



The Milwaukee Mental Health Task Force is committed to being a leader in identifying issues faced by all people affected by mental illness, facilitating improvements in mental health services, giving consumers and families a strong voice, reducing stigma, and implementing recovery principles.

The Milwaukee Mental Health Task Force *Karen Avery Award* – September 11, 2018

The Milwaukee Mental Health Task Force is very pleased to present the fifth *Karen Avery Award* to Denise Johnson, in recognition of her outstanding advocacy. The award was established to honor Karen's legacy as an advocate, mentor, peer, and leader in advancing the rights of people with disabilities.

About Denise Johnson

Denise Johnson, BSW, is a Deaf professional working in collaboration with the 8 Independent Living Centers (ILCs) in Wisconsin as the Wisconsin Statewide Project Coordinator of SUD/MH Services for Persons who are Deaf, Hard of Hearing and Deaf-Blind. Denise has dedicated her career to advocating for and with persons with disabilities, and especially those who are deaf, hard of hearing, or deaf-blind and live with a mental illness or substance abuse concerns. Among her many contributions, Denise serves on the Wisconsin State Council on Alcohol and Other Drug Abuse (SCAODA) Diversity Sub-Committee, is the Vice President of American Deafness and Rehabilitation Association (ADARA) and is the Chair of IndependenceFirst's Deaf Access Consumer Advocacy Team. Denise is one of the co-founding members of Deaf Unity in Wisconsin. She is an active member of the Milwaukee Mental Health Task Force.



The nomination commended Denise's willingness to improve program access and provide education on issues related to substance use and mental health as related to people who are deaf, hard of hearing and/or deaf-blind, and her tireless work to advocate and assist consumers and professionals in any way that she can.

Karen Avery was Denise's supervisor for 11 years, from the time she began her advocacy work, and a great mentor. In Denise's words, Karen "taught me a lot of things but one important skill that she taught me was to be a strong and stubborn advocate. I became a strong advocate not only in my professional life but the advocacy skills were useful during my personal journey with my two wonderful and beautiful children."

About Karen Avery

Karen Avery was an advocate, a mentor, a peer, friend, and leader in the fight for disability rights, dedicated to giving power and independence to people with disabilities. She began her career as an advocate for fair housing, then joined IndependenceFirst in 1998 as Associate Director. A respected leader in the mental health consumer/ survivor movement, she worked to advance the rights of people with mental illness and ensure a strong consumer voice. Karen was a founding board member of the Grassroots Empowerment Project and a leader in the Milwaukee Mental Health Task Force. She spoke about the system and about recovery with such impact, because she lived it. She was generous in sharing the challenges of her experience with mental illness and her recovery journey.



In her work as a leader in the disability movement, as well as to friends and family, Karen set the standard for being "selfless to a fault." She gave everything – her intellect, corny sense of humor, time, attention, empathy, kindness, authenticity, love of family, wonderful laugh, zest for life with a bit of indignation. Karen never wanted to be the center of attention in the public eye, but she was willing to speak truth to power to advance the rights of her peers – and, even more impactful, to mentor and encourage others in finding their voice. She was known for her T-shirts featuring irreverent messages – "Feisty and Non-compliant" was a classic. Karen was also an incredibly loving and caring Mother and Grandmother, and a treasured friend and mentor to so many.

When Karen passed away in 2013, the disability community lost a champion. The Milwaukee Mental Health Task Force established this award to honor Karen's legacy and her deep commitment to advancing the rights of people with disabilities, and to the mental health consumer movement.