

## **Freedom Quest holds rally for improved services for developmentally disabled**

**By ROB STROUD, Staff Writer**  
[rstroud@jg-tc.com](mailto:rstroud@jg-tc.com)

CHARLESTON — The Freedom Quest caravan for improved state services for the developmentally disabled will be taking a lot of signatures and memories from Charleston to its final destination today in Springfield.

The caravan made a stop at 10 a.m. Wednesday on the courthouse square for a rally that was attended by more than 150 people, including staff and clients from local service providers for the developmentally disabled. Many of those in the crowd signed a Freedom Quest Charleston rally flag that will be taken today to the Illinois Capitol.

"We can take everyone who does not get to go to Springfield to Springfield with us still," said Sarah Castle, an organizer with Campaign for Real Choice.

Charleston was one of 12 stops on four different routes that the three-day Freedom Quest caravan is making as it head to Springfield for the final rally.

Castle, a Paralympic gold-medal winning wheelchair basketball player from Champaign, said the local organizers of the Charleston rally went all out by bringing in singers and speakers. Castle said she liked that they connected the rally to local history by having Abraham Lincoln presenter B.F. McClerren take part.

"I think the Charleston event was fantastic. We had a really good time," Castle said. "We had lots of people and lots of enthusiasm. We are just so excited so many people came out to support our caravan, our cause and the event."

Amy Walker, an advocate with Illinois Voices, said the rally was "phenomenal" and she could tell the cheering crowd was "pumped."

Walker, a Decatur native who has cerebral palsy, said during her presentation to the audience that the developmentally disabled have long been trained to "smile and think everything is all right" when they should be rallying and fighting for their rights instead.

"We are tired of being treated like we are second class citizens, like we don't belong in the regular community," Walker said.

Freedom Quest is campaigning to reduce the number of state-operated institutions, increase the availability of community-based housing, and ultimately eliminate the state's waiting list of more than 16,000 people for services for the developmentally disabled.

Audience members held signs that said "Reduce the waiting list," "Support disabled workers," "People with disabilities calling for real change," "Let's work together to find a solution," and more.

Castle said Illinois spends too little on services for the developmentally disabled and this money is used inefficiently. She said the state could save money, which would help during the economic downturn, by supporting the movement of more people with developmental disabilities to small homes instead of large-scale institutions.

"It actually ends up costing the state less money and it ends up being better for people in terms of their morale and life," Castle said.

The crowd at Wednesday's rally included developmentally disabled clients from CCAR Industries, Charleston Transitional Facility and the Blumenthal Center, and the Paris-based Human Resources Center as well as providers that are taking part in the caravan.

"I want to thank everyone for coming out today and supporting our Freedom Quest and sending us off to Springfield, Illinois," caravan rider Joetta Kretzmann of Murphysboro said to the crowd.

Contact Rob Stroud at [rstroud@jg-tc.com](mailto:rstroud@jg-tc.com) or 238-6861.