



# MEDIA RELEASE

Jobs are Alaska's Future



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### Governor's Committee Announces Award Recipients

(Juneau) – The Governor's Committee on Employment and Rehabilitation of People with Disabilities held its annual awards ceremony yesterday in Juneau to honor individuals, organizations and businesses which have made a significant contribution to the employment of people with disabilities. This year, the Committee received a record 50 nominations, compared to last year's 25.

"It is truly rewarding to honor these outstanding Alaskans," said Labor & Workforce Development Commissioner Greg O'Claray. "Each award recipient's story is unique, but they all share a spirit and determination to turn adversities into opportunities and try to improve the lives of fellow Alaskans."

"It is truly heartening to see the scope of this year's recipients," said Governor Frank H. Murkowski. "From Nome to Juneau and all parts between, we're seeing a real shift in thought and advocacy as it relates to people with disabilities. Not only as role models for their peers, but also as productive citizens who are a tribute to hard work and overcoming adversity. I gladly echo Commissioner O'Claray's comments, wish them all the best in the future and congratulate them for their perseverance and commitment."

"One way to measure the value of a society is by how it treats those most vulnerable," said Lt. Governor Loren Leman. "I commend all the nominees this year and applaud their efforts in providing opportunities for Alaskans with disabilities. Their efforts represent the true Alaskan spirit and sense of community."

The following individuals and agencies were selected as 2006 award recipients:

**Carolyn Peter Volunteerism Award** is awarded to Ruth Johnson-Butts of Nome. She is recognized as being an active advocate for accessibility in the Bering Straits and volunteering as a board member for Arctic Access, the Nome Community Center and the Kawerak Vocational Rehabilitation Program. Johnson-Butts is actively involved with youth and regularly volunteers at the Nome Youth Facility. Her frank and direct

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communication with them helps them increase their understanding and general respect of people with disabilities. Ruth can often be seen wheeling about Nome on cold wintry days assuring the ramps and streets are adequately shoveled and accessible.

**Large Employer of the Year** is awarded to Lowe's Home Improvement Warehouse on Tudor Road in Anchorage. Lowe's is being recognized for hiring several people with disabilities, paying high wages and providing an exceptional working environment. The Human Resource Department and Store Manager Candace Hartley are commended for providing excellent leadership and inspiring their co-workers. They are creative and think "outside the box" to fill Lowe's labor market needs. Lowe's provides accommodations and staff know first-hand the benefits of having a diversified yet qualified workforce.

**Small Employer of the Year** is awarded to True Value Hardware in Anchorage. Owner Tim Craig is being acknowledged for his commitment to hiring people with disabilities for over a decade. Through his active involvement with the Anchorage business community, Craig has been a visible example to other businesses on hiring skilled individuals with disabilities.

**Hewitt Memorial Award** is awarded to Margie Thomson, who works at the Juneau Job Center as a Project Assistant through the Customized Employment Grant. The Hewitt Memorial Award recognizes a rehabilitation specialist whose work has been of extraordinary benefit to people with disabilities. Thomson has distinguished herself with the ability to bring diverse staff and customers into strong partnerships to promote employment opportunities for people with disabilities. Because of her leadership, new partnerships have emerged and blossomed at Job Centers throughout the state. Thomson reminds all of us that it is not about disabilities and deficits. It is about who a person is and what unique strengths and abilities he/she has. Numerous individuals with severe disabilities have obtained employment through Thomson's guidance. Her work is about more than just making a good job match – it is about addressing employers' unmet needs and improving employment services to all fellow Alaskans.

**Alaskan of the Year Award** is awarded to Summer Engler, who is being recognized as a person with a disability whose achievements have been an inspiration to all people. Engler is currently a student at UAA and, despite many serious medical challenges, has accomplished many great things in her young life. What makes Engler so inspirational is her ability to maintain her social, academic, research and volunteer activities. In addition to being a full-time student she teaches anatomy and physiology at her former high school, writes music, sings and plays flute, guitar and piano at a local restaurant, volunteers at the Salvation Army and Providence Hospital, and much more. Her attitude and constant smile helps everyone recognize that life is what you make it.

**Governor's Award** recognizes a public, private or civic organization that has done the most to improve awareness of the abilities and potential of people with disabilities. This year, it is awarded to the Alaska State Elks Association in Homer. The State Elks Association provided financial support to the Elks-Help Assistive Technology Lending Library for over two decades. The Elks-Help traveled throughout Alaska assessing

individuals' needs for assistive technology and providing devices that literally changed and enhanced many lives. Elks-Help served all ages, all disabilities, any where in Alaska. Alaskans benefit greatly from the tremendous support and contribution made by the Alaska State Elks Association.

**Removal of Attitudinal Barriers** recognizes an agency or individual that has made a significant contribution to the reduction or elimination of attitudinal barriers for people with disabilities and is awarded to Travis Noah of Fairbanks. Noah works as associate manager at the Regal Goldstream Theater where he has the opportunity to remove many attitudinal barriers. It is eye opening for many people when they request to see the theater manager to have Noah roll up to them in his wheelchair. He addresses each problem or issue in a professional manner and is advocating for people with disabilities just by his professionalism and visibility. Noah makes presentations at local high schools, businesses and civic organizations about what life is like with a disability. He is currently working toward his goal of becoming a human services administrator.

**Barrier-Free Design Award** is awarded to Capital Transit in Juneau. Over the past few years, Capital Transit has been upgrading its bus lines and now nearly all buses are wheelchair accessible. All buses can lower themselves to curb level allowing not only wheelchair access, but also making it much easier for any ambulatory person old or young to board the bus. Capital Transit also offers a VIP Pass that qualifies anyone with a significant disability to ride the bus system free of charge. The VIP Pass has made it possible for many Juneau residents to obtain and maintain competitive employment, which has in turned allowed them to live independently.

**Chairperson's Award** recognizes an individual who is a role model and who has increased the awareness of employing people with disabilities. Gail Sorensen is the recipient of this year's award. She was selected because her ability to partner with a wide variety of agencies to advocate for and provide services to people with disabilities. Sorensen is an excellent communicator and is always available to meet with providers and the clients she serves. She is a superb role model who truly believes there is no greater joy or greater reward then to make a fundamental difference in someone's life.

**Youth Award** is awarded to Luis Hernandez, who is recognized for being an exemplary person, excellent student, outstanding employee, inspiring community volunteer, award-winning athlete, and an all around great friend. Hernandez is 22 years old and a graduate of Juneau-Douglas High School. He currently works at Waste Management as a recycling aide. He educates people in the community about recycling and his employers are impressed by his willingness to jump right in and help and by his desire to succeed. In his free-time, Hernandez volunteers at ORCA and with the Young Adventure Club, offering guidance and support to students in our community. He is also an accomplished athlete who participated in the Special Olympic Games in Iowa, where he was awarded a Gold Metal for Shot-put.

**Honorable Mention** Alice Rocke, a Division of Vocational Rehabilitation counselor who recently passed away, is being recognized for her work which has been of

extraordinary benefit to people with disabilities. Rocke was an exceptional vocational rehabilitation counselor who had the ability to truly motivate and empower the individuals she worked with. She is remembered for her commitment to the vocational rehabilitation field she worked in and especially for her commitment to the clients she served. Rocke continued to work with her consumers just days before her death to make certain that their services would be continued despite her illness.

**Honorable Mention** The Municipality of Anchorage, (and particularly Mayor Mark Begich and ADA Coordinator Paula Harrison) is being recognized for making the Anchorage community more accessible and aware of the abilities of people with disabilities.

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