

RCO joins state lobby efforts for better pay

By Lori Sorenson

The Minnesota Organization for Habilitation and Rehabilitation (MOHR) organized a Virtual Disability Services Day at the Capitol on March 8.

The rally calls attention to a workforce crisis as the primary cause of the extended delays in access to employment and other day supports for people with disabilities.

Adria Benson, co-director of Rock County Opportunities in Luverne, participated online.

"Any help in that area from legislators, whether it be for wage increases or retention bonuses, would be greatly appreciated," Benson said.

"The staff here work very hard to provide good, quality services to the individuals that we support.

According to MOHR, over 3,500 individuals with disabilities are on waiting lists to access needed employment and day enrichment supports, due to unprecedented levels of

staff vacancies.

Benson said the crisis hasn't reached that level in Luverne, but hiring is always a challenge.

"RCO has been very fortunate in this aspect. At the beginning of the pandemic, we did have to shut down and lay off staff," she said.

"It was a very slow reopening process, and we couldn't bring back more clients until we had more staff."

She said there is no longer a local waiting list for services, and RCO is training another Direct Support Professional.

"That will give us the ability to allow any clients waiting for services to be able to attend our program," Benson said.

"We recognize that this is not the case in many areas. It has not always been easy to find the right staff throughout all of this, but we have been lucky to receive good, quality applicants at times we needed to add another staff member."

She said wages are always an issue in attracting qualified staff.

"At this time, we pay pretty competitively for this field, but this field is typically an underpaid one," she said.

MOHR is proposing adjustments to Minnesota's Disability Waiver Rate System to use more current economic data to update the reimbursement rates that service providers use to pay their staff and provide services.

A second proposal is aimed at short-term steps to be taken immediately to stabilize the disability waiver services workforce.

Employee scholarship grants, child care relief and onetime retention payments for staff are part of this proposal.

A third proposal from MOHR asks for increased access to "Employment Exploration" services for people with disabilities who are interested in competitive, community-based work.

Its aim is to align wage data for staff to match similar service types.

More information can be found at mohrmn.org.

