

DAC closes Headwaters Adult Day Services

By Robin Fish

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Restrictions related to COVID-19 continue to affect local programs for the disabled, even as state guidelines have gradually loosened.

Laura Johnson, executive director of the Hubbard County Developmental Achievement Center (DAC), announced on June 26 that Headwaters Adult Day Services, the DAC's senior respite care program, has been permanently closed.

Calling it a "difficult decision," Johnson admitted this closure leaves a "hole" in services for senior caregivers.

Johnson said the Minnesota Department of Human Services ordered the DAC to close all their facilities on March 20 — including the Salvage Depot, Bearly Used and Tin Ceiling thrift stores — due to COVID-19.

"Of course, it makes absolute sense because we want to keep people safe, and seniors are going to be at high risk," said Johnson.

This had a chilling effect on the DAC's finances.

"In our line of work, we are only paid when we have people at our facilities," Johnson said. "Once our facilities closed, we had no revenue until we were allowed to open our stores again in mid-May. We opened following the guidelines" — initially, staffed by DAC employees only — "but still did not have any clients attending our facilities."

In mid-June, guidelines relaxed further, allowing certain DAC clients to come back — those who live on

Population struggling

"We're seeing that the people that we serve are struggling because we can't bring them back to

work or bring them back to activities if they live in a group home," said Johnson. "Heartland Homes and the other group homes in our area are wonderful. They're doing the best they can. But we all are getting a little stir crazy as we try and quarantine. People with disabilities are maybe being forced to quarantine a little more strictly than the general public. We're seeing the people that we serve suffer."

Staff members have been furloughed or laid off to help cover costs. In addition, the DAC is receiving support from Hubbard County Social Services and advocacy by the Minnesota Organization for Habilitation and Rehabilitation (MOHR), which is lobbying state legislators to provide retention funds to make up for the center's lost revenue.

"We are not facing closure," said Johnson, "but the future is uncertain based on the length of COVID closures."

Thanks to the summer tourist traffic, she said, "We are going to be OK for the summer, while our stores are open. But once September hits, it's a different story. I can't say at that point that I'm going to be able to keep my stores open and to keep my 34 employees employed full-time."

The difficulty with that, she said, is "that means we may not have a program for people to come back, if this continues till the end of the year."

Johnson's biggest concern is the clients who are isolated in group homes.

"This is such a difficult situation because we want to keep people healthy,

but we have to look at the loss they experience by not seeing family and being able to work," she said. "We fight so hard for independence and now all of that is gone."

Johnson acknowledged that the Hubbard County DAC has been more fortunate than similar organizations in Minnesota, which may not have the same supports.

"It's difficult to watch this," she said, regarding the possibility that some areas' DACs will close.

Soft reopening

According to Hubbard County DAC employee Debbie Luther, the center typically had 20 to 25 clients attending and a staff-to-client ratio of one to four before COVID-19. These days, attendance runs between five and 10 with a one-to-one or one-to-two staffing ratio. DAC clients working at other locations used to number eight to 10; now the maximum is four.

"The clients are getting a little more personal contact with us because there are so few of them," co-worker Linda Hansen said optimistically. "There are more staff here. We're doing things in smaller groups."

Luther said three-hour shifts at the DAC are the maximum the DHS allows. Nevertheless, even a shorter trip to the DAC is better than none.

One DAC client, named Alex, used to attend three days a week. Now, Luther explained, "she is choosing to come four because she got really bored at home."

Tina, another client, said, "I feel better to be back."



DAC clients can work out in an exercise room, learn arts and crafts, and do unskilled work at the DAC or out in the community — jobs like cleaning wheelchairs at the nursing home, washing dishes at the hospital, and vacuuming carpets at an office, store or church — some of which have not yet brought back their DAC workers.

Also, under DHS restrictions, clients who used to split their work day between multiple locations must now stay in one location.

"It's to minimize the exposure," said Luther. "Even though they're back, somewhat, there are still a lot of adjustments being made from their normal routine."

DAC staff and clients have found innovative ways to get back to business and connect with friends. Luther gave such examples as reading dramas on Zoom video meetings, doing Zoom art projects and having group chats online. With the state allowing DAC to bill for remote services, that also brings in a little revenue.

"We're doing a lot of letter writing to representatives, so we can ask for their support and funding," Luther added.

Community's support encouraged

Ann Niedzielski's son Ben, 29, is a DAC client who lives on his own. Ann said Ben likes working at Bearly Used, calling it "a good fit for him."

"We really appreciate the DAC," she said. "We're very happy with the people that he works with, the services that he has at the

DAC."

Noting that it's easy for people in the community to support the DAC, both by donating to its thrift stores and as customers, Niedzielski said, "It's kind of a win-win."

Equally important is the work the DAC and local businesses offered to DAC clients.

"I think that Ben, along with many of the other clients, really missed that," said Niedzielski. "That's part of their routine, and it's a social connection to the staff and to their coworkers and to their community. It's a time and place where they see lots of different people. That's important."

"They give people who are higher functioning someplace to work," agreed Dick Kimball, whose sister Mary has been a DAC client since 1991. "It's very, very important that we do that."

Joshua Curtis with Hubbard County Social Services said the DAC "brings a dignity to our clients' lives that both bolsters self-esteem and provides ... opportunities for socialization" through employment and other activities.

Also, Curtis said, DAC programming "is creating chances for these folks to expand on their vocational skills and independence, leading to scenarios where (they) are able to live their lives in the most self-directed way possible."

"It's very near and dear to our hearts," Kimball said. "It is very, very important that we serve these people."

He noted that there is some "pushback" against the state funding services for the developmentally disabled.

"I really don't like politicians playing with somebody's life like they tend to do, with people with developmental disabilities," he said. "I take great offense to people who are trying to limit the opportunity for people with developmental disabilities to have some semblance of a normal life."

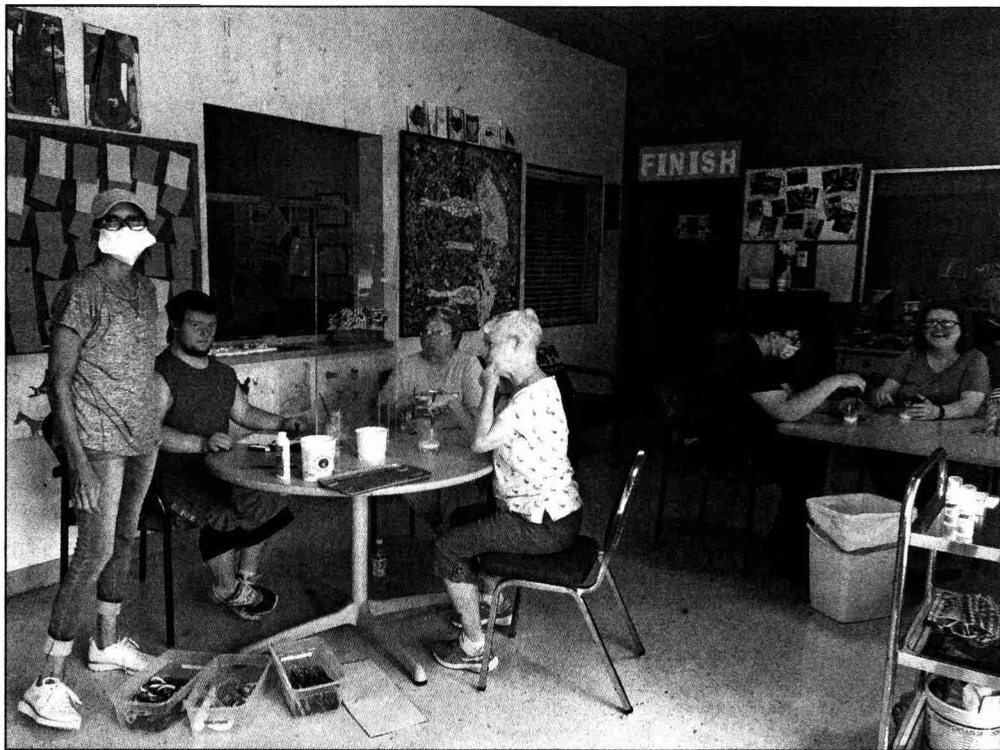
Although Mary is profoundly disabled, Kimball said that thanks to the DAC and Heartland Homes, "she has as close to a normal life as a person with a developmental disability can have. It gives us great comfort that she is cared for and loved."

He also spoke warmly about the expert care provided by both organizations. "These people are dedicated. They love their clients. They don't want to see anything impact their lives adversely."

Curtis called the possibility of losing the DAC "a travesty."

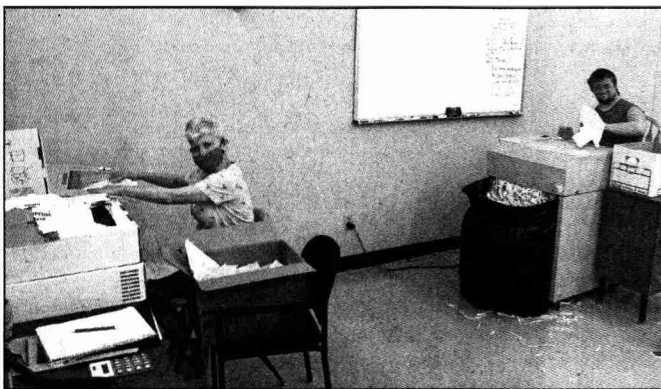
Kimball said, "This community is very, very protective of both Heartland Homes and DAC. I think you'd see a great outcry from the people of this town (if they are threatened)."

His advice: "Talk to your legislator, both federal and state. Talk to your county. Indicate to them that it's very important that we maintain these two entities and improve it."



Submitted photo

Art instructor Erin Nelson, at left, leads some DAC clients through a creative activity on Monday.



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Hubbard County DAC clients Lynn and Austin operate paper shredders Monday in the DAC job center. "I love this job," said Lynn.