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Freedom Quest pushes for disabled rights

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MOLINE -- The Quad-Cities was the starting point for of a caravan of vehicles heading to Springfield to rally for the rights of the disabled.

There are 13 stops along three routes for Freedom Quest 2009 — a statewide event calling for change in the way Illinois deals with its developmentally disabled. It ends Thursday with a stop in the state capitol.

"They have just as much invested in the political process in this state as anyone else," said Kyle Rick, executive director of the Arc of Rock Island County. "Let them know as voters what you expect from them."

Jennifer Pauley, a member of Speak Out — a group dedicated to lobbying for disabled"s rights — said thanks to special training she can now advocate for her cause, speak publicly about her issues and meet people across the state because of it.

The developmentally disabled want what most people want, she said: to be treated with respect, privacy, independence, and to be self-advocates. Even simple choices about what to eat and wear is sometimes an issue.

One of Freedom Quest's main goals is to end state-operated institutions for the disabled and create flexible, community-based supports. The group also wants to reduce, and eventually eliminate, the number of people with developmental disabilities on waiting lists for training and other programs.

Dawn Imel, executive director of Community Service Options, said Illinois is in the top 15



Photo: Todd Mizener

Sarah Blue of Moline flashes a smile in acknowledgment of the audience's applause Tuesday morning in the conference room of the i wireless Center in Moline. Sarah was introducing one of the speakers at the ARC of Rock Island County's Freedom Quest Kick-off Rally. Freedom Quest '09 is a caravan that will bring together people from across the state of Illinois calling for real freedom for people with developmental disabilities in Illinois.

in terms of state budget but ranks last in providing community support to people with developmental disabilities. Only 13 percent of the disabled who want jobs have them and there are more than 16,000 waiting for services, she said.

"It's only getting worse," she said. "We face significant cuts to an already faltering system."