

## Human Service Agencies Share Life Stories With Legislators

**By Andy McKeever**

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PITTSFIELD, Mass. — Tim Potter was classified as legally blind in 2003 because of retinitis pigmentosa, a degenerative eye disease.

He lost his job and his hobbies. He spoke with United Cerebral Palsy and they helped fit him with adaptive equipment, mobility cane, books on tape. Then they set him up with an internship to get his foot in the door to go back to work.

He has just finished computer training on a specialized laptop UCP had gotten for him and he feels he is ready to rejoin the work force.

Marybeth Galligher has a similar story. When she became disabled she had to "reinvent herself" and enrolled with Berkshire County Arc. They put her through computer training and she, too, is ready to work.

"We have to fight so much harder for employment," Galligher said, as she shared her story with hundreds gathered at the Itam Lodge for the annual Legislative Breakfast. "We don't want to be known by our disabilities."

Matt Hunt worked in the restaurant business for years before he lost his job. That's when he switched professions to help those with disabilities.

Because a human service position seemed more important to Hunt he assumed he'd be paid a "living wage." But that's not what he got.

"I was shocked when I saw my first check," Hunt said.

He works full time for UCP but had to take a second job back in the restaurant business. He is worn out, tired and believes he could do even more for people with disabilities if he



**The Itam Lodge was filled for the 13th annual Legislative Breakfast hosted by the Berkshire Disability Pride Day Committee.**

didn't have to work both jobs.

Those are three of a dozen stories the Berkshire's representation on Beacon Hill heard on Friday morning. The annual breakfast, organized by the county's human service agencies, is a way for the organizations to tell the delegation what they want, need and where state money is going.

"Putting out a budget is not a math exercise. It's people's lives," said Michael Weeks, of the Caring Force, a statewide group advocating for human services.

The Berkshire delegation will be asked to vote on at least two amendments as well as the budget funding the various programs. One amendment is to carry a salary reserve for those in the human services business and another to put enough into it cover raises the workers received last year.

"I'm embarrassed that we are at this fight again," state Rep. Tricia Farley-Bouvier, D-Pittsfield, said of the fact that the governor's budget does not include the raises voted in last year. "This should not have to be battled every year."

Residential programs, community living, internship programs, transportation, family support and intensive foster care programs for the disabled all depend on state funds. Ranging a whole spectrum of disabilities, the programs have been felt underfunded in recent years because of the economy.

But despite putting on an annual breakfast, the organizations don't need to convince the state representatives of their importance.

"The entire delegation is with all of you. We're in your corner," Farley-Bouvier said.

But they get to hear about the programs they are fighting to pay for on Beacon Hill. State Rep. Gailanne Cariddi, D-North Adams, said she didn't even know about the internship program that is offered.

"This is exactly what we need to hear," Cariddi said. "I take [these stories] to heart."

Cariddi and Farley-Bouvier were joined by Kerry Sullivan, representing state Rep. William "Smitty" Pignatelli, D-Lenox, and Chris Capucci, representing state Rep. Paul Mark, D-Peru. North Adams Mayor Richard Alcombright and state Commissioner for the Blind Janet LaBreck were also on hand.

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