

County DAC seeking support for additional funding

Wabasha's Kohls, others say it is vital that the Legislature act soon to address this critical problem to ensure people with disabilities get quality care

by Michael Smith

According to Wabasha County DAC Administrator Steve Kohls, the State of Minnesota keeps reducing the amount of funding it provides for such facilities as his here in Wabasha to operate.

That makes it difficult for Developmental Achievement Centers and facilities that provide similar services for people with disabilities to operate—and to keep qualified and dedicated staff. And that disturbs him a great deal.

Kohls has advocated for DACs, including Wabasha County's, which he has administered for nearly 40 years, and he has written to and lobbied the Legislature, as well as Congress, several times along the way in an effort to change that direction. He is doing that again now and has reached out to the Herald to get the word out, in hopes that maybe public opinion and accompanying pressure on the state legislators might influence these representatives of the people to better support DACs and the services they provide.

According to Kohls, "Minnesota's providers of training and employment services for people with disabilities are finding great difficulty in attracting and keeping direct support employees, jeopardizing the wellbeing of people served by their organizations."

Why our DACs need additional funds

Kohls summed up his thoughts on all of the system changes as follows:

The last few years I have been sending out letters in regard to my thoughts on all of the system, changes. (See letter to Sen. Klobuchar).

Unfortunately, they are still very relevant today. No positive action on my concerns have made it extremely difficult to administer the quality of DAC services our clients have enjoyed. I have not been able to figure out how to meet the requirements of the new unfunded mandates.

The last two years the DAC has had funding cuts due to the lowering of client per diems by the state Rate Management System (RMS), even though the state has had large financial surpluses. I have already seen more staff turnover in the last three years than I did in the first 30 years here. I pray daily that we can retain our quality staff when we are unable to pay them competitive wages and benefits.

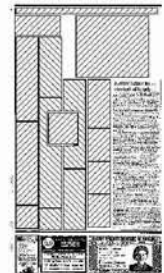
If the state does not change the formulas in the RMS, in the year 2019 many DACs will be receiving a 20% to 30% reduction in funds. If the RMS system is not changed, serious DAC changes are coming. Some DACs may even have to close their doors, putting the

responsibility for day programming for individuals with disabilities back on parents or on stressed group homes.

If you want DAC (Day Training and Habilitation) services, I ask you to contact your legislators and ask them to support funding for them. The last two years 75% of the state legislators said they supported increases for DTHs, yet they followed the leadership of both parties and gave us no increase. Parents and guardians must get them to commit to act.

We are members of the Minnesota Organization for Habilitation and Rehabilitation (MOHR). I encourage you to go online (www.mohrmn.org) to get more and ongoing information. Check out the grassroots movement started - Minnesota Families and Advocates Coalition (MNFAC).

Mike Burke, the president of the Minnesota Organization for Habilitation and Rehabilitation (MOHR), said the legislature must act this year to deal with this pressing problem, which has left many jobs unfilled at member organizations. "It is estimated that there are 8,700 unfilled direct support positions in Minnesota right now, and that number is growing as pay rates continue to lag behind other industries," he said. A wage increase of at least 4 percent is needed this year to help deal with the problem. "It



is hard to lose able, talented and passionate employees because they can earn more flipping burgers at a local fast-food shop," Burke said.

Representing more than 100 providers in the state, **MOHR** members provide skillstraining, employment services, community involvement, behavioral supports and life enrichment activities to more than 26,000 individuals with disabilities in Minnesota.

Kohls' thoughts on all of the system changes

The following words are not all mine. They come from many of my colleagues, who like me are frustrated with many of the system changes that are poorly thought out and poorly administered resulting in a lot of wasted time and expenditures.

People with disabilities are like everyone else; they have unique individual needs, likes, wants, desires and abilities. The Wabasha County DAC has worked to create opportunities and programs that best match the individual needs of the people we serve. We, of course, have numerous limitations and obstacles to accomplish that goal. Funding quickly comes to mind as the primary limitation.

I am concerned that there are many policy makers and advocates that are now pushing an approach that would force all people with disabilities into the same program plan. A program plan that is not desired or real-

istic for many.

Currently, our clients have numerous program choices. Habilitation options including functional skills, exercise therapy, leisure education and social recreation activities. Work options including in-center and community-based employment.

Over the past few years, two sometimes competing concepts have evolved in our business. The first "person-centered planning" involves giving individuals with disabilities more control over the services they receive. I support person-centered planning and strongly believe individuals should be empowered to make informed choices about their services and that they should have access to a broader range of services from which to choose.

The second concept embraces the philosophy that all people with disabilities should work in competitive jobs in the community, alongside workers without disabilities. This approach stems from a U.S. Supreme Court decision that ordered the state of Georgia to provide integrated community employment opportunities for two women who had been institutionalized. The case, known as the Olmstead case, essentially requires states to provide programs and services "in the most integrated setting appropriate to the needs of qualified individuals with disabilities."

Since then, many states, including Minnesota, have been developing "Olmstead plans" to ensure compliance with the Court's directive.

Minnesota and other states should be working to provide more and better competitive, community-based employment opportunities for people with disabilities. However, some people such as a group called Employment First are advocating an approach which presumes every person with a disability "can work, wants to work, and can achieve competitive integrated employment." I have to ask the questions: Does this not eliminate client choice? That is a great dream, but is it not a very naive and unrealistic dream?

The employment first policy could help some people; however, what funding and services would be left for those who cannot be or choose not to be employed in competitive community based jobs.

Some of our clients have profound needs and significant behavioral challenges. Some need assistance with basic daily tasks such as eating and bathroom use. Virtually all are vulnerable. When it comes to work, some cannot do a simple work task without assistance and most of our clients need a job coach to work successfully and maintain employment. Some of our clients do not want to work. Some of our clients have tried and failed working in the community and do not want to work in the community. Some clients due to their needs, care requirements, limited skills and inappropriate behaviors are extremely tough to place in competitive employment. Many of our clients, along with their families, want a safe and controlled environment where needs are met and they are pro-

ductive and happy.

If some of the activists get their way, a center-based DAC program may not exist much longer.

I am not against positive changes; however, speaking with four decades of experience in the education and human service fields, most of what I see is more expectations placed upon service providers with more obstacles put in their way to hinder accomplishment of those expectations. People have heard me say that some new forms or change in require-

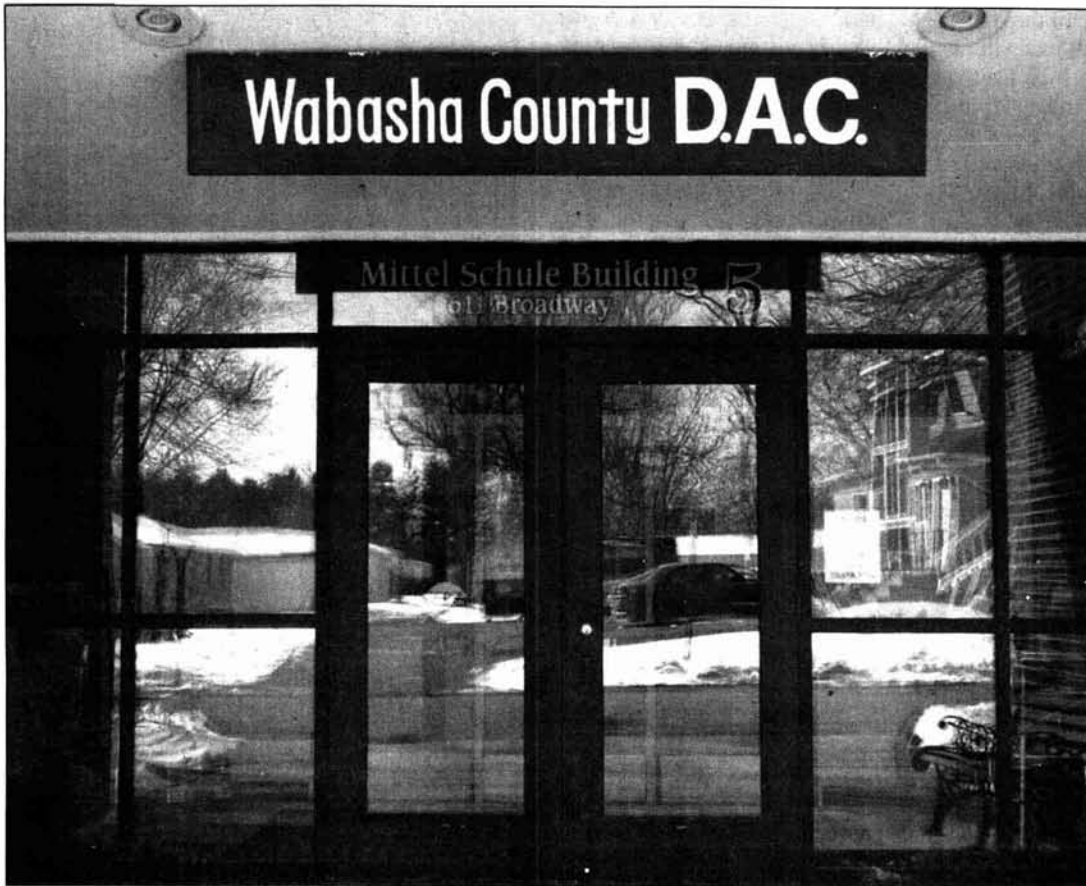
ments or billing procedures are "silly." Some of my colleagues use much stronger and descriptive language. Our jobs have always been challenging, but have also been rewarding. Now some advocates tell us the services we provide are wrong and we are taking advantage of our clients. Policy makers tell us we should do more for less and judge us by the paperwork we are required to do rather than for the quality of the actual service we provide. Both groups say we must improve the quality of our service. Funny, but I

have not seen one of those people here observing and evaluating our services.

Unfortunately for our clientele, a lot of very good experienced people in the human service, health and education fields have decided to opt for early retirement or have decided to switch to a less frustrating and more "rewarding" career.

This further hinders the services we are able to provide and is very unfortunate. The State legislature needs to address this very disturbing trend and do so immediately.

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The Wabasha County DAC