



*Picture the Possibilities*

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## **FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE**

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# **Governor signs legislation to strike 'mental retardation' from names of state, county agencies**

**COLUMBUS** – A small group of individuals from Athens County recently demonstrated that a grassroots effort really can make a difference – there and throughout the state. Through their tenacity, Ohio Gov. Ted Strickland on Tuesday signed into law a bill they began.

Senate Bill 79, introduced by state Sen. Jimmy Stewart, becomes law in 90 days and directs the Ohio Department of Mental Retardation and Developmental Disabilities to shorten its name to the Ohio Department of Developmental Disabilities. The law also requires all of Ohio's 88 local county boards of MRDD to drop 'MR' from their names.

"I applaud the legislature for working quickly to pass this inclusive and respectful legislation," Strickland said. "This change aligns Ohio with most other states in the way we identify and discuss citizens with developmental disabilities and special needs."

Many people may not be aware that mental retardation is, in fact, a developmental disability, said Superintendent Nancy Neely of the Licking County Board of Mental Retardation and Developmental Disabilities (LCBMRDD).

"The term 'developmental disability' covers a wide range of conditions that can affect an individual's ability to learn, communicate, care for personal needs, live and work independently," she said. "Developmental disabilities are present at birth or manifest in early childhood. These early years are known as the 'developmental' period, which is why these conditions are known as developmental disabilities."

"Developmental disabilities cannot be cured in the traditional sense," Neely added. "Although they are life-long conditions, they can be treated. Children and adults with a developmental disability are capable of much more than previously thought."

"Before the advent of local county boards of MRDD more than forty years ago", Neely continued, "no special education or formal programs existed to support kids and adults with developmental disabilities and their families. Now our expectations for what an individual with a developmental disability can achieve are much higher, especially with special education provided by local schools and other specialized services, supports and training provided by the Licking County Board of MRDD. Some men

and women with developmental disabilities can learn to live on their own, work and contribute in various ways to their community. Others will always require a significant amount of support.”

State law, as well as rules written by the Ohio Department of MRDD, determines eligibility for services from the local board of MRDD. In order to receive services, adults must have a qualifying diagnosis, explained Neely.

“For very young children – from birth through age 2 – they do not need to have a diagnosed developmental disability to receive early intervention [therapy] services,” she said. “These very young children need only experience a delay in their development, or be at substantial risk of a developmental delay -- perhaps because of a premature birth -- in order to be eligible for services.”

“The good news is that some of the children who receive early intervention services from the Board ‘catch up’ developmentally because of the intervention and no longer require any specialized services when they go on to school,” Neely said. “Other very young children with a diagnosed developmental disability are better prepared for school because of their participation in the Board’s early intervention program.”

In addition to mental retardation, other examples of developmental disabilities can include, but are not limited to, Down syndrome, autism, traumatic brain injury, fetal alcohol syndrome and spina bifida.

The process of the statewide name change began more than two years ago when a group of people with developmental disabilities attended a meeting of the Athens County Board of MRDD. They said they didn’t like being called “retarded.” Their personal stories touched the board members and then-Rep. Stewart so intensely that the board immediately changed its name to the Athens County Board of Developmental Disabilities. Stewart then began the process of changing the name of the Ohio Department of MRDD and all 88 county boards of MRDD.

“After listening to my constituents, I decided to sponsor this legislation because I knew in my heart it was the right thing to do,” Stewart said Tuesday after learning his legislation would be signed by the governor.

In June, both the Ohio House of Representatives and the Senate unanimously voted to pass the bill.

“Every legislator understood that this bill wasn’t about money or politics – it was about the people with developmental disabilities in Ohio and their families,” said Linda Oda, director of communications for the Ohio Association of County Boards of MRDD, which is expected to make a similar name change. That is why a statewide name change was necessary, Oda said, adding that the name change is part of a continuing evolution of acceptance for people with developmental disabilities.

The history of services to people with mental retardation and other developmental disabilities in Licking County goes back to the mid 1950s with the efforts of local civic leader Eleanor S. Weiant and Katie Carter, a parent of a child who had developmental disabilities. They worked hard to make the local system of services that exists today a reality.

“Although the name will change to the Licking County Board of Developmental Disabilities, the system that individuals and families have come to rely on for services and supports will still be here,” Neely said. “Dropping ‘mental retardation’ from our name is a step in the right direction for individuals we serve and their families.”

Because the name change is effective 90 days after the signing of the bill (Oct. 7, 2009), the Ohio Department of MRDD and local boards will begin to phase-in the name change during the course of that time, and will refer to themselves by their current legal names until that time.

The LCBMRDD provides comprehensive services to more than 1,300 Licking County children and adults with developmental disabilities, including early intervention services at the E.S. Weiant Center in Newark and the Ann Davino Center in Pataskala; adult services at LICCO Inc. in Heath; residential supports; family respite; transportation; and service coordination. The LCBMRDD is nationally accredited by the Commission on Accreditation of Rehabilitation Facilities (CARF) for providing high-quality supports and services to individuals with disabilities and their families.

For more information, please call (740) 349-6588, or visit [www.LCBMRDD.org](http://www.LCBMRDD.org).