Many bills in the hopper for session

It’s been a fast start for the 2023 Minnesota Legislature, and disability community advocates are rushing to keep their issues at the forefront. Typically the first weeks of session are spent on committee organization and informational hearings. That is still true, and still needed with almost 30 percent of state lawmakers stepping in for the first time. But lawmakers have already taken a deep dive into key issues ranging from taxes, legalization of marijuana, paid family leave and abortion rights.

Gov. Tim Walz began releasing pieces of his proposed budget in January. One big issue is that of Minnesota’s workforce, including the workforce for people with disabilities and elders. Much attention is being paid to the personal care attendant and home care workforce shortage, which has become catastrophic and even fatal in some cases. One family testifying on that issue is the family of Dennis “Denny” Prothero. Prothero died in December after months of inadequate care, which led to amputations and health issues. His family members had to struggle to provide care, without adequate training and support.

Many bills are introduced each session, with the theme of Love. Liberation. Belonging. With the first deadline for committee proposals being remembered to add to the ones already in the area, more cameras brought in private security guards to help victims. Interim Metro Transit Police Chief Rick Gates described the longtime situation as a “perch” where people who commit crimes can watch out for potential victims.

In the meantime, Metro Transit has brought in private security guards to help them patrol the skyways. More cameras to add to the ones already in the area, and even an intercom system are being planned.

Double homicide closes link to St. Paul downtown skyway

Stout chains and padlocks on the doors told the story. St. Paul’s downtown skyway tower remained inaccessible through January. People with disabilities have to trek at least a block away for elevator access, which is closed during overnight hours.

The skyway tower, which was at the center of a high-profile accessibility battle a decade ago, was closed in late December. It will remain closed until physical changes can be made to the structure. Both the tower building and a portion of the adjoining skyway connection to the Alliance Bank Center and St. Paul Athletic Club buildings are owned and operated by Metro Transit.

That means people with disabilities who rely on the tower elevator must travel to the bank building to use the elevator there. The skyway and its elevator are lifelines for people with disabilities who live and work downtown. It is adjacent to the Green Line light rail Central Station, and to major bus stops. The tower closed in the wake of a mid-December shooting, in which two men died. St. Paul and Metro Transit Police departments said safety changes need to be made in the skyway tower and connecting skyways before it can reopen.

One issue is that people loiter and use the windows as a lookout. Many windows will be covered to deter that behavior. Interim Metro Transit Police Chief Rick Gates described the longtime situation as a “perch” where people who commit crimes can watch out for potential victims.

In the meantime, Metro Transit has brought in private security guards to help them patrol the skyways. More cameras to add to the ones already in the area, and even an intercom system are being planned.

SEIU Healthcare pay pact lauded but will it be enough?

Pay increases should be coming for direct support workers, who provide care to Minnesotans with disabilities. But will those wage increases be enough?

Debate has flared on social media over the SEIU Healthcare Minnesota & Iowa announcement that starting wages could rise from $15.25 to $20 per hour by 2025 for new workers.

The agreement includes a historic wage increase if a new agreement wins approval. The contract would cover between one-fourth to one-third of the state’s home care providers.

The broader industry of roughly 100,000 personal care and home health aides has been targeted to the limit. More people with disabilities and elders are seeking services but cannot hire staff.

Caregivers could see wages increase if a new agreement wins approval. The agreement also takes important steps toward professionalizing home care in Minnesota, establishing a wage scale to provide higher pay based on experience in the field for the first time and ensuring that all new caregivers entering the workforce receive a high-quality orientation.

But is the proposed wage increase enough, in light of a general labor shortage where even last food workers can make more than $20 per hour?

Members of a Facebook group called Waiver Reimagine Minnesota DHS Disability RIGHTS Issues have debated the proposed increase. One poster, Kathy K Dub, has a child with disabilities. She Pay PACT Page 6
It was striking to listen to a young speaker at the recent Minnesota Council on Disability legislative update, who spoke of his desire to get an education beyond what high school can offer. He spoke of the barriers faced and of how higher education may just be a wish at this point. Many of us...could relate to wanting what could be a life-changing experience.

say it's about time.

Many efforts are aimed toward inclusion and we'd urge our community members to get involved with the issues that meet their needs. From trying to ensure that parents with disabilities are fully included in their children's IEP processes to calling out schools personnel for withholding recess to not be a form of punishment...there's plenty to get behind and speak about.

We'd like to focus on higher education.

One bill would expand the access to college discount program. Currently Minnesotans ages 62 and older can take college courses at a rate of $25 to $75 per class. The change sought is to expand access to those college credit rates to any individual who accesses disability services. That is meant to open a door to postsecondary education to more people. The second education-related change sought is tied into a larger package of accessibility needs. The bill language focused on higher education calls for inclusive higher education statewide. At this time, capacity for and access to higher education for students with intellectual disabilities statewide is very limited.

The intent is to provide technical assistance and grant funding to public colleges and universities throughout Minnesota, to launch or enhance higher education initiatives.

Currently only a few schools offer such programs. Results have been challenging to track. The Bethel University Inclusive Leadership Development (BUILD) program was launched to high praise several years ago. The distance-delivered program is touted as an inclusive two-year certificate program where students learn to live as independently as possible, maintain meaningful employment and value lifelong learning.

BUILD has evolved over the years but that case illustrated the challenges of providing a truly inclusive higher education experience. Bethel leadership admits that the student in the legal case hadn't received the educational experience he and his family had envisioned. That's why the promise of higher education...is to be approached carefully. We know too many people, of all abilities, who have witnessed the fact that well-paying job and meaningful career even with a degree or degrees. A degree is an asset.

We'd also like to see a focus on the trades for people with disabilities when the Act was signed in 1973. The bill needs a four-year degree or that even a degree in the field. Jobs in the trades can pay well and offer opportunities for advancement.

But we applaud efforts to open educational opportunities to all. It's way overdue.

Bills before the 2023 Minnesota Legislature could change that. And we

Special Olympics of Minnesota celebrates 50 years of sports competition and camaraderie in 2023. The program opened its doors as an accredited program of the Special Olympics in 1973, providing fun and competition for people with developmental disabilities. Today Special Olympics Minnesota offers five and statewide competitions, six regional camps, 100 area events, training programs for 3,300 coaches and 17 floor hockey volunteers. Athletes can also take part in its Healthy Athletes and Athlete Leadership Programs. With 17 sports, there is something for everyone. It's hard to believe that year and how it was unheard of for people with any type of disabilities to enjoy sports as a competition. The Special Olympics have their roots in the Kennedy family's work on behalf of people with developmental disabilities, which began in the 1950s and 1960s. Eunice Kennedy Shriver was an early proponent of sports and activities for people with disabilities, even holding a summer day camp and sports activities in her home's backyard.

Shriver was the driving force behind her brother President John F. Kennedy's White House panel on people with intellectual disabilities and also led the work of her family's Joseph P. Kennedy Jr. Foundation. The foundation is named for the family's eldest brother, who was killed in World War II.

The first major Special Olympics event was held in 1968 at Soldier Field in Chicago, with 1,000 young athletes with developmental disabilities. The Kennedy Foundation and Chicago Park District sponsored the event, which 85 groups from 25 states competing.

Special Olympics competitions in Minnesota started a few years before the formation of Special Olympics Minnesota itself. We find some of the first newspaper references in the late 1960s. The early statewide sponsor was the Association for Retarded Citizens (ARC) Minnesota, working with the Kennedy Foundation. Some of the first state meets were held at Macalester College in St. Paul. The state had seven regions for athletes to compete in.

Some early athletes had "stars" in their eyes. In 1960, the Minnesota North Stars professional hockey team joined with the 11 other National Hockey League teams to launch an event at the Canadian Special Olympics. The North Stars generously financed a trip for a Minnesota floor hockey team to compete in Toronto that June. Minnesota's team would be chosen after a team tournament held at St. Louis Park High School. Pictures show boys wearing what looked like basketball uniforms and tennis shoes, playing with a small hoop or ring rather than a puck. The sport was more skin to netting than floor hockey.

No one wore helmets or protective gear. It was all-Owatonna final as the A team beat the B team from that community. Other teams were from Glen Lake and St. Louis Park. A 15-member all-tournament team was chosen to go to Canada.

North Stars center Ray Cullen was named team coach, assisted by Owatonna coach Paul Hedrebrecht. The Minnesota team won three games and lost one in Canada. The North Stars provided uniforms, equipment and for other team needs. The team sponsored by the Montreal Canadiens won the first Special Olympics Minnesota trophy.

The North Stars continued to sponsor floor hockey teams for the Canadian Special Olympics for several more years. Read more about the Special Olympics Minnesota at www.specialolympics.org/about/history.

The History Note is a monthly column produced in cooperation with the Minnesota Governor's Council on Developmental Disabilities. Past History Notes and other disability history may be found at www.mndcc.org.
COVID-19 continues to be a major health threat, especially for Minnesota residents with disabilities. The Minnesota Department of Health (MDH) has contracted with 48 community partners to help those most impacted by COVID-19 get vaccinated, improve health and recover from the effects of the disease.

The contracts extend MDH’s existing pandemic work with COVID-19 Community Coordinators. The community coordinators serve communities hit hardest by COVID-19, including communities of color, American Indian communities, LGBTQ communities and Minnesota residents with disabilities. This round includes the largest number of community coordinators since the project started in October 2020.

To continue to serve each of these communities in ways that meet diverse community needs, MDH has contracted with the community groups through June 2024. The COVID-19 Community Coordinators will work on testing access and increasing vaccination rates while also addressing other health needs of community members.

There was strong interest in working as community coordinators. During the selection process, MDH received more than 100 applications.

Applicants could apply for a narrower charge of focusing on vaccines and testing or take a broader approach to help their communities recover from some of the harm done by COVID-19. In the end, 85 percent of the 48 selected contractors opted for the approach of assisting with COVID-19 recovery. In addition, most of these are also doing vaccine and testing work.

To recover from the COVID-19 pandemic, Minnesotans are having to address worsened physical health due to COVID and chronic diseases and the impacts of the pandemic on education, financial stability and mental health," said Minnesota Commissioner of Health Dr. Brooke Cunningham. "These community partners will be working to strengthen their communities and connect people to resources while also addressing the immediate impacts of COVID-19."

COVID-19 Community Coordinators can answer questions about topics such as COVID-19 testing and vaccination, food support, health care and mental health resources, housing and rental assistance, and employment resources.

COVID-19 Community Coordinators draw on community strengths and trusted community networks to support Minnesotans who need COVID-19 information specific to their communities, including in their native languages.

Those affected by COVID-19 are looking for support or resources can connect with a community partner using the online tool to search for outreach groups by cultural community, language, county and more. The online search tool can be found at COVID-19 Community Coordinator Search, at https://covidcommunitycoordinator.who-healthstate.mn.gov/

The helpful search tool provides organization names and contact information, as well as cultural communities served, other communities served, languages available and other detail. Tabs at the page right side can be clicked for organization hours, phone numbers, addresses, online contacts and more.

COVID-19 community coordinators support Minnesotans who need COVID-19 information specific to their communities, including in their languages. Coordinators help community members find and get critical resources to deal with health concerns as well as employment, food access, housing, child care and legal rights. They can answer questions about where to get tested, who can be found, how to get a vaccine, and so much more.

Communities were involved with the selection process that included more than 50 reviewers, including community leaders, representatives from local governments and state staff. MDH made final funding decisions based upon these community recommendations and all applicants were notified of their status.

To learn more and find a community partner, visit COVID-19 Community Coordinators at https://www.healthstate.mn.gov/communities/equity/funding/scc.html. MDH continues to provide an array of services for Minnesotans facing COVID-19. Weekly situation updates, information about exposures and quarantine periods, and more details are available at https://www.healthstate.mn.gov/diseases/coronavirus/index.html.

SKYWAY
From page 1

A timeline hasn’t been announced for completing changes and reopening the tower.

Metro Transit released a statement, saying, “In conjunction with the City of St. Paul, we have decided to temporarily close the building at 46 5th St. E., which connects the skyway and street level near the METRO Green Line’s Central Station effective Tuesday, December 27. We are temporarily closing this facility so we can work alongside the City of St. Paul and its police department to make physical and operational public safety improvements at this location.

“We recognize the importance of maintaining access to transit, as well as all the other surrounding amenities, and will work closely with our partners to re-open soon. Elevator access to the skyway will continue to be available daily from 6 a.m. to midnight at Alliance Bank Center. Outside of normal business hours, guard access is required.”

At a virtual town hall meeting days before Christmas, City Council member Rebecca Noecker said, “We’re here because last week in a horrific event, two young men lost their lives.”

Noecker and other city leaders have heard many complaints about skyway conditions, both at the meeting after the shooting and at other meetings. Skyway users, including several people with disabilities, said they are concerned about a lack of safety in the skyways prior to the murders. They said a growing number of people use drugs, consume alcohol, urinate and defecate in the skyways and in stairwells. Some skyway users have been crime victims. One speaker described downtown St. Paul recently as “almost a dystopian, lawless, chaotic place where hordes of individuals congregate freely using drugs.”

Several downtown residents with disabilities contacted Access Press. Many moved downtown in recent years for what they consider to be safe and accessible housing, convenient to shopping and good transit. But many now feel afraid and don’t want their names used because they fear being victimized.

A big frustration is how many people with disabilities, including the late Rick Cardenas, fought for the tower. Central Station is on the block at fifth and Cedar streets. It wasn’t originally considered when the Green Line and its stations were being planned.

Groundbreaking for the tower, which cost more than $1 million, occurred in summer 2013 after a high-profile campaign to get some kind of elevator connection built. At the time the tower was built, it was estimated that more than 9,000 people with disabilities were living downtown St. Paul within a few blocks of Green Line light rail.

Of the downtown light rail stations, Green Line was the most heavily used by downtown dwellers, with about 2,000 boardings per day. The numbers are based on a study done almost a decade ago by the now-defunct District Councils Collaborative, a group that monitored light rail construction.

But the tower has become a spot for loitering and crime. At one point it was being locked at 9 p.m., which drew protests from downtown residents.

Read about the tower’s opening celebration in 2014, at https://accesspress.org/cardenas-honored-tower-provides-access-to-light-rail-line/
Bipartisan federal effort will continue safety tracking program

by Sen. Amy Klobuchar (D-Minnesota)

For so many people, a break from routine can be stressful, especially for people living with dementia or a developmental disability, such as Down syndrome or autism. Those moments of anxiety or commotion can result in them wandering away from safety.

Forty-nine percent of children with autism have wandered from safe supervision, and 60 to 70 percent of people living with dementia will wander at least once. In Minnesota, we have seen these stories come true for our families.

In 2015, Hamza Elmi, a 6-year-old boy with autism wandered away from his family’s home in St. Cloud. His disappearance launched a search that brought together police officers, reporters and community members. Sadly, the next morning Hamza’s body was found in the Mississippi River just blocks from his home. As John Bodette of the St. Cloud Times put it at the time, “Our entire community has lost a son.”

Two years later, in 2017, the Dukuth community was devastated by the loss of Mary and Ron Tuska, who had been married for 59 years. Decades earlier, Mary had suffered a stroke, and Ron took up responsibilities as her caregiver. But as Mary had suffered a stroke, and Ron took up responsibilities as her caregiver. But as

Dukuth home with no cell phone. Days later, following a prolonged search, their car was recovered in a swampy area 30 miles away. Neither of them survived.

For years, the Missing Alzheimer’s Disease Patient Alert Program has been incredibly successful in reuniting wandering people with dementia with their families. That’s why in 2017 I led a bipartisan bill with Sen. Chuck Grassley (R-Iowa) to increase funding and broaden the scope of this program to support wandering children with developmental disabilities. That’s now called the Missing Americans Alert Program.

Our bill also included funding to educate caregivers on how to prevent wandering and equip law enforcement with the tools needed to recover missing loved ones, including potentially lifesaving tracking equipment like transmitter bracelets. The legislation was named Kevin and Avonte’s Law, in honor of two boys who died as a result of wandering incidents.

This vital program was set to expire, so Sen. Grassley and I knew we had to act. I am proud to announce that we were able to extend it through 2027 with the Kevin and Avonte’s Law Reauthorization Act, which was passed as part of the National Defense Authorization Act. We couldn’t have gotten this done without the incredible work of a broad coalition of disability and patient advocates who came together to support this legislation.

For law enforcement, this means a higher chance of reuniting families. For caregivers, this means lifesaving training on wandering prevention. For loved ones, this means peace of mind. And for people living with disabilities, this means living in a country with better resources to keep them safe.

In the year ahead, I look forward to continuing to work with our state’s disability communities to make sure that every Minnesotan with disabilities is able to live a safe and healthy life.

Democrat Amy Klobuchar is a U.S. senator from Minnesota. This is reprinted from the Albert Lea Tribune.

SESSION

From page 1

Participants will make posters centered on the event theme of “Love. Liberation. Belonging.”

Check-in and preparation are between 9:30-10:30 a.m. in the Minnesota Department of Transportation Cafeteria. The March & Roll to the Capitol is 10:30 to 11:30 a.m., followed by an 11 a.m. roll. After the rally ends at 11:45 a.m., participants can meet with their legislators.

Participants are urged to plan ahead and make appointments in advance to meet their lawmakers.

ASL and CART will be provided that day.

Wednesday, February 15 through Friday, February 17, everyone is asked to follow along on sponsors’ social media accounts for information about more virtual grassroots actions to round out the week.

Visit https://www.disability.state.mn.us/events-and-outreach/community-outrachts/2023/disability-advocacy-week/ or the Facebook event at https://www.facebook.com/events/826546891781813/ Several groups are organizing Disability Advocacy Week, so check in with groups to see if there are specific activities or meetings to attend.

February 17 is also the deadline to register for the 2023 Disability Services Day at the capitol, which is led by the coalitions of ARRM and MOHR. This year’s Disability Services Day is Tuesday, March 28.

Register at shorturl.at/fJkM7

An ongoing activity is Wednesdays at the Capitol, led by the Minnesota Consortium for Citizens with Disabilities (MNCCD). This was previously known as Tuesdays at the Capitol.

Meet with MNCCD at 10-11 a.m. every Wednesday in the Department of Transportation Cafeteria. Share policy priorities, give updates, and energize advocates to take action. Questions or want more information about Wednesdays at the Capitol? Email Project Coordinator Bridget Carter at br Hector@ mnccd.org.

Another useful resource is the Minnesota Council on Disability bill tracker page, which has a wealth of information on disability-related legislation. Go to https://www.disability.state.mn.us/about-our-public-policy/bill-tracking/

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We welcome your letters and commentary

Access Press welcomes letters to the editor and commentary pieces from readers, on topics of interest to Minnesota’s disability community. Letters should be no more than 500 words, with 750 words per commentary. Ask if the editor of more space is needed.

Letters and guest commentaries must be signed by the authors or authors. With letters, a writer’s hometown is published but not a street address. Please send contact information, in the form of a phone number or email, in case the editor has questions about a letter or commentary. Contact information isn’t published unless the writer specifically requests that the newspaper do so.

Pictures of the author or content subject matter can be published with a guest commentary but aren’t required.

Access Press asks that letters and guest commentaries be specifically written for the newspaper. Letters must have a focus on disability issues and ideally, a focus on those issues as they affect Minnesota. Form letters will not be published.

Here’s an important reminder during an election year. Because Access Press is a non-profit publication and must follow regulations on political partisanship, political endorsements letters are not published. That is true for candidates’ endorsements as well as for ballot questions.

Before making a submission, writers are always encouraged to contact the newspaper to discuss ideas or to ask questions about From Our Community submissions. At 651-644-2133 or access@accesspress.org

Let the newspaper know if accommodations are needed to submit a letter or commentary, and we will help you.

Letters and commentaries reflect the view of the authors and not the views of the staff and board of directors of Access Press.

Deadline for the print edition of the newspaper is the 15th of each month, with publication following the last week.
Gov. Tim Walz and Lt. Gov. Peggy Flanagan began unveiling parts of their two-year budget in mid-January, focusing on how the state’s $17.6 billion surplus and the ways it could be used to better the lives of Minnesotans.

One interesting idea Walz has raised is that creating a new Department of Children, Youth, and Families. It would be separate from the state’s Department of Education. A new department could take over some programs that are now run by the Minnesota Department of Human Services (DHS).

The notion of a split of DHS is nothing new but how a split and a new department could potentially help Minnesotans with disabilities and their families isn’t clear. Legislators from both parties have criticized DHS’s budget spending, saying it is too large and unwieldy.

Of course many disabled Minnesotans and their family members have their eyes upon workforce issues. Walz has already indicated that he supports the SEU Healthcare Minnesota & Iowa contract proposal unveiled earlier in January. (See related story.) But the Walz proposal also targets workers with disabilities and their job needs, as well as the needs of caregivers.

Funding the SEU contract proposal is so large -- providing a hiring and wage increase, providing incentives for new workers, providing access to education and an orientation program that provides a foundation of the supports available to those entering or re-entering the home health care worker profession.

Higher rates and other system changes in the budget would also provide for the hiring and expanding the long-term care workforce, making it easier for people with disabilities to find and hire direct support workers to meet essential daily needs. The One Minnesota Budget increases rates for services, increases inflationary updates for waiver disability providers, and raises hourly limits for parents and spouses who are paid to provide community-first and consumer-directed community supports.

Yet another proposal is for two permanent grant programs. These would address Minnesota’s long-term care workforce shortage by expanding the depth and diversity of the workforce while improving recruitment and retention. Ongoing funding would support provider capacity grants for rural and underserved communities, where the healthcare shortage has been extremely critical. Another new grant program would be focused on recruiting and retaining new Americas for vital long-term care positions.

A $30 million investment is recommended in the next budget year for what is called the Drive for 5 Workforce Fund. It is focused on five of the most new, occupationally critical industries in the state with high-growth jobs and family-supported wages.

The five focus areas are technology, caring professions, education, manufacturing, and agriculture. The Drive for 5 Workforce Fund is meant to produce a pipeline of workers who are skilled and prepared to enter into high-wage and high-wage employment, in areas and begin to address Minnesota’s high job vacancy rate.

Walz’s unique vision for Drive for 5 funding in the context of Minnesota with disabilities is that it not only focuses on an area of need for home care and support, it also focused on disabled persons who wish to be in or advance in the workforce. It centers on populations that face the biggest barriers to employment: people of color with disabilities, people facing other barriers.

Often during the workforce shortage, there has been frustration that people with disabilities are overlooked as potential workforce. Walz and Flanagan recommend creating a Minnesota Reasonable Access Coalition, which will reimburse small- to mid-sized Minnesota employers for expenses tied to providing reasonable accommodations for employees with disabilities. The Minnesota Accommodation Program is promoted as a critical tool to help Minnesota employers create disability-inclusive workplaces.

The budget includes a comprehensive package of investments and policy reforms to increase wages and create more inclusive workplaces for people with disabilities. The 2023-24 budget includes additional workforce shortage and increasing workforce participation by people with disabilities. These changes will align the state’s disability service system with Employment First laws, while renewing Minnesota’s commitment to competitive and integrated employment for people with disabilities.

While direct the current work of the whole and the workforce as a whole are other wages Walz is focusing on.

The centerpiece of the workforce and economic issues is paid family and medical leave, something that has been sought by many for many years of waiting for some disabilities.

The paid leave proposal was announced at Unity Cafe, a restaurant on St. Paul’s Rice Street just north of the capital. Unity Cafe owner Cheryl “Cheli” Jome works two other jobs in addition to running his small café. He sustained a disabling back injury in an accident but doesn’t have options to take time off for treatment. Short-term disability would not be enough to cover his needs.

Jome is a member of the Mainstreet Alliance, a progressive small-business owners group that has long called for the paid leave program. Members have argued in the past that small business owners and employees have struggled to work with injuries that in many cases have led to permanent disabilities.

The current paid leave would offer up to 12 weeks of partially paid time off for family reasons such as a new child or a seriously or terminally ill family member. It would also provide up to 12 weeks of medical leave. Department of Employment and Economic Development Commissioner Steve Grove has indicated that the program could be covered through payroll deductions. At $669 million it is the largest piece of the budget section aimed at economy and workforce needs.

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New book is celebrated for its refreshing, insightful look at autism

The book I Will Die On This Hill: Autistic Adults, Autism Parents, and the Children Who Deserve a Better World invites autistic adults, parents, care providers, and community members to work toward building a more accepting and inclusive community for disabled children now and throughout life. The book’s release was celebrated in January at an event at the Guthrie Theater in Minneapolis. Minnesota Jules Edwards and Meghan Ashburn, a resident of Virginia, coauthored the book. It was released by Jessica Kingsley Publishing.

Ashburn is a former teacher and works as an educational consultant. Edwards is an Indigenous disability justice advocate and consultant, and was recently appointed to serve on the National Institutes of Health Autism Centers of Excellence advisory board.

Ashburn and Edwards’ new release shares the authors’ collective wisdom gained through years of protesting and advocating for disability justice. The authors were inspired to write the book they wish had been given when their children were first diagnosed. I Will Die On This Hill challenges the dominant narratives surrounding autism and invites readers to take action.

The book promotes a refreshing look at caring for autistic children, and provides dynamic insights into creating a better world for the estimated 1 in 44 children diagnosed with autism. With a focus on intersectionality, the book features eleven additional autistic contributors throughout, including nonspeaking/AAC users and BIPOC autistic advocates from around the world.

“I Will Die On This Hill is such a gift for all of us who have been checked and way too speculative and assuming about autism,” said Marce Alvis Walker, creator of the website Black Coffee with White Friends. “Ashburn and Edwards’ honest and unsentimental book will make you a better human being and, therefore, a better neighbor, better educator, better family member to autistic adults, autism parents, and the children who need us all to do better.”

Dr. Mona Delahooke, author of Beyond Behaviour, said, “This is the book I have been waiting for to recommend to parents and all childhood providers. Educators, professionals, physicians, and care workers will all gain new insights into supporting autistic children.”

Edwards is an Anishinabke woman from Ojibimangaming (Little Portage). Jules is a writer, gardener, accountant and disability justice advocate. She’s passionate about improving child safety and disability policy. Her background includes a 2020-21 Leadership Education in Neurodevelopmental Disabilities fellowship, 2021-22 Association of University Centers on Disabilities National Training Director Council fellowship, and being a 2022-23 Wilder Foundation Community Equity Program cohort member.

Some of her roles include co-founding Minnesota Autistic Alliance, working board member for the Minnesota Ombudsman for American Indian Families, and Chairperson of the Minnesota Autism Council.

Learn more about Edwards at https://autistictyping.com/i-will-die-on-this-hill

Ashburn is the mother of twins with autism. She is a graduate of the partners in policymaking course and is an activist in her home state of Virginia. Read more about her and her book at https://notanautismmom.com/about/

Playground bid gets national focus

Students at Glen Lake Elementary School in Hopkins get a big boost in their efforts to build an inclusive playground, thanks to being featured on CBS TV’s On the Road news feature segment.

Glen Lake has a lot of students with physical disabilities, but no wheelchair merry-go-round, swings or any adaptive playground equipment, which really bothered the students in Betsy Juler’s fifth grade class.

“It just didn’t seem fair that some kids were just left out,” Wyatt Feucht said.

“They didn’t look happy, and recess is about having fun,” said Rhys Riley.

So one day the students asked Juler why they couldn’t just buy the equipment themselves.

“I said, ‘Do you know how much that costs?? It costs a lot of money’,” Juler said.

The students were undeterred at the thought of raising $300,000. They started collecting spare change, then held a bake sale, printed flyers and went door to door. Then they began cold-calling businesses and even got restaurateurs to donate a portion of their profits. This went on for months — until recently, when they finally hit their goal, with support from the Glen Lake Parent Teacher Organization.

Riley says it was overwhelming to know that their hard work finally led to a more inclusive playground. As for the students, who’ll benefit, they seemed to appreciate the effort almost more than the result.

“First time I set foot on this playground I’m probably going to start crying from seeing the effort that all the school has made,” said John Buettner, who uses a wheelchair.

After raising $300,000, the class set a new goal. They now hope to buy adaptive playground equipment for other schools in the Hopkins district. They are raising $900,000. Learn more at https://www.glenlake.k12.mn.us/glen-lake-accessibility-project
ICl’s Kleist to be honored at national conference in June

The American Association on Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities (AAIDD) has announced that Barbara Kleist will receive AAIDD’s Policy Award for 2023 for her outstanding contributions to the field. The award will be presented to her at the 147th AAIDD Annual Meeting in Pittsburgh in June. Kleist is the program director for entrepreneurial and development programs at the University of Minnesota’s Institute on Community Integration. She received her M.Ed. in recreation park and leisure studies from the University of Minnesota and her J.D. from Hamline University School of Law. Kleist is co-director of DirectCourse—online curricula for life in community. Her work focuses on state and federal programs to improve community services for children and adults with intellectual and developmental disabilities and their families. Her current projects include leading training and technical assistance efforts in federal and state policy development focused on identifying best practices for improving direct support workforce stability across long-term services and supports and Medicaid funded systems.

She is currently a member of the Minnesota Disability Law Center Advisory Committee, WINGS MN, and the Learning Community for Person Centered Practices, and chair of the Legal Process and Advocacy Network of the American Association of Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities (AAIDD). Kleist is a licensed attorney with Minnesota State Bar with 30 years of experience providing counsel and support to self-advocates and family members on a variety of topics including conflict resolution, access to home- and community-based services and supports, alternatives to guardianship, supported decision-making and person-centered practices. Her relationship with a sibling provides the foundation for Kleist’s commitment to the civil and human rights of people with intellectual and developmental disabilities.

Two Minnesota brothers remembered for their invention, placed in hall

Sixteen innovation pioneers will be honored as part of the 50th class of National Inventors Hall of Fame inductees. In partnership with the United States Patent and Trademark Office, the hall of fame will honor these winners in a ceremony in October. The hall is in Alexandria, Virginia. The October event is not only the “Greatest Celebration of American Innovation,” it will also mark the hall’s 50th anniversary. Fifty years ago the first honoree was Thomas Edison.

Two members of the hall’s Class of 2023 have Minnesota ties. The late Cyril and Louis Keller played key roles in launching the compact equipment industry in the late 1950s and early 1960s with their invention of the world’s first compact loader, which became the Bobcat skid-steer loader. What the Kellers likely didn’t expect at the time was that their invention would be used by some disabled people with disabilities as a unique combination of work and mobility device.

With his interest in assistive technology, a range of items, including medical devices, gene-editing systems, wheelchair hand controls and the COVID-19 vaccine. For biographies of each inductee, visit https://www.invent.org/inductees/new-inductees.

Duluth’s Lighthouse center to move

The Lighthouse Center for Vital Living will move this summer into a more central, visible location in Duluth’s downtown. The disability support services nonprofit will leave its West Duluth location and reopen at 309 W. First St. Mary Junnila, executive director of the Lighthouse, told the Duluth News-Tribune that the move has been serendipitous for the organization. The Lighthouse’s current location was sold to a New York investment group last December, so the Lighthouse was no longer able to depend on rental income from other building tenants. In addition, Junnila said the organization’s assistive technology library was growing too large for the 8,000-square-foot space to contain.

The Lighthouse’s new building was donated to them by Landisnn Energy Service, founders of Lake Superior Consulting. The building used to house Lake Superior Consulting until the engineering firm moved. Junnila said the 1908 building was recently remodeled, so it’s in good shape for them to take it over. The main expense will be making the three-story building handicap accessible and adapt the space for training rooms, including a wheelchair-accessible kitchen.

A grant from the Minnesota Department of Human Services will be a big help with that. A $350,000 Live Well at Home grant will go toward renovations at the donated building — specifically to install an elevator. Junnila expects the Lighthouse will use the first two floors of the 12,600-square-foot building, and is considering renting out the third floor. The nonprofit expects to be in the new building in June.

“With our adjustment to blindness services, it’s great to be downtown near the DTA and the skywalk systems,” Junnila said. “A big part of what we do is in that division is help people to use public transportation, and to be right in the center of that is really important.” She also looks forward to the opportunity to increase awareness for the assistive technology services the Lighthouse provides. Assistive technology encapsulates many different things to help a person complete a task or function independently.

Junnila said the assistive technology branch of the organization has become their biggest customer market, and it’s grown exponentially since the COVID-19 pandemic. In 2020, people became more isolated and needed more help at home. In addition, the number of people who are elderly and/or disabled continues to increase. Junnila said their services have grown alongside those needs.

The Lighthouse works with elderly adults and people with disabilities of all ages to help them learn skills, including digital literacy classes, adjustment to blindness programming and occupational therapy. The center does outreach, occupational therapy and travels to clients’ homes. Junnila said patients, therapists can help clients identify any assistive technology they could benefit from and helps them master it.

Another grant from the Minnesota Department of Human Services, a $642,000 Tech for Connectivity award, will help people who are older or have a disability to access technology. The grant will go toward getting people internet access, cell phones, or other devices and teach them how to use them for communication, medical appointments and job applications.

New book focuses on disabilities

The Way We Play, a new children’s picture book by University of Minnesota medical student Hugh Burke and his friend Kyle Donohue, a student at the University of Minnesota College of Science and Engineering in Minneapolis, is about accepting and appreciating diversity of all types. The book was recently featured in the Star Tribune.

“Each animal brings different skill sets and weaknesses to the table,” said Burke, a 25-year-old Eden Prairie native and first-year medical student. The book is about accepting and even embracing those challenges that make us unique.

People who are interested in ordering copies of “The Way We Play” can contact bookauthor@uhuman.com for more information. Copies are available through the University of Minnesota Bookstore.

People & Places

PEOPLE & PLACES

Barbara Kleist

Cyril Keller

Louis Keller

Duluth News-Tribune

February 2023

Volume 34, Number 2

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North Memorial settles federal lawsuit

North Memorial Health has agreed to pay $180,000, the U.S. Department of Labor said Tuesday, to settle a federal lawsuit brought by a woman who said she was refused a job as a greater at its hospital in Robbinsdale because she is deaf.

Kaylah Vogt, of Maple Grove, and the health care system reached their settlement in December in a suit filed in federal court in Minneapolis under what is called a consent decree. That means North Memorial makes no admission of wrongdoing but agrees to make the settlement and take other actions, including training in the suit that address rights protected under the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA).

“The outcome allows employees to continue to discriminate against deaf applicants based on myths, fears and stereotypes about their ability to do the job because of their disability,” said Gregory Gochanour, senior attorney at the Equal Employment opportunity Commission (EEOC), which sued on Vogt’s behalf.

Julianne Bowman, district director for the EEOC in Chicago, said, “The consent decree’s requirement of training for managers and supervisors involved in hiring decisions on the provisions against discrimination is critical to eliminating discrimination against disabled applicants.”

Vogt, 26, is a student at the University of Minnesota’s College of Continuing and Professional Studies. In an article she described how she was seemingly hired and then fired in 2020. She uses hearing aids, which allow her to hear.

In a court filing denying the allegations, North Memorial highlighted the challenges greeters were having at the time because of the pandemic and the need for “strong listening and verbal communication skills while interacting with individuals experiencing stress/grief.”

The filing also contended that greeters “needed to communicate quickly and succinctly with visitors regarding visitor policy, assess visitors’ understanding and compliance, and troubleshoot [while] communication was significantly hindered by COVID-19-related face masks.”

One day after the settlement was reached, North Memorial said in a statement, “We recognize that our [hiring] processes in place for temporary roles may have been compromised during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, and we understand Ms. Vogt’s disappointment in the decisions that were made at that time.

“We have reviewed specific practices following this case and will continue to strive to ensure our customers, our current, past and future team members, and our providers feel valued and respected.”

The consent decree places a number of disability anti-discrimination and reasonable accommodation policies to all applicants and employees hired to work at North Memorial Health, whether they are hired by North Memorial directly or through a staffing firm. The $180,000 payment covers $75,000 in compensation damages, about $44,000 in back pay and roughly $61,000 to pay attorney’s fees.

(Source: Star Tribune)

Veterans Home winning praise

Although it is still far from complete, Jim Williams had only one word to describe the Veterans Administration skilled nursing home that will be ready for its first residents this year.

“Wow,” said Williams as he left the Montevideo facility during a visit. He took part in a tour hosted that day by Minnesota Department of Veterans Administration Community Liaison Larry Shellito and his staff, along with the project’s contractor, Knuston Construction. The home will meet a need for older veterans and veterans with disabilities.

Construction on the 72-bed skilled nursing facility is 60 percent complete, according to Shellito. He and Ashley Bormann, the newly appointed administrator for the home, said they anticipate welcoming the first residents in early September.

Like others on the tour, Williams said he was surprised by the size of the facility now taking shape. The building area includes 93,513 gross square feet on a 13.4-acre site on Montevideo’s east side. It consists of four connected wings. Each will hold two “neighborhoods” and four “households” of 18 residents. The design is aimed at providing a more homelike atmosphere, according to state officials.

The Montevideo home is one of three under construction at this time; the other two are in Preston and Bemidji.

Jim Williams’ late brother, Vietnam veteran Steve, had included a $3 million donation to the Montevideo veterans facility in his will after learning about the project during a tour hosted that day by Minnesota Department of Veterans Administration Community Liaison Larry Shellito and his staff, along with the project’s contractor, Knuston Construction.
A federal class action lawsuit involving Minnesotans with disabilities who live or have lived in group homes says that the lawsuit — which is for all adult females at group homes or group homes in Minnesota — is continuing. A fairness hearing in the case of Murphy versus Harpstead was set for early January, but has now been postponed to May 2. The case is being heard in U.S. District Court in St. Paul before Judge Donovan Frank.

The hearing was delayed after the Minnesota Department of Human Services (DHSMHS) was told that it failed to mail notice to a number of Minnesotans with disabilities who were entitled to receive notice of the settlement agreement. New notices were to be sent by mid-January.

A series of deadlines in the case are starting to kick in, including one for the plaintiff's objections to a grant contract due by March 21. About half a dozen objections have already been filed. The case began in 2017. Treasuer Murphy is the Murphy in the case and is one of the plaintiffs. Harpstead is DHS Commissioner Jodi Harpstead.

DHSMHS itself is a defendant, and several counties' human services departments and ARRM are involved as defendants or amicus parties. The Minnesota Disability Law Center is handling the case for the plaintiffs. Plaintiffs in the case contend that corporate adult foster care and group homes cause isolation and segregation. They want access to various individualized residential services available under disability waivers, for more integrated housing options.

The case is for all adult females at group homes or group homes in Minnesota — “it’s not like we can say, ‘Sorry, we don’t have a contract so we can’t take your calls. You are on your own.’”

DHS officials declined a Star Tribune request for an interview. But in written statements, assistant commissioner Eric Grumdahl said the contract delays stem from leadership transitions, staff turnover and a shift in contract management processes. He said mobile crisis providers can continue to provide services, though they won’t be paid until grant contracts are finalized. The agency doesn’t expect delays in payments to providers because the contracts should be ready by the time first-quarter invoices are received, he said.

Grumdahl, who oversees the Behavioral Health Division, said the contract delays are related to the rollout of a new contract management system — “a one-time transitional impact” — that will standardize renewals across the agency. Crisis responders say they have been kept in the dark about the reason for the contract delays, which have already caused service disruptions.

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PAY PACT

From page 6

never seen before. That speaks to the great progress in understanding the value of this work and what it means to disabled people and our communities that we’ve been able to make over the last few years,” Thompson said.

Kerry Adelmann, a family caregiver who has cared for her disabled son for the last seven years, also supports the agreement. “One of the things that is so important to me is knowing I can hand off what I would tell someone who will be caring for my son when I can’t do the work any longer. This isn’t just a job for so many of us. Raising wages and making this a real career gives me hope that I’ll be able to get help and more people will want to do this important work. This can and should be a beautiful career, but that has gotten lost because of the low wages. It’s a relief to me, as a mother and a family caregiver, that we now have a path to bring other people in who choose to do this work. These gains are worth all the hard work we had to put in to get here.”
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Talking Book Network are available for loan through the Minnesota Braille and Talking Book Library. The catalog is at www.mnbl.org, click on the link Search the Library Catalog, or call the Minnesota Braille and Talking Book Library at 800-722-0500, Mon–Fri, 9 a.m. – 4 p.m. CST.

For updates, go to the Facebook site for assistance, at 651-539-1422 or Dan Gausman. If the book’s broadcast is no longer available, call 651-539-1422 or Dan Gausman for assistance, at 651-539-1422 or dan.gausman@state.mn.us.

The sampling published monthly in Access Press doesn’t represent the full array of programming.

Chautauqua* Monday – Friday 6 a.m.

The Song of the Cell, nonfiction by Siddhartha Mukherjee, 2022, An exploration of medicine and our radical new ability to manipulate cells. Read by Yelva Lynfield. 12 broadcasts; begins Mon, Feb. 13.

Past is Prologue* Monday – Friday 11 a.m.

The Turning Point: 1851, nonfiction by Robert Douglas-Fairhurst, 2022. A close look at a formative year for one of the greatest literary personalities ever to have lived: Charles Dickens. Read by Charles Barratt. 12 broadcasts; begins Mon, Feb. 6.

A Woman’s War, nonfiction by Virginia M. Wright-Peterson, 2022. A history of Minnesota women contributing to the war effort of WWII. Read by Jan Anderson. 10 broadcasts; begins Wed, Feb. 22.

Bookworm Monday – Friday 12 p.m.


Mouth To Mouth (rebroadcast), fiction by Antoine Wilson, 2022. A successful art dealer confesses the story of his meteoric rise in this sly, suspenseful novel. Read by John Schmidt. Six broadcasts; begins Tue, Feb. 21.

The Writer’s Voice* Monday – Friday 1 p.m.

Putting the Hat in the Hat, nonfiction by Brian Cox, 2021. The incredible rags-to-riches story of acclaimed actor Brian Cox, best known as the successor’s Logan Roy, from a troubled, working-class upbringing in Scotland to a prolific career across theatre, film and television. Read by Jim Ahrens. 10 broadcasts; begins Wed, Feb. 1. – L

Fear and Loving in South Minneapolis, nonfiction by Jim Walsh, 2020. A veteran Twin Cities journalist and correspondent summons the life of the city after reporting and recording its stories for more than 30 years. Read by John Schmidt. 10 broadcasts; begins Wed, Feb. 15.

Choice Reading* Monday – Friday 2 p.m.

The Poet’s House, fiction by Jean Thompson, 2022. A warm and witty story of a young woman who gets swept up in the rivalries and love affairs of a dramatic group of writers. Read by Holly Sylvester. 10 broadcasts; begins Thu, Feb. 2. – L


Afternoon Report Monday – Friday 4 p.m.

The Avoidable War, nonfiction by Kevin Rudd, 2022. The former Australian Prime Minister Kevin Rudd offers insight, gloom, and counsel for America in navigating a world that rewrote the rules of China. Read by John Potts. 19 broadcasts; begins Thu, Feb. 12.

Night Journey* Monday – Friday 7 p.m.

Radium, fiction by John Enger, 2022. Two brothers from western Minnesota go on the run. Read by Tom Speich. 13 broadcasts; begins Mon, Feb. 6. – L

Insurrection, fiction by Tom Corwin, 2021. A story of domestic terror, critical media care and everyone facing unimaginable conflict. Read by Mike Tierney. 12 broadcasts; begins Thu, Feb. 23. – L, S

Off the Shelf* Monday – Friday 3 p.m.


Good Night Owl* Monday – Friday 10 a.m.

City On Fire, fiction by Don Winslow, 2022. A contemporary gangland masterpiece in the tradition of The Godfather, Casino and Goodfellas. Read by Jim Gregorich. 10 broadcasts; begins Mon, Feb. 6. – L

The Temps, fiction by Andrew Young, 2022. They’re underemployed, underpaid and trying to survive the end of the world while trapped inside an office complex—an epic exploration of survival and human connection in the digital age. Read by John Gunter. 11 broadcasts; begins Mon, Feb. 20. – L

RTB After Hours* Monday – Friday 11 p.m.

How to Deceive a Duke, fiction by Samantha Parish, 2022. A historical romance set in Regency England about a rebellious female chemist and her highborn lover, the Duke of Wilderffe. Read by Laura Young. 12 broadcasts; begins Wed, Feb. 8. – L

After Francesco, fiction by Brian Malloy, 2021. A universal story of love and loss set in New York City and Minneapolis at the peak of the AIDS crisis. Read by Brenda Powell. 11 broadcasts; begins Mon, Feb. 27. – L, S

Weekend Program Books

Your Personal World, 1 p.m. Sat.

presented by the Minnesota Reading Network. To learn more, visit www.nfb.org/programs-services/nfb-newsline

For the Younger Set, 11 a.m. Sun.

For the Younger Set, 11 a.m. Sun, presented by the Minnesota Reading Network. To learn more, visit www.nfb.org/programs-services/nfb-newsline

6. – L, S

Poe’s Reflections, noon Sun, presents The Poems of Jane Kenyon by Jane Kenyon, read by Mary Knatterud; followed by Love and I by Fanny Howe, read by Mary Knatterud.

The Great North, 4 p.m. Sun, presents The Pride of Minnesota by Thom Henninger, read by Jim Gregorich.
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