



# Media Release

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**For Immediate Release**

September 19, 2014

## **Hot Springs woman who's visually impaired earns achievement award**

Debra Cole of Hot Springs has been named the area's outstanding Consumer of the Year by the Department of Human Services Division of Services for the Blind (DSB).

DSB Vocational Rehabilitation Counselor Matt Lyles nominated her for the award because of her determination to overcome adversity, serve others, and succeed at work. "Ms. Cole has an impressive record of obtaining and maintaining employment despite vision conditions which might prevent many others from even applying for work. She has several times informed her VR counselor that she has plans for her life which don't include sitting at home," said Lyles.

Cole works as a Certified Nursing Assistant (CNA) in the behavioral health unit at Lakewood Convalescence Center in Hot Springs. She was named CNA of the Month at her job in August.

Cole had been a security guard at the Arkansas Department of Corrections Ouachita River Correctional Unit in Malvern, but in 2007 her vision worsened and she couldn't qualify with a rifle, so she lost that job. Fortunately, she was able to return to her previous employer, Lakewood Convalescence Center.

Her vision continued to decline and in 2011, she couldn't see well enough to renew her driver's license.

She said she was diagnosed with sarcoidosis or sarcoid condition, which can affect the lymph nodes, internal organs, bones, and skin. The cause is not known and there is no cure. In one in 15 people who have the condition, such as Cole, it also affects eyes. She said her lymph nodes above the lungs were affected and her heart is not beating as it should.

In April 2013, Cole said she was diagnosed with Uveitis, inflammation of the middle layers of the eye, which in her case was aggravated by diabetes. She said she was not properly diagnosed until she

sought a second opinion and other treatment options from the Harvey and Bernice Jones Eye Institute at the University of Arkansas for Medical Sciences. Since then, her vision has steadily improved.

“You can’t let a condition beat you,” Cole said, adding that she doesn’t complain about her illnesses.

Cole is one of only 13 people in Arkansas to receive an area award and was chosen from the area that includes Saline, Garland, Hot Spring, and Clark Counties.

Cole’s employer, Lakewood Convalescence Center, received an award as an outstanding business partner for its commitment to promoting the employment of persons with vision impairment.

The awards were presented at the evening meeting of the Hot Springs Lions Club held at Arlington Resort Hotel and Spa on September 18.

Cole has always been interested in the medical field. As a teenager, she was in the Health Occupation Students of America Club at Monticello High School. She earned her CNA license in 2005, and except for a year as a prison guard, she has worked as a CNA since high school.

“It is probably from their mother’s strong work ethic that her daughters received their own motivation for work and advancement,” Lyles said. One is serving in the military. The other daughter is in nursing school; she’s also in pharmacy tech training and will finish its licensing requirements in April. “All three women stand by each other and help each other in pursuing and achieving their goals.”

“Currently Mrs. Cole is completing online courses with an eventual goal of working as a probation or parole officer. I’m confident she will accomplish her career plans and will continue to be a positive role model for others in the community,” her counselor said.

Cole is very appreciative of DSB services and said the agency paid for her CNA training, eye injections, numerous surgeries, doctor visits, magnifiers, eyeglasses, and eye medications. “I used DSB (services) to keep my job.”

When she’s not at work, Cole enjoys spending family time with her husband Alex Cole and helping raise her two-year-old grandson, Kayden Hill.

This is the seventh year that DSB has given Consumer of the Year awards to recognize individuals who have managed their rehabilitation plans, gained marketable skills, secured good jobs, and become role models for others. An overall state winner will be selected at the end of the year.

For information about DSB’s programs and services, visit the DSB website at <http://humanservices.arkansas.gov/dsb/Pages/default.aspx> or call 1-800-960-9270, 501-682-5463, or TDD 501-682-0093.