

Award for Programs for the Disadvantaged in Memory of Carolyn Keane

POPULATIONS OF 50,000 AND UNDER



BRUCE E. CHANNING

ICMA's Excellence Award for Programs for the Disadvantaged, established in memory of Carolyn Keane, recognizes a local government that has enhanced the quality of life for the disadvantaged, including homeless citizens and people with AIDS. This year, ICMA presents the award in the 50,000-and-under category to the city of Laguna Hills, California, and City Manager Bruce E. Channing for their "Circle of Friends" Program.

In 1996 a group of parents approached the city of Laguna Hills, Calif. (pop. 31,000) to talk about the lack of recreational opportunities for their disabled teens. When their children were younger, they had participated in a host of social outings. As the children grew to become young adults, however, the opportunities for social and recreational activities all but vanished. The parents looked to the city for support in finding a solution to this challenge.

The city of Laguna Hills joined forces with the parents, developing

the "Circle of Friends" program. Thirty young adults attended the first event, a summer dance for people 13 to 22 years of age with disabilities. The monthly dances, movies, beach parties, park picnics, and softball games soon attracted as many as 90 participants.

Success was not without complications. The city quickly outgrew the facilities it used for the Circle of Friends program. Program leaders also recognized that the needs of the disabled did not stop when they reached 22 years old. To help it meet the growing demand, the city of Laguna Hills asked its neighbors to join in its effort. The city of Laguna Niguel quickly responded, enabling the Circle of Friends program to expand to include people up to 60 years of age.

The success of the Circle of Friends program is a testimony to the power of partnership. It is run by a board of two parent representatives, one representative from the Regional Center of Orange County, two representatives from the school district, two staff members from the city of Laguna Hills, and one staff member from the city of Laguna Niguel. Activities are financed through grants and city funds. The Safeco Insurance Company covers the costs to provide the monthly dances, while the combined efforts of the city of Laguna Hills and Laguna Niguel provide the staffing and facility needs. After the program had been in place for one year, participants voted to charge a small fee for the monthly dances. The

\$1.00 to \$3.00 admission is used to pay for special guests at functions, decorations, and the like.

Community residents and businesses have come forward to share their special talents and provide support. The city of Laguna Beach makes available beach access wheelchairs for beach excursions, a local restaurant has provided catering for the annual holiday dinner dance, the Westwind Sailing Club arranged for special boats for sailing classes, a local riding center arranged for trained personnel to provide horseback lessons, and a local dance instructor designed a new teaching method in an effort to offer line dancing at the yearly country dance. A carpooling program helps get people to and from functions. The number of participants and the enthusiasm for the program throughout the community continue to grow.

The benefits of the Circle of Friends program extend well beyond the local disabled population. The program also has enhanced group home programming. It helps parents and guardians of disabled persons not only to provide their loved ones with a range of activities, but also to meet others who are dealing with the special challenges of caring for a disabled person. By expanding awareness of the needs and unique abilities of disabled persons, the Circle of Friends program benefits the entire community, encouraging understanding and a tolerance of differences among the city's residents. ♣



Participants in Laguna Hills' "Circle of Friends" Program.