

Regional Center of Orange County honors 10 champions of disability inclusion at 29th Spotlight Awards

6 May 2026

Updated: 13 hours ago

By [Aliyu Pokima](#)



Sandy Martin, Michele Gile, John Correa, Larry Landauer

✕fin

The Regional Center of Orange County (RCOC) honored 10 individuals and organizations at its 29th annual Spotlight Awards ceremony in Garden Grove. Three of this year's honorees stood out for redefining what inclusion looks like in Orange County, leaning on the arts, the workplace, and the tennis court.

Stay informed on nonprofit news, grants & jobs

Join sector leaders and grantmakers who read Charity Journal.

Subscribe

No spam. Unsubscribe anytime.

Twenty-five years of arts as a pathway

Orange County Children's Therapeutic Arts Center (OCCTAC) [received](#) the Service Provider Spotlight Award after 25 years of delivering therapeutic arts programming to children and adults with developmental disabilities in Santa Ana. Founded by Dr. Ana Jimenez-Hami, OCCTAC integrates visual and performing arts, life skills training, social development, and vocational exploration into a single support model.

Families served by OCCTAC consistently report gains in independence, communication skills, and peer connections. The organization extends its impact beyond direct programming through public performances, art exhibitions, and community events that challenge assumptions about what people with developmental disabilities can achieve.

Despite California adopting an Employment First policy in 2013 to support integrated work for people with intellectual and developmental disabilities, employment for the demographic remains at just 17%. OCCTAC's model addresses that gap not just through skills training but by building the confidence and community connections that make sustained employment possible.

Fire Authority clinches Regional Center of Orange County award

The Orange County Fire Authority (OCFA) received the Employer award for a partnership with RCOG that spans more than four decades. OCFA currently employs five participants from Goodwill of Orange County as full-time direct hires, making them eligible for county benefits and retirement. Two of those participants have worked at OCFA for 36 years.

The distinction between a direct hire and a supported employment placement matters significantly. Direct hires carry the same status and career trajectory as any other county employee. OCFA recently formalized that commitment further by converting a Goodwill paid internship into a direct hire position after the participant completed the program.

Nationally, less than one in five people with intellectual and developmental disabilities hold a paid job, and 41% of those without employment indicate a willingness to work in the community.

OCFA's model, which the Regional Center of Orange County and Goodwill point to when approaching prospective employer partners, demonstrates that the gap between aspiration and employment closes when institutions make [deliberate commitments](#) rather than one-time accommodations.

Teenagers who built something that lasted

Serving Advantage Adaptive Tennis received the Community Partner award for a program that three high school sophomores founded in 2020 when they were fifteen years old. Now operating across Orange, San Diego, and Los Angeles Counties, the organization creates inclusive tennis environments where athletes with intellectual and [developmental disabilities](#) train alongside peer mentors drawn from middle and high school student communities.

Volunteers work one-on-one with athletes of all ages, adapting instruction to individual needs while building the kind of sustained relationships that generate confidence beyond the court. By recruiting peer mentors at a formative age, Serving Advantage builds awareness and advocacy into a generation of young people before assumptions about disability have hardened.

The remaining seven honorees reflect the breadth of people and institutions that sustain Orange County's disability services ecosystem. Evelyn Rodriguez of Hawaiian Gardens received the Parent and Family Member award.

Meanwhile, Jennifer Kennedy, Area Manager at RCOC's Cypress Office, received the Regional Center of Orange County Achievement Award. Martha England, a job coach at Westview Services in Anaheim, received the Direct Support Professional award.

Eric Doran, Research Manager at the UCI Center for Aging Research in Down Syndrome, received the Healthcare Professional award. Furthermore, John Correa of Costa Mesa, recognized for his commitment to speaking up and shaping his own path, received the Self-Advocate award.

Stuart Haskin, founder and Executive Director of Get Safe in Tustin, received the Lifetime Achievement award, and Meena Chockalingam, a board member of Jeena, received the E. Kurt Yeager Award for service leadership.