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Conference honors workers who assist, train disabled

Hundreds attend first statewide meeting for profession

BY BETH MILLER
 THE NEWS JOURNAL
 05/05/2006

DOVER -- Donna Thurston had a few moments to smell a rose Thursday and the fragrance put a smile on her face. Maybe it was the moment of recognition, too.

Thurston, who works in a KenCrest group home in Milford, was one of 35 nominees for awards at the state's first conference for workers who provide assistance and support to people with disabilities.

And though she wasn't one of the five finalists, Thurston did get that rose -- and savored the moment. There aren't too many of those moments for direct-support professionals, as those in her field are known, she said.

"They're trying to do something to support us," she said. "They're honoring us. It's about time we get pats on the back -- and it doesn't have to be a money pat on the back. This is really nice."

The field of direct-support professionals includes those who spend at least 50 percent of their time providing assistance or training for those with disabilities, enabling them to live in the community, hold a job, and enjoy a variety of social networks.

Cathy McKay, CEO and president of Connections Community Support Programs, whose 300 employees work with those who have mental illness, HIV, substance abuse problems or are homeless, estimated that at least 3,000 people work in the field in Delaware.

Their median pay is about \$27,000 a year, McKay said.

"These people are professionals, but their image is not that," said Beverly Stapleford of the University of Delaware's Center for Disabilities Studies. "I don't think they're even aware that they're professionals."

Several hundred attended this first statewide conference, sponsored by the UD Center, the state Department of Health and Social Services, the state Division of Vocational Rehabilitation Services, and the Governor's Commission on Community-Based Alternatives for Persons with Disabilities.

"I volunteered to come," said Chrissy Garey, a program assistant with Easter Seals in Dover. "My supervisor

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Keynote speaker Rachel Simon enjoys a light moment during her introduction. She wrote "Riding the Bus with My Sister," about accompanying her mentally disabled sister in their Pennsylvania town.

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The University of Delaware's Renee Settles-Bean leads a workshop at the state's first conference for caregivers who work with people with disabilities.

AWARD WINNERS

Five people Thursday were named Delaware Outstanding Direct Support Professionals in the first state conference for those in the field. They are: Meg Armstrong, program coordinator, Opportunity Center Inc.; Lorraine Clark, senior program manager, Sherwood and Village of Barretts Run Apartments, Mosaic; Anna Collins, occupational therapy aide, Stockley Center; William Jenkins, direct support specialist, Fairfax House, Mosaic; and Carla Tull, certified nursing assistant, Stockley Center.

thought it would be good -- and she was right."

Some who attended -- like Thurston -- work in residential homes. Others are job coaches or offer

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recreational and therapeutic programs.

Thursday, they had a choice of seminars on topics ranging from dealing with change, sexuality, managing conflict, mentoring, networking, wellness, values, what it takes to be exemplary in the field, and how to work with the boss.

They also heard stirring stories from keynote speaker Rachel Simon, author of the acclaimed "Riding the Bus with my Sister," which traced her experience of joining her mentally disabled sister as she rode public buses throughout her Pennsylvania town.

Simon said she became aware of the value of direct support professionals when her sister had surgery. She now is compiling stories of the workers and their significance in the lives of those they serve.

"A great DSP [direct support professional] makes the difference between a life of struggle and a life of success," Simon said. "You are doing some of the most important work in the world."

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