation herself, but the Independence Now group, among other things, made it possible for her to participate.

**For youth with disabilities** and their peers, the MDF promoted the **5<sup>th</sup> annual Port Discovery Fun Day** at Baltimore City's Children's Museum. A record 1,268 children and young people attended this event. MDF also continues to provide **disability awareness training** about patron needs at Oriole Park and Port Discovery.

## Hear Their Voice: A writer's education

In preparation for this article, I arranged to interview the vice chairman of MDF at his office and home in Phoenix, Maryland. Mr. Dave Ward is himself a person who suffers from a high level spinal cord injury that resulted in quadriplegia. The MDF social work intern would join us as well. Unfortunately, on the day of my interview, Mr. Ward's personal health assistant was delayed. She regularly provides routine morning care, but on this day, problems arose. Without her services, Mr. Ward could not meet publically for our interview. Nor could he work in the office at his voice activated computer or attend a scheduled evening meeting.

Nevertheless, I learned about two MDF success stories **behind a situation like this**. In 1996, the Maryland Disabilities Forum was responsible for **reversing statewide cuts** to support services like personal assistants, interpreters and assistive technology. Moreover, in February 2001, the Maryland Board of Nurses agreed to include **changes in the Code of Maryland Regulations** to guarantee the right of consumers to supervise their own personal assistance services. MDF helped to make all this possible. With this important service, Mr. Ward is able to live and work effectively as a key Maryland Disabilities Forum activist.

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