

Good afternoon everyone, and thanks for singing along with our presenters when we started today! It felt great, didn't it? It's wonderful to look out there and see so many friends who took the time to be with us today. For those of you who don't know me, I'm Lori Ropa and I have the privilege of serving as the executive director of this incredible organization.

At The Arc, we talk a lot about Community. About people's right to live in the community. About The Arc giving people a sense of community. About making our community a place that embraces everyone. Though there are many definitions of the word, the lyrics we just sang do a great job of capturing the word's essence - Community is a place, but it's not just a place. It's also how you feel when you're in that place.

According to our song, Community is the place where everyone knows you and they're glad you're there. At Cheers, the bartenders, wait staff and patrons created their own community in the heart of the city of Boston. Everyone mattered. Things weren't quite right unless Cliff rambled on with some little known fact about the white rhinoceros, Sam commented on the latest woman who couldn't resist him, or the whole room shouted "Norm!" when he walked in the door. Each character, though far from perfect, had an important role to play, and they were all essential. It's what made Cheers a community.

The reality of today is that people with autism, cerebral palsy, Down syndrome and other intellectual and developmental disabilities are not living in world that embodies that sense of Community. Although we no longer institutionalize people because they have a specific diagnosis, and words like "feeble-minded" and "retarded" are completely unacceptable, the value of people with disabilities is still not recognized everywhere.

An extreme illustration of my point is the news story that broke this summer about “the near eradication of Down syndrome in Iceland.” After reading multiple news reports it became clear that in Iceland, their culture does not value people with Down syndrome, and consequently people with Down syndrome are no longer part of their community. What a devastating loss.

Colorado is not Iceland, by any means, but, as a state, we still struggle to demonstrate that people with disabilities are valued by our society. One of the ways in which states typically do this is through funding necessary supports for them. The State of Colorado currently ranks 47<sup>th</sup> in Fiscal Effort to support the needs of people with intellectual and developmental disabilities. Yes, that’s 47<sup>th</sup> out of 51 -- just ahead of Alabama, Texas, Florida and Nevada.

In our world, insufficient funding means reduced access to essential services like the personal care needed to assist someone who uses a wheelchair to get out of bed in the morning, transportation to get to work or to appointments, or therapies that can be life-changing. It means waiting lists with long delays that come with very real consequences. Without putting our “money where our mouth is” as a state, we will never be able to successfully, fully include people with disabilities in our Community.

And fiscal effort is just one factor. There are many other challenges to people with disabilities truly being a part of our Community. Outdated perceptions, ignorance, fear, and indifference - all of these play a part. Children have difficulty getting the support they need to fully participate at school. They face bullying. Sometimes they’re underestimated by teachers or administrators. Adults have difficulty getting appropriate medical care and finding housing or jobs. Many are

not even accorded the respect they deserve to make personal decisions like where to live and with whom, what to eat and what to wear. Pre-conceived notions of individuals' abilities drive all of these scenarios.

Over the last 60 years, The Arc has been there - a driving force in the disability rights movement, with a focus on building an inclusive Community.

Through direct advocacy, we empower individuals and their families to understand their rights, find their voices, and challenge the perceptions of people in our Community. We give people the information and confidence necessary to ask for, and get, what they need. And at the same time, we educate the people who work in those systems so that each subsequent person's needs are better understood and more easily met.

Yet as the number of advocacy requests and their complexity continues to increase, we are challenged to be able to keep up. We stand alongside people and often fight long, drawn-out battles over basic needs like medical care, having a safe place to live or access to an appropriate education. If it were you, how many people would you say you'd be able to fight for --- 10? 20? 50?

What about 150 or 200? Our entire three-county area is covered by five full-time advocates and one part-time advocate. And last year alone, our five and a half advocates provided guidance and support to nearly 1,000 people with disabilities and countless family members, many of whom required extensive, ongoing assistance. Our advocates are knowledgeable and skilled, but we are stretched to a near breaking point. The truth is, we cannot meet the rising demand for advocacy without additional staffing.

Through The Arc's Community Outreach initiative, we're working to create strong partnerships across Jefferson, Clear Creek and Gilpin Counties. We're collaborating with community leaders, many of whom are here today, from cities like Wheat Ridge, Lakewood and Arvada - and together we're creating changes like increased access to programming through our public libraries. The Arc's involvement in projects such as the City of Arvada's new Holistic Health and Wellness Park has ensured that this wonderful new outdoor space will be accessible to every member of our community. This work is making a real, tangible difference, though we are limited in what we can do simply because this program is currently unfunded.

Our hope, our vision, is to expand all of this important work in the next year, which will only be possible if new resources become available.

A true Community is where life happens. By supporting The Arc through your participation today, you are partners with us in creating real Community for us all. A place where friendships are made. Where learning happens. Where people live and work. Where they fall in love and get married. It's a place where we laugh together and cry together. A place where people are interdependent, not independent.

The power of community is indisputable. Together we are stronger, smarter and more compassionate. We are imperfect and essential - all of us. May the power of community sustain us, for as we nurture our community, it will surely nurture us.