

Disability Rights Ohio Executive Director to Retire

After 12 years of dedicated service, Michael Kirkman will leave post in early 2020

Columbus, Ohio – Oct. 30, 2019 – After more than twelve years as Executive Director of [Disability Rights Ohio](#) (DRO), Michael Kirkman is announcing his decision to retire, effective early 2020. Kirkman's roots with the organization run deep, as he was Legal Director for its predecessor, Ohio Legal Rights Service, for 20 years before assuming the leadership position.

"I consider guiding the transition from a state-run organization – OLRs – to a non-profit, private organization – DRO – as one of my greatest accomplishments as Executive Director," Kirkman said. "It took more than five years to move into the private sector, and since then I have watched the organization grow into a vibrant work environment dedicated to establishing and expanding the rights of Ohio residents with disabilities."

Spearheading that transition is only one of Kirkman's impressive successes. During his tenure, Disability Rights Ohio brought and resolved several major court cases, milestones in the fight to ensure that the rights of those with disabilities are recognized and honored. These include:

- A settlement in the class action lawsuit, filed by DRO, the law firm of Steptoe & Johnson, and The Bazelon Center against the State of Ohio, will shortly be submitted to the Court for approval. The comprehensive settlement agreement focuses on improving outcomes for students with disabilities by identifying specific steps school districts must take to maximize student achievement, including integration into the regular classroom, and emphasizing the use of assistive technology to boost learning. The ruling also includes strategies for improving the transition to post-secondary education for students with disabilities.
- Preliminary approval of a comprehensive settlement agreement in the class action *Ball v. DeWine* suit, granted after more than three years of litigation. DRO, the law firm of Sidley Austin LLP, the Center for Public Representation (CPR), and attorney Sam Bagenstos brought the suit on behalf of individuals with developmental disabilities and their families. As part of the settlement, the Department of Developmental Disabilities (DODD) has agreed to continue and expand programs that will allow more people with developmental disabilities the option to live and work in their communities with the supports they need. DODD will expand options counseling and pre-admission counseling programs, maintain peer-to-peer and family-to-family programs, increase access to state-funded Individual Options waivers for people who choose a waiver, support and expand programs for integrated, affordable housing and integrated employment and day services, and continue follow-along visits for people after they have left their care facilities.
- A nationally recognized federal court opinion that led to resolution of a dispute between DRO and The Buckeye Ranch that advances a strong working relationship between the organizations as they seek to ensure the safety and care of children with disabilities. The settlement outlines DRO's access authority and the means by which its advocates will conduct abuse and neglect investigations going forward, minimizing interference into residents' schooling.

“I’ve worked closely with Michael for the past decade and became a member of the DRO Board five years ago, and it has been one of the greatest and most fulfilling experiences of my career,” said Jennilee Mohler, DRO Board of Directors President. “The growth in this organization has been astounding, and Michael’s ability to visualize change – and diligence in making it happen – has been inspiring. He not only has to deal with the day-to-day pressures involved in litigation, but also with external challenges such as keeping funding sustained and obtaining grants. I have watched DRO grow, expanding its staff to include a team of professionals dedicated to empowering people, no matter what their challenges. It has truly been an honor to work alongside Michael.”

The search to find Kirkman’s successor will begin immediately. The Board has established a Search Committee that will identify potential candidates and make recommendations on which should be interviewed by the full Board. Applications from both internal and external applicants are currently being accepted and may be submitted to execsearch@disabilityrightsohio.org. Interested parties can go to www.disabilityrightsohio.org/execsearch/ for more information.

“The most exciting experience has been to watch the way our work at DRO has truly transformed the lives of our clients,” Kirkman noted. “Those who might have been institutionalized 20 years ago because there were no other options now can live, work and worship in their communities. Thanks to the work of a dedicated and motivated team, we have ensured the right of Ohioans with disabilities to make their own decisions. That is perhaps our greatest contribution, and that is why DRO exists. It has been a fight the last 32 years, one that I have relished, and the fight will continue long after I’m gone. Thanks to everyone at DRO for allowing me to be part of the organization, I know you will continue to move forward.”

About DRO

Disability Rights Ohio is designated under federal law as the Protection and Advocacy System and Client Assistance Program for the state of Ohio. The mission of Disability Rights Ohio is to advocate for the human, civil and legal rights of people with disabilities in Ohio. Disability Rights Ohio provides legal advocacy and rights protection to a wide range of people with disabilities. Find more information at disabilityrightsohio.org.