

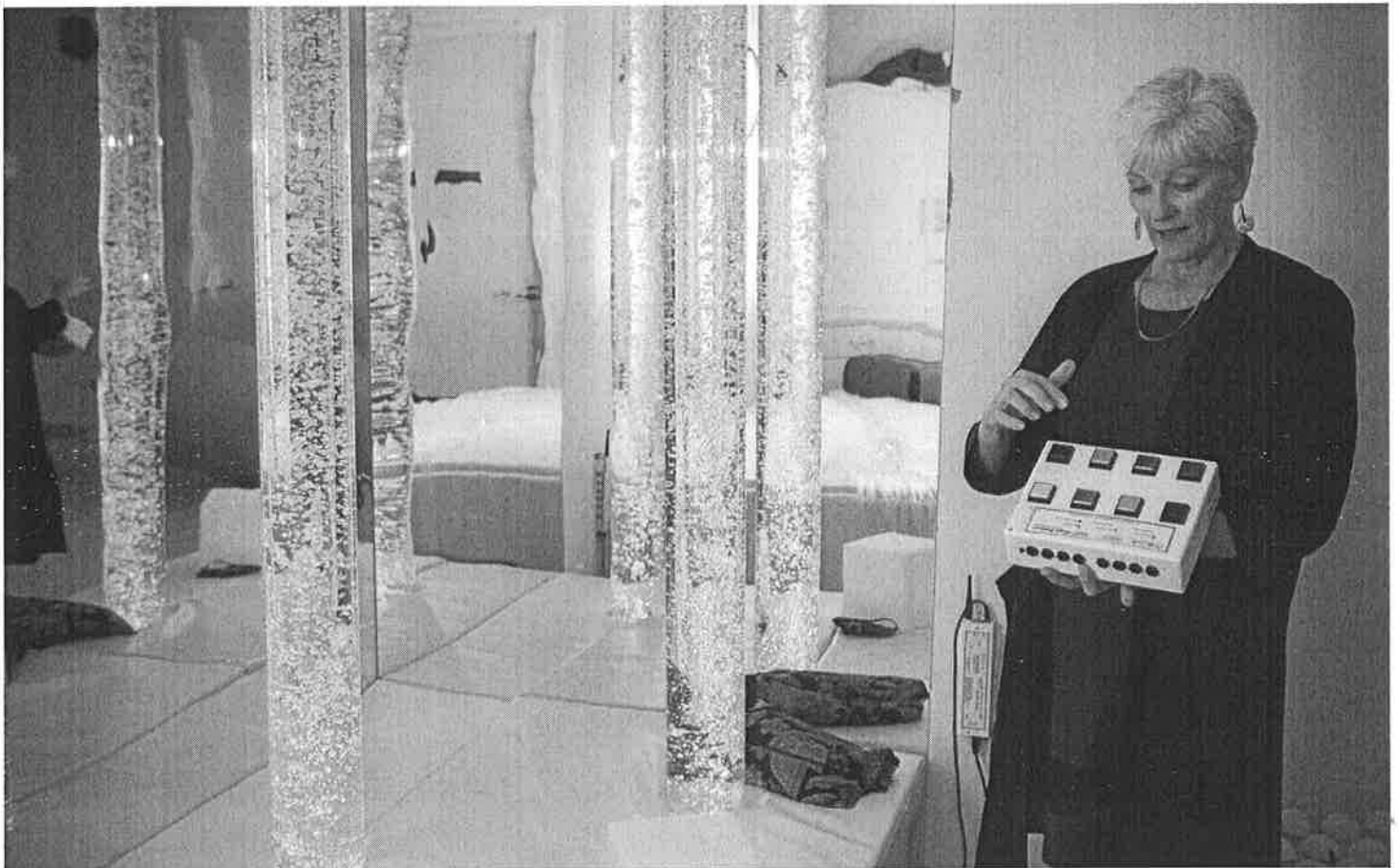
you can see friends and relatives during the pandemic surge — but do it carefully

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BUSINESS

# Minnesota service providers for developmentally disabled brought to the brink over pandemic

Written By: Adam Kurtz | Jul 12th 2020 - 10am.



JoAn Bittner, the executive director of Polk County Developmental Achievement Center, expressed concern that, without assistance from an upcoming special session of the state's Legislature, DAC and other facilities like it, may face permanent closure, which would leave their clients in the lurch. Eric Hylden / Grand Forks Herald

Day centers and facilities for people with developmental and intellectual disabilities in Minnesota, long closed because of the pandemic, are pushing the breaking point to where some may not be able to reopen



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DAC and other facilities like it, may face permanent closure, which would leave their clients in the lurch.

“If this goes on past September, we definitely have to consider closing for good,” said JoAn Bittner, executive director of Polk County DAC, in a July 7 phone call with the Herald.

Unable to earn money through its vocational and day habilitation services, DAC furloughed more than 20 staff members when its Paycheck Protection Program loan ran out on June 10 and is now operating on cash reserves. Two employees work full-time and a few more are working four to eight hours per week. The organization’s board members have extended employee’s benefits through the end of July.

The facility is based in Crookston and has a location in East Grand Forks. It used to serve 80 clients, but now only offers remote services -- services to people who either live independently or with their parents -- to 12% of them. The remainder of those individuals stay in group homes.



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### Taking a toll

In an early June COVID-19 impact statement on the DAC’s website, employee Ruby Zenteno wrote that, in some instances, people have not been able to attend funerals, and staff have limited options to comfort them because of social-distancing requirements. The biggest hardship for clients has been not being able to see friends and family or take part in their usual activities.

“By not being able to do that, (it) takes a lot from them, and they become depressed and tend to shut down to the point where they stay in their bedrooms through long periods of time,” Zenteno wrote.

One problem, according to Bittner, is the Minnesota Department of Human Services has categorized congregate living facilities -- prisons, nursing and group homes and similar facilities -- as one entity. Cases of COVID-19 have risen in nursing homes, she said, because the state sends people not sick enough to be hospitalized there to recover. Group homes have stable numbers of residents and staff and have not seen those increases, she said. MDHS is reluctant to let group homes stand alone and function under a different set of restrictions.

“As long as we’re lumped in with that setting, it could be till October before we come back,” Bittner said.

### State help

Minnesota state lawmakers are scheduled to meet in a special legislative session beginning on Monday, to discuss extending the state’s peacetime emergency. Legislators will have the option to discuss an omnibus Human Services bill to provide relief to facilities such as DAC, that was discussed at the state’s previous special session on June 12. The bill, S.F. No. 9, authored by Republican Sen. Jim Abeler passed the Senate at that time by a vote of 67-0, but was not heard in the House.

“Over 100,000 people with disabilities including autism are about to lose their critical services,” tweeted Abeler on July 4. “This is real and the situation is desperate.”

Bittner, frustration clearly evident in her voice, said she has been sending daily emails to Minnesota Gov. Tim Walz asking for assistance.

“I feel like the Minnesota Legislature could care less,” she said.

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