

## Housing Committee Chair Shares Vision

By Peggy Robertson

Bruce McElrath has a good understanding of the needs of people with disabilities. Mr. McElrath served in the military and is a disabled veteran. After he was discharged from the military and living in Washington D.C., he was mugged and shot four times, resulting in his becoming a paraplegic. He described his disability as being enlightening in a totally different way. He has an awareness of the issues people with disabilities face from different perspectives and has used that awareness to advocate for the rights of people with disabilities.

Mr. McElrath plays a significant role within the disability community in Philadelphia. He is CEO and Board Chairman of D.R.A.G., Disabilities Rights Advocacy Group, a non-profit organization, which was founded in 1989. D.R.A.G. has been responsible for changes in legislation that protect the civil rights of people with disabilities including advocating for the installation of curb cuts and accessible and user-friendly ATM machines, which has since become



*Bruce McElrath, CEO and Board Chairman of D.R.A.G. and Chairman of the MCPD Housing Committee*

a national trend. Mr. McElrath explained that D.R.A.G. has recently become more involved with housing issues.

Mr. McElrath's credentials made him an excellent choice to become the Chairman for the Mayor's Commission on People with Disabilities (MCPD) Housing Committee. He became co-chair of the Housing Committee in September 2005 and has since moved into the role of Chairman. He is pleased to be involved with a group that seeks to ensure that individuals with disabilities are afforded the same rights

as all other citizens, especially with regard to housing.

The specific goal of the committee is to advocate for affordable accessible housing and education. Committee members include representatives from various city housing and disability agencies who meet approximately eight times a year in order to make information more accessible and to articulate the housing problems people with disabilities are experiencing. Mr. McElrath said, "Meeting the housing needs of

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people with disabilities starts with bridging the communication gap between the different disability agencies, city housing agencies and legislators. I think our role is to provide outreach and resources and serve as a problem solver. We are fortunate because Roger Margulies, the Assistant Deputy Mayor for the MCPD, is actively involved in the Housing Committee and really understands all of the issues. We want to open up the avenue of communication to give people the opportunity to be a part of the broad discussion. That is why it is important to bring as many people to the table as possible."

Mr. McElrath added, "The committee is concerned about the lack of resources allocated for people with disabilities and would like to see more money put into the city budget. Philadelphia has done a good job of increasing the stock of affordable, accessible housing for people with disabilities but there is difficulty in getting people with disabilities into housing that is accessible. That

is why we were supportive of the passage of the Housing Trust Fund and we will continue to stay updated on its activities. We also support the city's efforts to pass a Visitability Ordinance. (Visitability is defined on page 5 of this newsletter.) In fact, we invited Councilwoman Blackwell, who proposed the Ordinance, to come to one of our meetings."

Councilwoman Blackwell was invited to the committee's May meeting to give an update on the Housing Trust Fund. Although the Visitability Ordinance has not yet been passed, Ms. Blackwell was pleased that Visitability was a major component of the Housing Trust Fund. The Councilwoman stated that she wants to stay informed about the committee's activities so that she can continue to advocate for people with disabilities.

Anthony McIntosh, Executive Vice President of the Philadelphia Housing Development Corporation (PHDC), also attended the May meeting. He described the services PHDC offers to people with disabilities, including the Adaptive Modification Program (which is described on page 5 of this

newsletter.) Mr. McElrath noted, "It is important for us to hear from other city agencies such as PHDC. We plan on inviting a representative from the Philadelphia Housing Authority to attend a future meeting so that we are updated on any new policies or programs being offered. The committee has also discussed putting together a workshop or town meeting. The target audience would be people with disabilities in need of housing who could come and talk with representatives from OHCD, PHA, etc. to learn about the different resources that are available and to be able to articulate the obstacles that they have encountered."

Mr. McElrath is providing leadership, expertise and creativity to his role as Chairman of the MCPD Housing Committee. He understands the needs of people with disabilities and knows how to be an effective advocate. He also brings compassion to his mission. He stated the philosophy that affects how he lives his life. "If I can help somebody along the way, my living will not be in vain."