

NASDDDS Announces 2022 Award Honorees

Mark A. Thomas: The Ben Censoni Award for Excellence in Public Service

Barbara Brent: The Robert M. Gettings Compass Award

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ALEXANDRIA, VA –The National Association of State Directors of Developmental Disabilities Services (NASDDDS) regularly honors professionals in both the public and private sectors who have left indelible marks on the field of intellectual and developmental disabilities (I/DD) services. These awards are generally bestowed at the NASDDDS annual or mid year meetings. Two awards will be given at the NASDDDS annual conference occurring in Virginia on November 2-4.

The Ben Censoni Award for Excellence in Public Service is the only award that recognizes public officials who strive to improve the lives of people with intellectual and developmental disabilities. The award is named in memoriam of Ben Censoni, former developmental disabilities director for Michigan and chair of the association’s Governmental Affairs Committee.

Ben Censoni was not only successful because of his intelligence and charm, but because of his persistence — his “press on regardless” attitude. He believed this kind of pressing stimulates ingenuity. He was energetic. He was honorable. He had conviction. He was resilient. He was not just an advocate — he was a champion. Given a little time, he always came up with a good tactic to use, even with the most significant problems. But more than anything, he was admired most because he was optimistic.

NASDDDS is pleased this year to award Mark A. Thomas, former NASDDDS Board President and Deputy Secretary of the Louisiana Department of Health, the Ben Censoni Award for Excellence in Public Service. This award recognizes not only Mark’s resilient and optimistic approach to public service, but also the numerous advancements in the field achieved under his watch. Mark was first elected to the NASDDDS board in 2017 and assumed the presidency in January of 2020. Before pursuing a position in the private sector, Mr. Thomas served as Deputy Secretary at the Louisiana Department of Health. Prior to that role, he supported I/DD services in his home state as Assistant Secretary for the Louisiana Office for Citizens with Developmental Disabilities. He has more than 25 years of experience in the field of developmental disabilities. During his tenure at the Department of Health, Mr. Thomas led the State through the public health emergency caused by the COVID-19 pandemic and numerous significant regional emergencies all while maintaining an eye toward constant innovation and improvement of the State’s ability to effectively support people with I/DD and their families. Mr. Thomas’ significant accomplishments also include ending the state waiting list for I/DD services; implementing a tiered waiver; and, rebalancing the service delivery system. Under his leadership, NASDDDS began the association’s investment in a coordinated diversity, equity, and inclusion initiative aimed at advancing the efforts of the association and its member states in this area. His impact on Louisiana and the association



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is long lasting and his efforts will be felt for many generations to come.

"We are forever grateful to Mark Thomas for his leadership of more than two decades in his home state of Louisiana and across the nation," said Mary Sowers, NASDDDS Executive Director. "He truly embodies the spirit of the Censoni Award with his eternal optimism in the face of even the most trying times and his pragmatic approach to solving extremely complex issues while aiming to benefit every single member of the community."

The Robert M. Gettings Compass Award recognizes the achievements of individuals who, while working in the private sector, have made significant contributions to the development of publicly funded state service systems for people with intellectual and developmental disabilities through research, the design of new service models, training, technical assistance, and consultation.

NASDDDS is pleased this year to award Barbara Brent, retired director of state policy for NASDDDS, the Robert M. Gettings Compass Award. Barbara Brent dedicated more than 10 years to the association providing technical assistance to states; advancing the community of practice which promotes supporting families across the lifespan; and, contributing to a variety of HCBS ventures to ensure person centered, culturally appropriate, and innovative services to support people with I/DD and their families.

Before joining NASDDDS in 2012, Barbara spent six years as the state director for the Arizona Division of Developmental Disability Services, supporting more than 30,000 children and adults with developmental disabilities, along with their families. She oversaw the administration of over 500 home and community-based service providers, the fiscal intermediary system, acute care contracts, fiscal operations, rate setting, and community partnership initiatives.

Barbara also served as the deputy director of the Arizona Division of Developmental Disabilities from 2001-2006, overseeing all community operations, support coordination, and provider systems. Barbara also worked in Tennessee, first as the state's education coordinator for the state Division of Developmental Disabilities, moving into the position of assistant deputy commissioner, and then into the state director position as the deputy commissioner. During her tenure in the state of Tennessee, she presided over both community and ICF services across the state and oversaw systems redesign, waiver development, and implementation to come into compliance with DOJ lawsuits.

"Barb Brent is a consummate professional, keeper of knowledge, and a true friend and mentor to many in the field," said Mary Sowers. "Her efforts surrounding cultural and linguistic competency; person centered planning; and, support for individuals with I/DD within the larger framework of their families and communities was not only groundbreaking but created far reaching and long lasting change in our field. We remain always grateful to her dedication to this work."

Please join NASDDDS in honoring these outstanding professionals at our annual meeting in November. You can register at [THIS LINK](#).

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The National Association of State Directors of Developmental Disabilities Services (NASDDDS) represents the nation's I/DD agencies in 50 states, the District of Columbia, and Puerto Rico providing services to children and adults with intellectual and developmental disabilities and their families. NASDDDS promotes visionary leadership, systems innovation, and the development of national policies that support home and community-based services for individuals with disabilities and their families. Find out more at [THIS LINK](#).