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SPRING 2025

Small Envelope, Big Difference

SOAG Brings Safety Initiative to Ohio Roadways



Flashing lights approaching behind your vehicle give all of us a little jolt of anxiety – no matter the situation. Imagine that anxiety amplified knowing that your ability to communicate with officers may be hindered by your disability. Thousands of drivers throughout Ohio know this feeling – and a simple blue envelope can help. The Southern Ohio Council of Governments (SOCOG) is pleased to announce the launch of the Blue Envelope Program across the state of Ohio. The program uses communication tools to assist individuals with

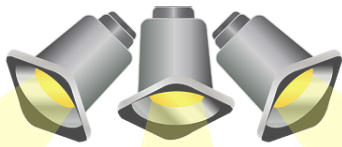
developmental disabilities during interactions with law enforcement and emergency personnel.

The key part of the program is the Blue Envelope itself. The envelope has space on the outside for information about the disability and/or medical conditions of the driver or passenger of the automobile. A copy of a ID/driver's license, vehicle registration, and vehicle insurance card can be kept inside the envelope which would be handed to a law enforcement officer during a traffic stop. Having this infor-

mation in one place makes it easier to communicate with officers and reduces anxiety during a traffic stop.

The second piece of the program is the Blue Envelope Car Decal. The three-inch decal features the program logo and can be placed on a vehicle's windows to discreetly communicate to law enforcement and first responders that the occupants participate in the Blue Envelope Program. They

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SOCOG STAFF SPOTLIGHT

January
Kathy Sharp
Investigator



Kathy Sharp was our January Spotlight Staff. Kathy was nominated by her supervisor and peers for her outstanding work as an Investigative Agent and a mentor to many of our other IAs.

Kathy has been with SOCOG since 2003 and is one of our most experienced investigators with much knowledge to share. Kathy has successfully mentored many new investigators over the years. For the last few years, she has covered MUI investigations for not only her assigned counties, but also one very large, busy county. Kathy is an extremely thorough investigator that goes above and beyond with her cases. Many of her investigations have resulted in successful abuser registry placements which further protects the individuals we serve. Kathy is well known by DODD and receives great compliments and praise for all her hard work.

December
Mary Saunders
MUI Secretary



Mary Saunders, MUI Secretary, is the recipient of the December Employee Spotlight award! Mary was nominated by both her supervisors and peers for her outstanding dedication and contributions to the MUI (Major Unusual Incidents) department.

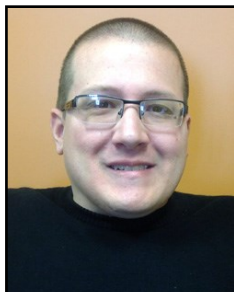
As the backbone of the MUI team, Mary plays an integral role in ensuring the department runs smoothly and efficiently. Known for her tireless work ethic and attention to detail, she consistently goes above and beyond to support her colleagues. She provides invaluable assistance to Investigative Agents (IAs), helping them stay on top of their timelines and maintain organized investigation files. Her proactive approach and organizational skills are critical to the success of the department.

Mary's peers describe her as a hardworking, reliable, and indispensable team member. Her efforts not only streamline the investigation process but also create a supportive and collaborative environment for everyone she works with.

SOCOG extends its deepest gratitude to Mary Saunders for her exceptional contributions and congratulates her on this well-deserved recognition. Thank you, Mary, for all that you do to support the mission and values of SOCOG!

February & March
**Travis Dresbach &
Kelli Gothard**

Advocacy Group Coordinators



Our February and March Spotlight staff are the dynamic duo of Kelli Gothard, Executive Assistant and Travis Dresbach, Pickaway Advocate. Congratulations to both of you!

Kelli and Travis have worked tirelessly with our advocacy group to secure a grant from the Ohio Developmental Disabilities Council to implement the Blue Envelope program. Not only will this program help our individuals in our area, but it has the potential to be implemented across the state.

Thanks to the work from Kelli and Travis our advocacy group is growing and doing amazing things. Thank you!!! We appreciate both of you!!

ADVOCACY, Continued from page 1

will be aware that a person in that vehicle may have a disability that could affect their actions or speech. In the event of a traffic accident, the Blue Envelope Car Decal and Blue Envelope allow first responders to access critical information immediately in case you are injured. The Blue Envelope Wallet Card is included in the packet for people who want a method of communication they can carry in their pocket or purse. It is a smaller version of the envelope that can be used anywhere. Blue Envelope Packets are available at the offices of County Board of Developmental Disabilities throughout the state of Ohio. The packets are available for free to anyone with a developmental disability. "The Blue Envelope program promotes inclusion and is a communication tool between law enforcement and community members," said SOAG co-coordinator Travis Dresbach. "Disabilities such as autism spectrum disorder, dementia, physical disability, or mental

health conditions may require additional accommodation or awareness during a law enforcement interaction. It's amazing that something as simple as an envelope can do so much." The flagship Blue Envelope Program was designed by the San Diego Sheriff's Department and has been implemented nationally with various agencies. The program first appeared in Ohio with a program developed by the Mahoning County Prosecutor's office in 2024. SOAG learned of the program and wanted to see it implemented throughout the state of Ohio. Ohio's Blue Envelope Program was made possible through a collaboration of the Ohio Developmental Disabilities Council, Southern Ohio Council of Governments, and the Southern Ohio Advocacy Group.

For more information on the Blue Envelope Program, email Kelli Gothard at kgothard@socog.org.



Ross County Advocate Austin Speakman shows the signage used to promote the Blue Envelope Program at the OACB Spring Conference. Advocates at Ross and other SOCOG counties are assisting with the assembly of Blue Envelope Packets.



Gifford Testifies at State Finance Committee

Pickaway County - Michelle Gifford is the first person served by the Pickaway County Developmental Disabilities to be appointed as a board member. In March, she spoke passionately in support of a modest increase in the next state budget for Direct Support Professionals (DSPs), sharing how frontline workers help her live independently and with dignity. According to OACB CEO Adam Herman, "After spending two decades working in and around the Ohio Statehouse, I can honestly say today was the first time I watched the entire Ohio House Finance Committee along with a full audience of fellow witnesses give a round of applause following state budget testimony. Michelle rocked it, and we're so grateful that she lent her powerful voice to the process." Michelle's testimony serves as the DD Budget Coalition's closing argument before the bill leaves the



House—and we hope that Ohio lawmakers will remember her words as they make decisions in the weeks ahead. Special thanks to Marie Wilbanks and Heather Foll for supporting Michelle as she traveled to the Statehouse.

New Faces at SOCOG

To meet the needs of our counties, SOCOG has recently added several new positions to our staff. Learn more about the people filling those positions below.

Karen Reed

Family Advocate—Lawrence Co.

As a Family Advocate at Lawrence County Board of DD, Karen is a voice for families of individuals with disabilities.



Gabriella Guthrie

Secretary — Scioto Co.

Gabriella was hired in February 2025 as a full-time secretary in the business office at the Scioto County Board of DD.



Regan Scarberry

Secretary—Scioto Co.

In February of 2025, Regan Scarberry began working as the secretary for the SSA department at Scioto County Board of DD.



Hunter Robinson

Advocate—Ross County

As a member of the Ross County Board, Hunter is no stranger to the issues facing the DD community. He plans to put his experience to use as an Advocate.



Jordan Olivares

Advocate—Pickaway County

Jordan is the second advocate to join the team at Pickaway County Board of DD. He began work in March 2025.



Heather Giles

Advocate—Ross County

Heather is very active in community events, including the Ross County Fair. She has participated in several Special Olympics sports including swim, cheerleading, and powerlifting. She joined SOCOG in April 2025.



Deion Ford

Advocate—Ross Co.

Deion held several jobs in the service industry before joining the advocate team at Ross County Board of DD in April. He is also a member of the Trailblazers Special Olympics team.



Ginger Kneeler

Advocate— Ross Co.

Ginger was one of several Advocates hired to work in Ross County in April 2025. She is eager to learn about Advocacy and share her experiences with others.



Shelby Dunham

SSA Assistant — Ross Co.

Shelby graduated from the Ohio State University in 2023 with a bachelor's in Human Development and Family Services. She joined the SSA department at Ross County in May.



School vs School in Healthy Competition

Lawrence County - Ironton High School hosted the Open Door School Jets as they played the Verne Riffe Cardinals in two games of basketball. Both schools also showcased routines by their cheer squads. The day was filled with a fantastic amount of support from Ironton High School staff and students. Everyone enjoyed some healthy competition, and players of both teams were treated to pizza provided by Ironton High School after the



Special Olympics Athlete on Good Day Columbus

Ross County - The Special Olympics Ohio holds state-wide fundraising events throughout the year. If local programs participate in those events, most of the funds raised are kept at the local level to be used for day-to-day program expenses. This year the Ross County Special Olympics will be participating in the Columbus Polar Plunge for its second year. The Polar Plunge is Ohio's largest community fundraising event that benefits athletes. Ross County Athletes

will be collecting pledges from friends, family, and others in our community to take an icy plunge in the name of inclusion on Saturday, February 8th. The plunge event is held at the Columbus Crew Lower.com Field. One of our area athletes, Noah Hiles, was selected in Ohio to be interviewed by Cameron Fontana and Alissa Henry from Good Day Columbus. Noah along with Special Olympics Ohio CEO, Jessica Stewart, was featured in an upcoming segment of "Good Day Extra".

Night to Shine Honors Special Advocate



Adams County - The Adams County Night to Shine hosted 120 individuals down the Red Carpet this year. The honored guests enjoyed, dinner, dancing, party bus and limo rides, balloon making, karaoke, and a photo booth. During the prayer, a special tribute was made to Adams County Board of DD Advocate TJ McClellan, who passed away suddenly in January.

SOCOg TRAINING SCHEDULE 2025

Medication Administration Refresher

July 30
November 26

Annual Provider Training

July 30
November 26

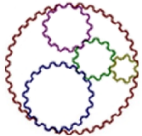
Medication Administration Training

August 5-6
November 4-5

First Aid/CPR

August 8
November 14

To register for trainings, visit www.socog.org/trainings/register-pay-online
or call 740-774-5030, option 4.



Southern Ohio Council

A Council of Governments

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PO Box 456

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Office hours - Monday-Friday
8:00 AM - 4:00 PM

The Southern Ohio Council of Governments was formed in March 1996 and began services in March 1997. The Council was created by Superintendents of County Boards of Developmental Disabilities in southern Ohio. The Council is a government entity created under Chapter 167 of the Ohio Revised Code, representing 14 County Boards of Developmental Disabilities. The Council provides administrative supports for County Boards in Adams, Brown, Clinton, Fayette, Gallia, Highland, Jackson, Lawrence, Meigs, Pickaway, Pike, Ross, Scioto and Vinton Counties.

www.socog.org

SOCOg Mission Statement

- Do things together we can't do effectively and efficiently alone
- Offer members a trusted source of external expertise and feedback

Spring 2025