

Shoals employers honored for ongoing effort to hire workers with disabilities

By Lisa Singleton-Rickman Staff Writer | Posted: Wednesday, October 8, 2014 10:59 pm

MUSCLE SHOALS — Locally, 325 people with disabilities participated in programs in the past year through the area's Vocational Rehabilitation Services Center that helped them get back to work.

That's not a statistic that's taken lightly, according to James Myrick, assistant commissioner of the Alabama Department of Rehabilitation Services.

Myrick was among the speakers Wednesday at the Shoals Area Committee on Employment of People with Disabilities awards luncheon.

Statewide, rehabilitation services centers have played a role in helping 4,596 individuals with disabilities join or re-join the workforce in the past year.

"Partnerships with businesses, some of the very ones being honored here today, are crucial in getting Alabama children and adults with disabilities on the road to achieving success," Myrick said.

Local businesses were honored Wednesday for their ongoing commitment to hiring individuals with disabilities

The businesses included Brentwood Retirement Community in Muscle Shoals, small business employer of the year; Wal-Mart, Supercenter, Florence, large business employer of the year; Social Security Administration, partnership of the year; Leslie Rager, advocate of the year; and Fred Wilkins, employee of the year.

Graham Sisson, Jr., a native of Sheffield who is the director of the Governor's Office on Disability, shared his experiences with the rehabilitation services he received in 1982, when a drunken driver hit the car he was riding in, breaking his back.

"This program was very valuable to me in that it enabled me to work," he said, praising many of the



Enabled and ready to work

Natalie Gordon, the keynote speaker at the Shoals Area Committee on Employment of People with Disabilities awards luncheon, stops to greet attendee Fred Williams.

state's 400,000 small businesses that hire individuals with disabilities.

The day's keynote speaker, Natalie Gordon, who lost her arm and shoulder to cancer in her early 20s, said during her time in rehabilitation after her amputations there was a constant reminder that quitting wasn't an option. It's her motto to this day.

"I was a young mother with two very young children, and welfare wasn't an option," she said. "Through it all, the loss of my arm, shoulder and part of my lung, I didn't quit. I couldn't. Had I quit, I would have never learned I had a lot less disability than ability."

Recently retired from Riverbend Center for Mental Health as a social worker for 35 years, Gordon said she has continued to draw strength from three constants in her life: her family, friends and faith.

"I would never have achieved what I have in my life had I quit, and though the pain at times seemed unbearable, I knew I had to keep moving forward," she said. "That's the kind of encouragement you get from the folks at the rehabilitation center."

Gov. Robert Bentley, who was attending a fundraiser luncheon nearby, told the group in brief remarks he appreciated their commitment and pledged to financially support the State Department of Rehabilitation Services in its mission to train disabled individuals.

"My own son has benefited from these services, and I value the work you do," Bentley said.

Lisa Singleton-Rickman can be reached at 256-740-5735 or lisa.singleton-rickman@TimesDaily.com. Follow on Twitter @TD_LSRickman.