

# Local Arc leader finds patriotism, sense of duty in White House briefing

By Cheryl Wade for the Daily News | Posted: Sunday, February 19, 2012 1:00 pm

A leader with The Arc of Midland said he came home from a trip to the White House with a tremendous sense of patriotism, fond memories of a speech by President Obama and the sense that many federal employees truly want to make life better for people with disabilities.

Midlander Paul White is immediate past president of The Arc Michigan and served on The Arc Michigan board and as president of The Arc of Midland. The Arc is an organization that advocates for people with intellectual and developmental disabilities. One of his sons, 13-year-old Adam, has Down syndrome and attends Northeast Middle School.

“There is a desire to do better,” he said of the federal officials who spoke at the Feb. 10 Community Leaders Briefing, which hosted 150 representatives of state and local Arcs. “There is a desire to be compassionate.”

Moderator for the event was Kareem Dale, special assistant to the president for disability policy. White said there was nothing political about his trip, although he acknowledged that President Barack Obama’s in-person speech bore the kind of positive sentiments that a president would make during an election year. Still, he loved being within 10 feet of Obama and believes the president cares about the important issues of disability.

“No matter who you are, no matter where you come from, you can make it if you try,” he told the crowd. “For a long time, folks with disabilities were excluded from that promise. And I believe that’s wrong,” Obama said.

People with disabilities deserve a fair shake, a fair shot, a chance to find good jobs with good benefits, a chance to build a life for themselves and to live in communities they choose, the president added.

White took away encouragement from well-placed federal officials to go home and work hard to improve life for people with disabilities. He got the sense that the federal government passes money and program plans to the states, which treat the money and mandates in differing ways — like a bunch of little kids who behave differently with their parents.

“They take these programs and pass them onto the states, knowing some states will have more success than others,” he said. The government wants to benefit the greatest number of people. “But they know that ... even though we have this great program, there will be some failures. They attempt to hold states “Some states and some communities are having tremendous success and some are failing miserably.”

The government appears to want people with disabilities to receive assistance from either Medicaid — the health program for the poor — or Medicare — primarily for senior citizens and

those receiving Social Security Disability Income. Now, a number of people who need lots of support services are receiving help from both programs, and the two pots of money pay for differing services, White said. Some people undoubtedly are taking advantage of this dual qualification, but others need what the money can provide, White said.

Attendees heard from five speakers including representatives from Medicare and Medicaid services, the Department of Justice, the Office of Management and Budget, the Domestic Policy Council and Housing and Urban Development. After those speakers, White took part in a breakout session about education for people with disabilities.

White noted that the day before his big meeting, Obama had announced that 10 states would receive waivers exempting them from some requirements of the complex No Child Left Behind law if they adopt higher standards in the way they evaluate students' performance. Michigan was not on the list.

Government officials believe the law is not working the way it was expected to work, or at least not everywhere in the country, he said.

"Some states are getting caught up in being so busy trying to comply with it that we're not doing a very good job of educating our children," he said. "Some states will be released from having to do some of the accountability hoops, to come up with a program that improves the way we're teaching our children."

Attendees didn't simply focus on the positives, White said. One woman from a southern state said she believed her state was lying when it filled out some of the forms it sent to the federal government to monitor its programs. One of the speakers said "we'll get back with you."

The speech from Obama, which lasted a little more than four minutes, came as a surprise, White said. When Dale told the people they were to have a special guest, it turned out to be Obama's chief of staff, Jack Liu. After that, the crowd waited for 25 minutes as a big tough-looking Secret Service official went in and out, his arms folded as if to say, "you think you can take me, but you can't," White said. Then came the big announcement: here was the president of the United States. Obama came out from behind a curtain and delivered remarks that, if they'd been given to cake lovers, let everybody know they were having cake, White said. At his entrance, audience members were on their feet, cheering. One man, who appeared to have a disability, leaned forward from the third row crying "Mr. President! Mr. President!" Obama asked some in the audience to lean to the side so their hands could touch.

"He walks out from behind the curtain like a rock star," White said, referring to Obama's confidence. "It wasn't about politics. ... I was so proud to be in his presence. What I couldn't get over was the amount of respect in that room for the president."

The group toured the East Wing, sat for Obama's message in the press briefing room and ate box lunches at the White House. White assumed the government didn't want people to think it was paying for a lavish lunch in an election year, or that the ARC U.S would have had to pay for a fancy lunch.

White has decided he'll take the federal officials up on their urging, and tell others what he has learned. His first chance will come at the March 1 Midland Noon Rotary Club meeting.

"I have come home to know I was charged with helping people. It isn't that I have perfect answers; it's that I have a willingness to help," he said.