ILLINOIS DEPARTMENT OF
HUMAN RIGHTS

JB Pritzker, Governor
James L. Bennett, Director

Illinois Highlights Ongoing Commitment to Disability Rights and Educational Equity

Illinois' Employee of the Year, State Agency of the Year, Advocate of the Year, and Legislator of the Year were recognized during the 2026 ACED Awards

CHICAGO – Today, state officials honored leaders advocating for people with disabilities and reaffirmed Illinois' commitment to protecting civil rights at a time when key federal protections are being rolled back.

A Special Congratulations to:

- Employee of the Year – Jay Williams
- State Agency of the Year – Illinois Department of Innovation and Technology
- Advocate of the Year – Donna Hardy
- Legislator of the Year – Representative Gregg Johnson

The Accessibility Committee for Employees with Disabilities (ACED), a statewide Committee administered by the Illinois Department of Human Rights (IDHR) and Department of Human Services (DHS), supports State of Illinois employees with disabilities and State of Illinois agencies regarding disability-related issues of concern.

"Today's ACED Award recipients embody the values that guide Illinois: inclusion, dignity, and equal opportunity," **said Illinois Department of Human Rights Director James Bennett.** "At a moment when national protections are uncertain, Illinois is doubling down. The state is working with school districts, families, and communities to ensure that every student, including students with disabilities, receives the full protections guaranteed under state law."

"We cannot take for granted living in a state where civil and human rights are protected and taken seriously. That's why it is so important that we take these moments to celebrate our champions of disability rights," **said IDHS Secretary Dulce M. Quintero.** "These ACED award winners remind us to lead and live guided by equity and the belief in the dignity of all people."

Aleeza Strubel, Complex Litigation Counsel at the Illinois Attorney General's Office, keynoted the event and underscored Illinois' dedication to inclusion, access, and educational equity remains unchanged and, in fact, is strengthening in response to recent federal actions.

"It is an honor to join the ACED Awards in celebrating leaders who advance equity for people with disabilities," **said Aleeza Strubel Complex Litigation Counsel at the Illinois Office of the Attorney General.** "Their work could not be more important as federal agencies step back from long-standing civil rights obligations. Here in Illinois, our commitment is unwavering. We will continue to vigorously enforce our state's civil rights laws to ensure that Illinoisans with disabilities can live, learn, and participate fully in our state free from discrimination."

The ceremony took place amid significant shifts at the federal level, including recent actions by the U.S. Department of Justice that weaken enforcement of *Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act* and narrow longstanding *Olmstead* community-integration protections and actions by the U.S Department of Education to roll back its civil rights enforcement. These federal initiatives reduce oversight of disability rights in schools. These actions have contributed to a growing backlog of civil rights complaints nationally and a dramatic decrease in investigations involving students with disabilities.

Illinois officials emphasized that, while federal protections may be eroding, Illinois continues to enforce some of the strongest civil rights guarantees in the country and is expanding state-level enforcement to ensure that students and individuals with disabilities are not left behind.

Illinois' Actions to Protect Disability Rights and Education Equity

During the ceremony, state officials outlined steps Illinois is taking to reaffirm its leadership in civil rights:

- **Affirming state enforcement:** The Illinois Attorney General's Civil Rights Bureau is prepared to identify pattern-or-practice civil rights violations in schools under the Illinois Human Rights Act.
- **Challenging unlawful federal rollbacks:** The Office of the Attorney General has joined a multi-state coalition to take legal action to prevent cuts to school mental health funding and to object to the Department of Education's changes to data collection on disparities that affect students of color with disabilities.
- **Addressing gaps created by reduced federal oversight:** With federal enforcement staff reduced by more than 50% and complaint dismissals at the US Department of Education Office for Civil Rights reaching 90% in recent periods, Illinois aims to

strengthen state-level enforcement to protect the civil rights of students with disabilities.
- **Statewide collaboration:** Illinois is partnering with IDHR and ISBE to ensure that civil rights protections are fully realized in schools statewide.

The ACED Awards ceremony celebrates organizations and individuals whose work reflects Illinois' core values. Officials emphasized that, while much of the country faces uncertainty, Illinois is committed to ensuring that the rights of students and residents with disabilities are upheld.

"Today we celebrate champions of inclusion," **said Xavier Potts, ACED Chief Administrator**, "And, we recommit to ensuring that Illinois remains a place where every person regardless of disability, race, national origin, sex, or gender has equal access to opportunity. We meet this moment with action."

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ABOUT ACED

ACED was originally created by statute in 1974 to support State of Illinois employees with disabilities and State of Illinois agencies regarding disability-related issues of concern. ACED's mission is to promote access, independence, and opportunity for State employees with disabilities.

The Committee holds regular meetings to plan activities that promote and expand access, opportunity, and independence within State employment. The Committee is a forum for the dissemination of information on disability matters and as a place where issues of general concern for State of Illinois employees with disabilities can be raised.

This statewide Committee is administered by the Illinois Department of Human Rights (IDHR). In June 2026, by approval of the Illinois General Assembly (via Public Act 104-0465, Article 20), ICED was officially renamed as ACED, or the Accessibility Committee for Employees with Disabilities.