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By SHAWN PIATEK

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U.S. Rep. John Murtha was honored Thursday for his support of medical rehabilitation, but it was the Johnstown congressman who was handing out most of the kudos.

The Pennsylvania Association of Rehabilitation Facilities, PARF, bestowed upon Murtha its Rehabilitation Leadership Award at the Cambria County Association for the Blind and Handicapped, 211 Central Ave., in Johnstown's 8th Ward neighborhood. Leaders of many PARF member organizations were on hand to thank the congressman personally for his efforts to increase awareness and funding for their respective causes.

"He's been there as a protector," said Gene Bianco, president and CEO of PARF.

"When it comes to programs of public support, the congressman has been there as our protector and supporter."

Murtha addressed the gathering about why he feels it is important to support organizations that aid those suffering from disabilities.

He took time to explain the importance of the work being done to rehabilitate and train disabled people and helping them to become active members of the work force.

Murtha had an emotional moment while talking about soldiers returning from the current military conflicts in the Middle East with disabling injuries.

"To me, one of our most important missions is to make sure that our young soldiers returning from war are being cared for properly," Murtha said. "They're heroes and outstanding citizens, and we need to make sure they're being taken care of when they return.

"We fell behind in that mission. Congressional leadership, myself included, (must ensure) that we do everything possible to catch up and provide these men and women with everything they deserve."

He then toured the Cambria County Association for the Blind and Handicapped facility to see the work being done by the people who have been given a chance to learn and apply new skills.

The organization, which employs about 350, produces a variety of products, most of which are used in the mining industry, while some are manufactured for defense industry clients and others.

“When you think back to how employers used to view the disabled, no one would hire them,” Murtha said.

“The thing that’s great about this facility is that it again proves that these people want to learn these valuable skills, and they’ve proven that they can really work.”