

# Leaders in Action and Advocacy Leadership Network



*By John Romer*

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In 1998, under direction of then-Superintendent Tom Kidd, Hamilton County Developmental Disabilities (then called the Board of MR/DD) started the first County Board-supported advocacy group in the state of Ohio. Melody Brauning, now retired, led the new effort on a part-time basis with Essie Pederson, a consultant with national expertise and insight into advocacy for/with people with developmental disabilities.

The founding members were Patrice McHale, Brian Welty, Margie Moeller and Mia Peterson (later hired by the agency as the first professional who experiences DD), and they decided to call this new advocacy group Leaders in Action. Gradually, membership expanded to include more people with DD, as well as leaders from community organizations such as the University of Cincinnati University Center for Excellence in Developmental Disabilities (UC UCEDD). They served as leaders to support and encourage all people supported by Hamilton County DD Services to “find their voices” and to “speak up and speak out.”

Cheryl Phipps, who was named Superintendent in 2001 after Tom Kidd retired, reinforced the national trend of ensuring that people with disabilities were being heard and truly had a seat at the table in the decision-making process. When Melody Brauning moved to another position within the agency, Phipps hired John Romer, who used to work with UC UCEDD, to continue expanding advocacy support efforts, ensure that Hamilton County advocates were supported to be leaders in advocacy on the state and national levels, and engage local service providers to support the people they serve to “speak up and speak out” as well.

These new efforts led to founding Advocacy Leadership Network (ALN), which brought together several large agency providers and advocates with DD, including:

- Resident Home (now Envision) and Linda Kunick
- The Arc Hamilton County and Marvin Moss
- United Cerebral Palsy (now Stepping Stones) and DJ Maes and Diana Mairose
- Jewish Vocational Service (now Easter Seals) and Robert Shuemak
- Ohio Valley Goodwill Industries and James Harley
- Cincinnati Children’s UC UCEDD and Brady Sellet
- Down Syndrome Association of Greater Cincinnati and Patrice McHale
- Starfire Council and Steven Anderson

These energetic and dynamic advocates had many accomplishments in the following years by working with local city and county officials to remove the word “handicapped” and replace it with “accessible” on signage, educating local media reporters on people-first language, sharing their stories with local and state politicians to affect legislation, and serving in leadership positions on numerous statewide and local boards and organizations.

In addition, Hamilton County Commissioners appointed Robert Harris to the agency’s Board, and he was the first member who experiences disability himself. Later, Hamilton County DD Services hired Diana Mairose and Robert Shuemak as valued members of the Advocacy and Integration Team, to bring knowledge and expertise in housing, voting rights, transportation and technology.

Today, under the leadership of Superintendent Alice Pavey, the agency’s ongoing commitment to both advocacy support and integration have now been combined in the Office of Planning, Innovation and Quality.