

# Enterprise

Park Rapids ▶▶▶

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## Stauber hears local concerns about services for adults

Congressman Pete Stauber visits Park Rapids to talk about how the COVID-19 pandemic has affected programs serving adults with disabilities and the elderly, and what kind of help Congress can provide.

Written By: [Robin D. Fish](#) | Aug 4th 2020 - 1pm.



U.S. Rep. Pete Stauber listens Monday as Hubbard County Commissioner Char Christenson discusses the financial and personal impact of COVID-19 on the Heritage Living Center. (Robin Fish/Enterprise)

U.S. Rep. Pete Stauber (R-8th District) visited with directors of local adult care programs and area state legislators Monday to hear how the programs have been impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic and what Congress can do to help.

Stauber hosted the listening session, titled “Caring for Our Aging Community,” outdoors at the All Veterans Memorial in Park Rapids.

Regarding issues affecting the Developmental Achievement Center (DAC) and senior services,

Stauber said he relates to these concerns because his son, Isaac, has a “severe and profound” disability, and because of the “devastating” effects of COVID-19 restrictions on his parents, who are in their 80s.

## **DAC needs support**

Laura Johnson, executive director of the Hubbard County DAC, told Stauber about the financial toll the COVID-19 pandemic has taken on services for adults – like the permanent closure of Headwaters Adult Day Services, which served 27 people.

“We’re only paid when our clients attend,” said Johnson, “and that’s either through Medicaid waivers or county waivers. Obviously, no clients – no revenue.”

Meanwhile, she said, the DAC has fixed costs – building rent, mortgage, transportation, health insurance. Plus, it self-pays the unemployment benefits of furloughed or laid-off workers.

“We’re not under unemployment insurance,” she said. “We have to pay it all back. Where am I going to come up with that money?”

A \$329,000 award from the Paycheck Protection Program covered about 10 weeks of DAC payroll, she said. But this did not replace lost revenue. Johnson said their June billings were projected to total \$96,000, but they actually billed \$7,000. At the same time, new rules required them to staff clients at a 1:1 or 1:2 ratio.

“I can’t even cover the costs of my payroll for that amount of billing,” she said.

Johnson appealed for funding to help the DAC cover its costs and pay unemployment.

## **‘End-run’ around DHS**

State Sen. Paul Utke (R–Dist. 2) criticized Minnesota Department of Human Services Commissioner Jodi Harpstead for not applying for a waiver to allow organizations like the DAC to receive retainer fees – aid that some 35 other states have received under the federal Coronavirus Aid, Relief and Economic Security (CARES) Act.

“I don’t buy Jodi Harpstead’s (claim) that they couldn’t do it,” said Johnson.

Utke, who serves as vice chair of the Senate Human Services Reform Finance and Policy Committee, claimed Harpstead “dances around” questions about why her department has not applied for the waiver.

Utke also estimated the state has about \$600 million in CARES Act funds “sitting in the checkbook,” which could help struggling DACs, “but for some reason, they just will not do that.”

Johnson noted that the DAC’s three thrift stores were developed to provide employment for DAC clients, and one of them – Bearly Used – is as heavily shopped as any store in downtown Park Rapids.

This “provides good revenue and good employment,” she said. “But do you know what? DHS doesn’t value it as employment, because it’s owned by the DAC.”

Johnson challenged this reasoning. “Right now, in an economy where there aren’t very many jobs, who’s going to hire my clients?” she said. “To say that we don’t continue to provide a value, or to say that we take away people’s rights – they’re not looking at the programs.”

Utke clarified that DHS guidance is toward offering clients “individualized employment” at outside businesses.

Johnson said DAC staff have worked hard to develop programs that offer options for everybody. “That’s expensive,” she said. “But we’re not here to make money.”

Johnson said the state authorized DAC to bill for remote services, but her staff may spend 20 hours preparing for remote services only to bill three hours.

“We’ve been doing remote services, both for senior and disabled clients, this whole time, but we haven’t billed for any of that,” she said. “We’ve done that because we care about the people we serve.”

## **Lawmakers respond**

Stauber said the care of people with developmental disabilities “is about taking care of the most vulnerable, and who we are judged as a society,” and asked, “What would you like to see me do?”

Utke asked if it is possible to “end-run the system” and go around Harpstead.

Stauber said he would work with legislators to encourage the state to spend its CARES Act funds appropriately.

State Rep. Steve Green said bills to disburse CARES Act money would only provide temporary relief. “The fact is, we have to open up the state, and then the money’s got to flow,” he said. “Our deficit continues to grow.”

Green complained that it’s “business as usual as far as politics in Minnesota,” adding, “If there’s ever a time when we should be working together and looking at just the necessities to move forward, it can’t be more than this.”

Stauber talked about “the red line in the sand” of liability protections. He said Republican leaders in Congress are pushing for laws shielding businesses that have followed CDC guidelines from lawsuits for COVID-19 related damages, but Democratic leaders are opposed.

“If your facility has been given guidelines, if you’ve followed them and somebody gets COVID – if there’s not liability (protection), trial lawyers are going to love this,” he said. “We have to protect the small businessmen and -women of this country.”

Utke said a state liability bill didn’t make it through the last Legislative session, partly because of scheduling, but added that the trial lawyers’ lobby “was crazy on it. So, it would be nice if it came from the federal end of it.”

## **Senior living issues**

Stauber also asked Ashley Ylitalo, director of Knute Nelson Crystal Brook, how he feels senior living has been impacted by COVID-19.

“I would say our No. 1 concern, early on, was social isolation for the residents, who were used to seeing their families all the time or going out and about,” said Ylitalo. “That, of course, changed with COVID.”

While good steps have been taken to relieve these issues, he said the senior apartment building’s occupancy has declined from about 90 to 70 percent, with 60 of 88 apartments currently occupied.

Besides deaths, Ylitalo said some people chose to move out, or were moved by their loved ones. He said he expects it to take Crystal Brook 18 months to rebound fully from these setbacks.

Char Christenson, a Hubbard County commissioner who also serves on the Heritage Community board, reported that the 64-bed Heritage Living Center had a recent census of 56 occupants, many of them on short-term hospital rehab.

“We just redid our budget in the middle of the year for 48 beds,” she said. “People are waiting to move in, but they don’t want to move in because of the restrictions.”

Echoing Ylitalo, she said residents have moved out because of the restrictions, and Heritage also anticipates an 18-month recovery period.

County commissioner and Heritage board member David De La Hunt added that Heritage received federal aid for COVID-19 impacts, “but when you couple that with the drop in the census and the extra COVID expenses ... that money from the feds will only cover about half of the cash-flow shortage we’re probably going to be facing. We’re talking about hundreds of thousands of dollars.”

Christenson voiced frustration about Gov. Tim Walz’s lack of guidance for long-term care facilities before mid-May, but she applauded local facilities’ staff for taking the initiative to protect staff and residents.

Regarding the suffering of elderly residents who haven’t been allowed to leave care facilities since mid-March, she said, “People have died alone without their families, and that is not right. I don’t care what is going on; people should not have to die alone.”

Christenson cited increases in rates of suicide, addiction and out-of-home placement. “This is not how they’re meant to live,” she said. “There’s way more things to think about here than just COVID, and no one seems to be talking about them,” she said.

Utke agreed, “I truly believe half of the people dying in long-term care are dying of loneliness. We’re social creatures.”

Calling for a more commonsense approach, he said, “We could do this smartly and safely, but we’ve just gone so far overboard, all the way across. To me, it’s inhumane.”

Taking part in a discussion of "caring for our aging community" Monday at the All Veterans Memorial in Park Rapids were, from left, State Rep. Steve Green (R-Dist. 2B), Christenson, Hubbard County DAC Executive Director Laura Johnson, Crystal Brook Director Ashley Ylitalo, Stauber, State Sen. Paul Utke (R-Dist. 2) and County Commissioner David De La Hunt. (Robin Fish/Enterprise)

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## Hubbard County Social Services releases \$30K to DAC

Written By: [Shannon M. Geisen](#) | Jul 11th 2020 - 6am.

The Hubbard County Board authorized the release of \$30,000 from the county's Adult Mental Health Initiative fund reserves to assist the Hubbard County Developmental Achievement Center (DAC).

Hubbard County Adult Services Supervisor Joshua Curtis said the monies had been previously allocated to the DAC. "They were basically sitting there, waiting to be disbursed," he told county commissioners at their July 7 meeting. "We decided to pull the trigger on it when they got their support employment program going right now and they're going to need assistance with their staffing levels in the coming weeks and months as clients are returning to the workplace there."

Curtis said the DAC is "probably looking at more individualized staffing patterns, as many of the clients may need more redirection, more assistance in basically being safe at work."

In a June 29 letter to the DAC, Curtis explained that the reserves from fiscal year 2019 would "further improve services or clients served through the DAC. The utilization of these funds will be at DAC administration's discretion to disburse in different areas according to that agency's needs. Disbursement of these funds cannot be utilized to pay for services not rendered, but may be utilized for any documented program improvement or bolstering necessary staffing patterns in order to better serve our clients."

DAC Executive Director Laura Johnson said the group served by this program are specifically people with severe mental illness. "We provide employment for them at our program," she said. "COVID and isolation and the fear that comes along with that has made it more difficult for some of these people that we serve."

The storefront supports the program while providing employment opportunities. Shopping is brisker during the summer months, she said, but this year they are only seeing one-third of their normal business.

The board unanimously authorized the release of the money.

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# **UTKE: Ask governor, House speakers to fund Hubbard County DAC**

Written By: Sen. Paul Utke, Minnesota Senate, District 2 | Jul 11th 2020 - 12am.

Funding for the Development Achievement Center (DAC) is past due.

Thank you to the Park Rapids Enterprise for an informative article about challenges that our local DAC is facing.

The Hubbard County DAC is doing a good job, considering the current COVID-19 restrictions. Thank you to our local residents for your support of the DAC operation, but the DAC cannot operate long-term under the current financial limitations.

During the 2020 legislative session, the Senate has passed bills to fund day services providers, like our local DAC. The latest bill that was passed in the Senate was for \$30 million dollars during the first special session in June. Unfortunately, the House did not even hear the bill.

The Senate has another bill to supply funding for our day services providers ready to go for the expected upcoming special session.

Please contact the Governor's office and the House leadership's offices to tell them how important this funding is for our providers across all of Minnesota.

Gov. Tim Walz: 651-201-3400

House Speaker Melissa Hortman: 651-296-4280

House Majority Leader Ryan Winkler: 651-296-7026

We have a great example here in Park Rapids/Hubbard County of what services for our disabled citizens should look like. Our DAC and residential providers do a wonderful job of providing these services. Now we need to get them the funding they need to operate.

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## Program for the disabled needs funding fix fast

The Hubbard County Developmental Achievement Center needs community support as well as retainer funding from the state.

Written By: [Robin D. Fish](#) | Jul 8th 2020 - 7am.



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

According to Executive Director Laura Johnson, Hubbard County Developmental Achievement Center will not be closing – but it needs support from the community and the state to push through financial straits created by the COVID-19 pandemic.

“Basically, we are looking for support,” she said, for members of the community “to contact the governor and the House to support us in pushing through some retainer funding.”

Due to COVID-19, the Minnesota Department of Human Services (DHS) ordered the DAC to close all their facilities on March 20 – including the Salvage Depot, Bearly Used and Tin Ceiling thrift stores.

Even after the stores reopened in mid-May and with summer tourist traffic driving sales of donated items, the DAC lost its primary source of revenue by not being able to serve its developmentally disabled clients.

“Our community is so generous,” said Johnson. “We’re so thankful for the community and all the donations that we get so that we can have these stores.”

Nevertheless, she said, “It is not enough to ensure that our programs continue without the clients returning to our program.”

Since mid-June, she said, clients who live independently or with family – about 20 percent of the people the DAC serves – have been allowed to come back, while those who live in group homes remain under quarantine.

## 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 retainment 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.”



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Client Alex works out in the exercise room Monday morning at the Hubbard County DAC. Alex said she missed a lot of friends when she wasn't able to attend the DAC. (Robin Fish/Enterprise)

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# DAC closes Headwaters Adult Day Services

The senior respite-care program could not recover from the economic impact of COVID-19 related closures.

Written By: [Robin D. Fish](#) | Jul 7th 2020 - 1pm.



A group of clients participate in Headwaters Adult Day Services during October 2019. (Enterprise file photo)

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 their own or with family, “about 20 percent of the people that we serve,” she said. The majority of DAC clients, who live in group homes, remain under quarantine.

## **Tough decision**

Having the stores back in business helped, Johnson said, but not enough to save the adult day program.

“Unfortunately,” she said, “there are fixed costs. We have, basically, run through our reserves.”

The senior respite-care service “hadn't built up quite as quickly as we would like,” she said, “simply because it's a tough decision for families to make, for caregivers to say, ‘I need this respite, and I'm going to have our person go to this program.’”

Dick Kimball, the brother of a DAC client who lives in a group home, voiced regret about the closing of Headwaters Adult Day Services.

“I'm in that age group,” he said. “We're fortunate that we don't need those services yet. But who says, down the road, that one of us doesn't become debilitated to the point where we can't do the things we do now. ... You look at the aging population that we have in this area, and the other areas in outstate Minnesota. We have to have these types of services.”

Johnson called announcing the closure “a tough decision ... because it feels like a failure to close the service. Because we are leaving people without services. And that is really difficult.”

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