

Advocacy

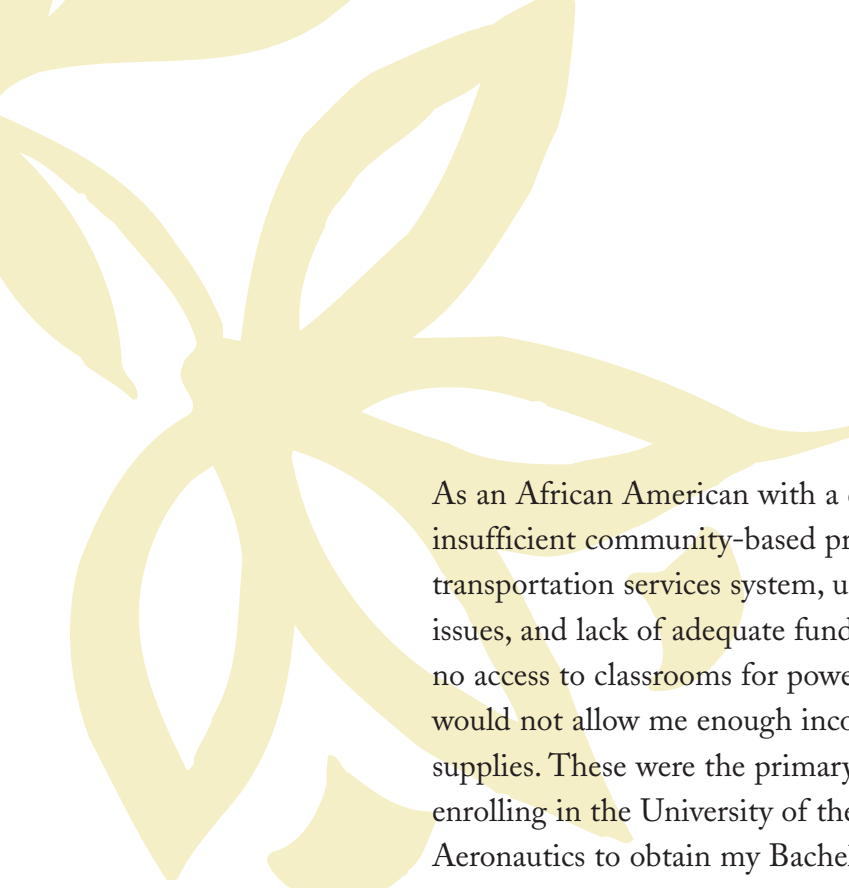
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MY NAME IS ROBERT E. COWARD JR. I AM THE EXECUTIVE

Director of DIRECT Action and Chairman and Spokesman for Capitol Area ADAPT ADAPT & DIRECT Action are advocacy groups that are leading, organizing and implementing a campaign for disability rights in the District of Columbia as well as America. ADAPT & DIRECT Action advocate for the civil rights, full inclusion, empowerment, and integration of individuals with disabilities into mainstream society.

I have been a District of Columbia resident since birth. After graduating from high school, I attended The University of the District of Columbia and majored in Aviation Maintenance Technology. Upon completing the major requirement that would allow me to receive my license and certification as an aircraft mechanic, I enlisted in the United States Air Force to serve my country and to obtain the hands on experience in my career field. I then separated from the US Air Force and returned to Washington, DC. After 19 months of being home and working, I suffered a spinal cord injury as a result of an auto accident on November 12, 1992. I was diagnosed as a quadriplegic. Since the date of my injury, I have received many hours of physical, occupational, and vocational therapy. I began setting career and other goals so I could be independent and provide for my two daughters.

My goal is to be able to re-enter the work force in my career field of aviation. Although my physical disability limits me, I am still able to sustain and be effective in my career field. To re-enter my career field, I need additional training, education, assistive technology services and devices and personal care support. This would enable me to cross-train from the hands on duties of an aircraft mechanic, to the administrative duties in the field of aviation.

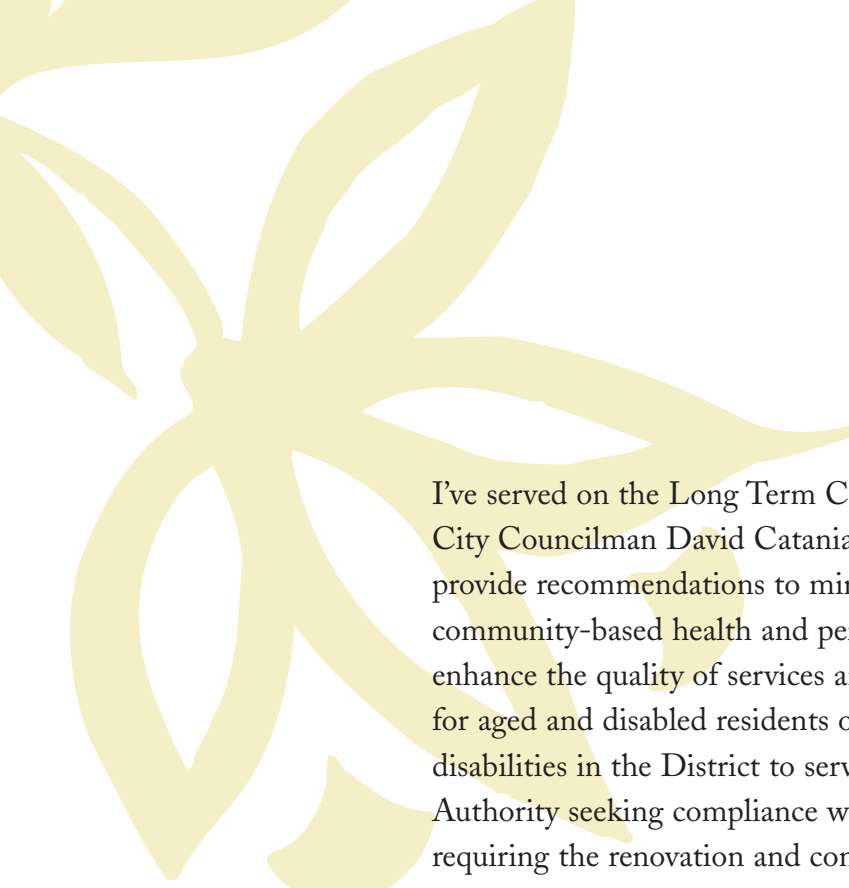


As an African American with a disability I had to overcome a lot of barriers, such as insufficient community-based programs for individuals with disabilities; unsafe transportation services system, unsatisfactory community outreach for disability issues, and lack of adequate funding for disability programs. Other barriers included no access to classrooms for power wheelchairs as well as educational expenses that would not allow me enough income for my living, personal care needs and medical supplies. These were the primary issues that made it difficult and deterred me from enrolling in the University of the District of Columbia and majoring in Professional Aeronautics to obtain my Bachelors Degree and re-enter the work force.

As the result of the barriers I encountered, I began acquiring in-depth knowledge and training from seminars, workshops, and conferences for disability rights and program negotiation for policy reforms that would allow me to advocate for my needs. I have now gone from a skilled technical field to the civil liberties and political science field. Now, well versed in federal, state and local policy, programs, as well as service delivery and support I continued to encounter barriers that prevented me from attaining my goal. I was one voice against enforcement for disability rights and a highly bureaucratic policy system that is very fragmented and biased.

I began to seek out support from organizations (national and local) along with organizing individuals with varying disabilities with common needs. Collectively, we began to demand systemic reform that would allow for the civil rights, full inclusion and integration of individuals with disabilities residing in the District of Columbia.

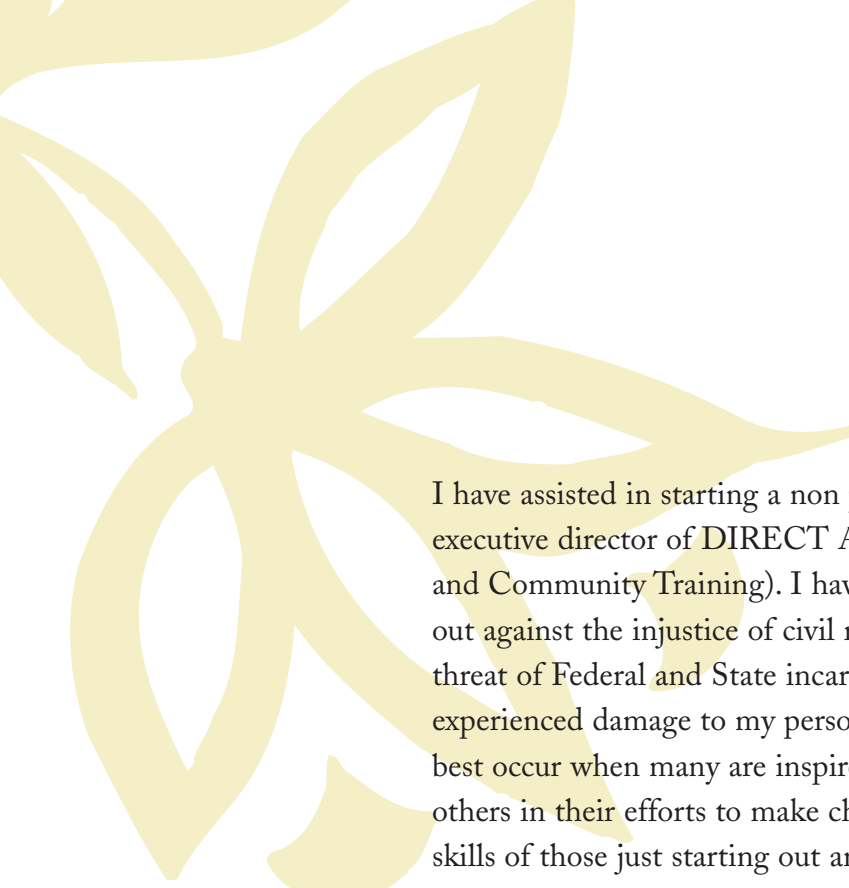
Through advocacy, I have now conducted training on Section 504 Housing Guidelines, Olmstead Implementation to consumers in the District. I have discussed the need for providing community-based options in DC with former District of Columbia Mayor Anthony Williams and Departmental Directors (DC Medicaid and D.C. Housing Authority) about the advantages of community based services. I was instrumental in the creation of a new Resource Center to handle intake for DC disabled residents in need of Medicaid Long Term Care services.



I've served on the Long Term Care Task Force convened by the District of Columbia City Councilman David Catania (Chairman of the Healthcare Committee) to provide recommendations to minimize current obstacles to delivery of home and community-based health and personal care services for people with disabilities, and enhance the quality of services and increase utilization of all long-term care options for aged and disabled residents of the District. I identified and organized people with disabilities in the District to serve as plaintiffs in a lawsuit against DC Housing Authority seeking compliance with federal accessibility laws resulted in an order requiring the renovation and construction of over 500 fully wheelchair accessible public housing units.

I have consulted with former President Clinton's cabinet members about administering the implementation of the ADA and MiCASSA (Medicaid Community Attendant Services & Supports Act), increasing integrated affordable accessible housing for people with disabilities. I have also met with President Bush's cabinet members regarding Housing Choice Voucher Section 8 budget cutbacks. I have met with the Director of the Center for Medicaid and Medicare Services (CMS) to discuss recommendations for funding community-based services and prescription drug benefits.

I initiated and presented at Disability Forums held by The Congressional Black Caucus and Congressional Panels about community-based services and policies. I have also negotiated with the NAACP and the Civil Rights Leadership Conference to gain support for congressional legislation. I have met with the President of the American Federation of State County Municipal Employees (AFSCME) as well as the State Employees International Union (SEIU) to obtain labor support for Community based service work force from both union organizations. I serve on the Homeland Security Emergency Preparedness committee to give recommendation and develop strategies, training and action plan for emergency evacuation of people with disabilities during natural disaster and terrorist attacks.



I have assisted in starting a non profit organization, in which I am currently the executive director of DIRECT Action (Disabled Individuals for Real Empowerment and Community Training). I have organized individuals, with disabilities to speak out against the injustice of civil right laws and policies, in so doing I have faced the threat of Federal and State incarceration. I have put my health and safety at risk, and experienced damage to my personal property. I believe that community action can best occur when many are inspired to lead as well as follow. My vision of supporting others in their efforts to make change in the system reinforces the new leadership skills of those just starting out and assures their active involvement in the process of creating change.

Individuals with disabilities are still too often refused access to a quality education, housing, employment, transportation, community base living and basic civil rights. As a forceful spokesperson, advocate, and example for people living with disabilities I am leading the local and national fight for independence and full integration into society. I believe the strength of a society is defined on its ability to take care of it's citizens this is why I advocate for individuals with disabilities.

By Robert E. Coward Jr.