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District amplifies its awareness of disabilities

By Lacey Justinger, Honolulu District Public Affairs

(FORT SHAFTER, HI NR 31-09) *“Each day, Americans with disabilities play a critical role in forging and shaping the identity of our Nation. Their contributions touch us all through personal experience or through that of a family member, neighbor, friend, or colleague. We grow stronger as a Nation when Americans feel the dignity conferred by having the ability to support themselves and their families through productive work. This month, we rededicate ourselves to fostering an inclusive work culture that welcomes the skills and talents of all qualified employees.”*

Reading the proclamation from President Barack Obama; Lt. Col. Jon J. Chytka, the commander and district engineer for the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, Honolulu District, set the tone for the National Disability Employment Awareness Month observance, Expectation + Opportunity = Full Participation, hosted by the Districts’ Special Emphasis Program Committee, Nov. 18.

Megan A. Conway, Ph.D., assistant professor at the Center on Disability Studies, University of Hawaii at Mānoa, spoke to attendees about expanding disability awareness in the workplace and everyday situations, and shared personal challenges and prejudices that she has experienced since birth.

“There is a lack of representation of people with disabilities in employment and education,” said Conway. “Discrimination is the overriding force in lack of representation. The number one barrier is peoples’ attitudes. Often people with disabilities are overlooked in representations in diversity.”

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Disability 2-2-2

In an informal brainstorming and question-and-answer session, District employees called out different types of disabilities which included psychiatric disabilities like depression and post traumatic stress disorder; learning disabilities such as dyslexia; health disabilities such as diabetes and epilepsy; as well as mobility or impairment disabilities, and asked questions about how to improve current situations and scenarios.

“Disability is a reality; find the solution,” Conway said. “The reality is in our day-to-day lives there are struggles and difficulties, no doubt about it, but there are solutions to problems associated with disabilities.”

With 54 million people in America living with disabilities, including 15 percent of college students, Conway explained that it is not preferential treatment to improve the working, living and educational climates for people with disabilities; it is an inadequate attempt to even out the starting point.

She challenged the District to explore new ways of incorporating universal design into buildings, to seek new perspectives and to encourage people with disabilities to share their talents.

“Take a fresh look around you at any barriers we have in our environment that we need to work on, or barriers that we’re not knocking down by our inactions,” said Maj. John Henderson, Honolulu District deputy commander. “I’m proud to be a part of an Army that’s revolutionizing the aid and access to disabled Soldiers and civilians.”

According to Chytka, five percent of the Honolulu District acknowledges a personal disability in their work records.

The Honolulu District Special Emphasis Program Committee hosts various activities, celebrations and events throughout the year to highlight the significant contributions of women, minorities and persons with disabilities.