

Disability Waiver Rate System eyed for reform at capitol in 2019

The new year is almost upon us, and with it, a new state legislature and governor. New legislative landscapes always offer both opportunities and challenges, we will have much work to do to grow alliances, continue to educate lawmakers on the great progress that has been made and also the needs that still exist within the disability services community, and ensure that legislation to maintain and improve services is a high priority. Many individuals with disabilities require some level of individualized, person-centered services to live their best lives, and more than 100 nonprofit Employment and Day Service providers in Minnesota are here to provide that support. The Minnesota Organization for Habilitation and Rehabilitation (MOHR) represents those providers. I want to share MOHR's top priorities for the upcoming legislative session.

Our most urgent task is to advance continued reforms to the Disability Waiver Rate System (DWRS). DWRS is a new statewide system that determines the rate providers are paid for working with each individual. Key components of DWRS need to be improved to ensure funding is sufficient to support the achievement of the goals of the individuals to which we provide services.

In addition, disability services providers in Minnesota began experiencing the implementation of an extremely destabilizing percent cut to our funding in 2018. A bipartisan legislative remedy passed the House and Senate last session but was included in a massive omnibus budget bill which was vetoed by the governor. We need

to identify supporters this session to sign on to a bill that will fix DWRS and remedy the 7 percent cut.

I am sure that many of you are aware of the severe workforce shortage in our field. The above-mentioned needed fixes to DWRS and the related 7 percent cut are directly tied to this workforce shortage. Direct Support Professionals are the lifeblood of disability services, and we need to find ways to pay them wages that are competitive with other job opportunities.

Our staff wages are tied to our rates, which are legislatively determined. We can continue to increase our efforts to recognize and reward our staff members, but only action by legislators and the governor will produce the higher wages that will have the biggest effect on improving our recruitment and retention efforts.

Not having adequate staffing makes it very difficult to meet the requirements of Minnesota's Olmstead Plan and other state and federal initiatives that require more individualized services, increased community engagement, and increased employment supports. Put plainly, the workforce crisis is a huge issue which threatens our ability to support both the health and safety needs and the quality of life of individuals with disabilities.

Another area of focus for MOHR is the redesign of the menu of services we can provide. In 2018, the Minnesota Department of Human Services (DHS) introduced three new employment services that increase the opportunities people have to explore employment options, develop their skills, and be supported once they get

a job. We at MOHR are strong supporters of increasing options for the individuals we support, and we will be continuing our work with DHS around these new services as there is still much work to be done to ensure the funding and scope of these services are designed in a way that makes them effective and sustainable.

In the next two years, DHS intends to propose additional changes to the menu of Employment and Day Services provided. These include redefining and redesigning Day Training and Habilitation (DT&H), Prevocational and Adult Day, and Structured Day Services. Many of these changes would need legislative approval. MOHR will work with DHS and the legislature to ensure that any changes are in the interest of improving services, developing payment rates that reflect the true cost of services, and respecting the choices of each individual. We will also work to make certain the stability of the current system is protected while changes are implemented. We are encouraging the continued development of more effective methods for communication with the individuals served and their families, so they can fully understand the proposed changes to the system and make their opinions known if they choose to do so.

MOHR's support for robust employment support services provided outside of DHS remains steadfast. Minnesota's Department of Employment and Economic Development (DEED) provides critical supports to the people served by MOHR members through Vocational Rehabilitation Services (VRS) and the Extended

Employment Program. We want to support and expand access to this high-quality employment assistance. Current and long-term funding are key to sustaining these services, and policy changes are needed to improve access to them.

Lastly, MOHR will advocate for transportation reforms. Access to all services and work opportunities come back, at one point or another, to transportation. Transportation rates in the current rate setting formula do not match the real cost of purchasing, driving, and maintaining our vehicles – many of which require expensive adaptations such as wheelchair lifts. MOHR is asking for a transportation rate setting tool that produces rates that will make transportation services sustainable and support the choices that individuals make on where and when people want to receive services. We will work closely with DHS to make this a success.

Thank you to all who have joined with us in our important work, and I want to welcome everyone who is new to our cause. This is a time of both great change and great opportunity in the disability field, and I'm hopeful that our efforts to collaborate with the new legislature and governor will help us move forward in our shared goal as a state to support Minnesotans with Disabilities to live their best lives. We at MOHR are privileged to be a part of making a difference in the lives of Minnesotans with disabilities.

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