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## MRCI cuts staff amid uncertain return date

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MRCI

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MANKATO — With a return date for MRCI's day programming still unclear, the nonprofit began cutting staff Friday.

CEO Brian Benshoof held off on saying how many would be terminated until the nonprofit could inform everyone who'd be impacted.

About 300 staff have been on furlough since services stopped in March.

MRCI halted day services for people with disabilities in March in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. The nonprofit's revenue has taken a hit as a result, since its main funding source is reimbursement for services.

It is losing \$1.3 million a month.

The nonprofit and similar organizations were hoping the state would OK a limited reopening this week, said Benshoof, but the Department of Human Services informed them they couldn't do so yet.

"Unfortunately we don't have an indication of how long it's going to be," he said. "It has an adverse effect on bringing staff back to MRCI."

DHS Commissioner Jodi Harpstead cited safety concerns in her bulletin explaining the decision Wednesday. With COVID-19 cases identified in group homes and many people who'd use the day services living in group homes, she wrote that bringing clients back now could undermine the state's mitigation strategies.

The potential for "more, closer and longer" exposures in day service settings, where clients and staff could interact for up to six hours per day, was another factor in the state's decision. MRCI's eight locations across the state serve about 1,300 clients, who find work and socialization opportunities through the nonprofit.

While the safety considerations are understandable, Benshoof felt MRCI was ready to safely welcome back clients and staff.

"We're not disputing the need to have safe conditions," he said. "It's just we think we can do some of that and we feel our clients are losing ground."

The nonprofit is also putting its Mankato headquarters on Map Drive up for sale in order to consolidate operations into its East Park building on Energy Drive.

MRCI had a two-year plan to consolidate buildings and move more programming into the community. The tough financial situation made it happen way sooner than expected.

Some staff could be rehired once organizations can start providing day services again. Surviving until whenever that is will be the challenge, Benshoof said.

"We're going to do everything we can to avoid (fully closing)," he said. "We're going to be putting several of our buildings up for sale, probably closing some locations and downsizing."

Harpstead described the decision not to resume day services as “agonizing,” adding she appreciates the stress the organizations are under while they wait. DHS officials will be in contact weekly with the Minnesota Organization for Habilitation and Rehabilitation about next steps.

In the meantime, the state approved remote services for clients, which MRCI is working to launch. DHS is also looking into a request to resume day center services for clients who don’t live in group homes — either having their own home or living with family — Harpstead said.

“We’re looking at that and other options,” she said. “We’re still looking for ways to open some of the services that the day centers have provided.”

MRCI will start providing more virtual services within a week or two. It should bring in some revenue, although nowhere near what regular day programming brings in, Benshoof said.

Despite the Minnesota Organization for Habilitation and Rehabilitation lobbying lawmakers for funding to cover the programming stoppage, the legislative session ended Monday without any relief coming. Add in the cuts that began Friday, and Benshoof said it’s been a rough week for MRCI.

“It’s difficult and disappointing on lots of levels,” he said.

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