



Minnesota Department of **Human Services**



June 21, 2013

Contact: Kelsey Gorsen
Communications
651-431-2448

Awards highlight excellence in aging, disability services

Eight individuals and organizations from across Minnesota were recognized for their work in improving and enriching the lives of seniors and people with disabilities at the 2013 Age & Disabilities Odyssey Conference held June 17-18 in Duluth.

This year marks the most nominations ever received for awards in the categories of service, community, innovation and policy.

“The 2013 Odyssey award winners are excellent examples of individuals and organizations coming together to better serve aging Minnesotans, people with disabilities and their caregivers,” said Human Services Commissioner Lucinda Jesson. “It is wonderful to see the difference these people and organizations are making in their communities.”

Three awards were given in the service category, which recognizes an organization or individual that has promoted exemplary practices, services and/or advocacy for older Minnesotans, people with disabilities and their communities. The 2013 service award winners are:

- **Sarah Mruz**, a direct support professional for Mains’l Services, Inc. in Brooklyn Park, received the award for her model treatment of consumers. According to her nomination, Mruz “maintains the utmost respect for the dignity and rights of the consumers, all while addressing their needs.” It also noted that she allows her consumers to make independent decisions, no matter the outcome, and is at the ready to solve any problems that may occur.
- **VINE Faith in Action** in Mankato, whose mission is to “promote quality of life and a culture of caring,” was recognized for its ability to identify a need in its community and create a solution to fill that need. Called “a pillar in its community for elders and people with disabilities,” VINE Faith in Action provides services including rides to medical appointments, housekeeping for people following hospitalization and/or peer mentoring.
- **Dr. Terrance Capistrant** was recognized for his work raising funds to establish the Capistrant Center for Parkinson’s Disease and Movement Disorders at Bethesda Hospital

in St. Paul. After a long career as a neurologist, Capistrant currently volunteers in an advisory role and as a patient educator at the center.

In the community award category, two individuals were recognized for improving policies, services or quality of life practices for elders, people with disabilities and their communities. The 2013 community award winners are:

- **Katy Boone**, a planning and promotion supervisor at Carver County Public Health Department, was recognized for her work to improve services for baby boomers. Through her work with city officials and interviews with Carver County baby boomers, Boone identified intersections between baby boomers' needs and the city's goals to develop a comprehensive set of programs and policies focused on the baby boomer population in order to improve services. Examples include training for local officials regarding seniors' housing-related concerns and the development of a comprehensive plan for the boomers of Carver County.
- **Barbara Fonkert**, an individual and functional needs planning coordinator for Homeland Security Emergency Management at the Minnesota Department of Public Safety, received the award for her key role in creating the "Functional Needs Planning Toolkit," which identifies a wide variety of resources to aide emergency planners to better meet the needs of people with disabilities. The toolkit also encourages emergency planners to involve people with differing needs in their planning to encourage the highest level of service.

Two awards were given in the innovation category, which recognizes an organization or individual that has championed innovations in direct services, coordination of services, and community-based partnerships, and increased the resilience, interdependence and quality of life for elders, people with disabilities and their communities. The 2013 Innovation Award winners are:

- **Northwoods Caregivers**, which serves seniors and people with disabilities in the Bemidji area, was recognized for partnering with Bemidji State University students to customize and create a database that automates time reporting, data entry and billing. With the new database and the use of tablets, Northwoods Caregivers has reduced errors and frustration and has saved time for office staff and homemakers. The efficiency allows the agency to reach out to more potential clients and referring partners. Funding for the changes was provided through grants from the Department of Human Services, and the George Neilson and Northwest Minnesota foundations.
- **Debra Schipper**, chief executive officer, director and lead autism spectrum disorder specialist at West Metro Learning Connections, Inc., received the award for her role in founding the organization, which addresses the specific needs of high-functioning young people with autism for personalized social, communication, and behavior skill development. In the past 10 years, West Metro Connections says 1,000 children have participated in the program and are now leading happier and more social lives.

In the policy award category, one organization was recognized for demonstrating public policy leadership resulting in improved quality of life for elders, people with disabilities and their communities. The 2013 Policy Award winner is:

- **ACT on Alzheimer's**, a statewide public-private community collaboration, received the award for their efforts to advance awareness and dispel myths about the disease. The collaboration also provides support to communities through tools and resources that make them more dementia-friendly for people with the disease and their caregivers. Currently, more than 50 organizations and 150 individuals participate in ACT on Alzheimer's, putting Minnesota at the forefront nationally in preparing for Alzheimer's.

“We can all learn from and be inspired by the exemplary work of these award winners,” said Don Samuelson, chair of the Minnesota Board on Aging.

The Odyssey Conference, sponsored by the Minnesota Department of Human Services and the Minnesota Board on Aging, focused on aging Minnesotans, people with disabilities and caregivers and services that support them.