

Page one story

NEWS > GOVERNMENT & POLITICS

## Some day centers that help people with disabilities may not survive coronavirus, advocates say



Volunteer Steve Gagner, left, assists Kong Moua at a MSS day center in St. Paul in an undated courtesy photo. MSS is a member of Minnesota Organization for Habilitation and Rehabilitation (MOHR), which is petitioning the legislature Wednesday, April 15, 2020 for funds to keep day centers for people with disabilities open during the coronavirus pandemic. (Courtesy of MOHR)

By [DEANNA WENIGER](#) | [dweniger@pioneerpress.com](mailto:dweniger@pioneerpress.com) | Pioneer Press  
April 14, 2020 at 8:14 a.m.

Several day programs serving people with intellectual or developmental disabilities in Minnesota are in danger of closing indefinitely if state funds aren't reallocated to help them weather COVID-19.

A bipartisan bill sponsored by Sens. John Hoffman, DFL-Champlin, and Jim Abeler, R-Anoka, is a third attempt at helping these services stay afloat. Senate hearings on the bill begin Wednesday.

"I don't want to balance the budget on the backs of these vulnerable people," Sen. Abeler said.

The Minnesota Organization for Habilitation and Rehabilitation, a group that advocates for its 110 providers who serve more than 26,000 Minnesotans, has been pushing for the state to pay up to 50 percent of their members' fixed expenses since March, but with little success.

The services, which help people with disabilities socialize through activities and supported/competitive employment, were suspended with the stay-at-home order. About 80 percent of the services are reimbursed from state and federal coffers.

"Without any funding, we don't get paid when people aren't there," said Julie Johnson, president of MOHR. "This could be devastating for the industry if they (legislators) don't stand up and pay attention to it. If we wait too long, we'll lose providers. People will lose options and opportunities."

## RESERVES ARE NEARLY GONE

Johnson is also the president and CEO of one of these service providers, Midwest Special Services (MSS), in St. Paul.

Hers is a larger, metro-based nonprofit with more resources than most of MOHR's members. But even MSS is struggling.

"It's financially devastating for us," Johnson said. "I've paid \$700,000 out without having any reimbursement. By the end of May we will chew through much of the reserves it's taken us 70 years to grow."

MOHR did a survey of its members in March asking them how long their reserves would hold out.

"Some of them had only 10 to 15 days," she said, estimating that up to 70 percent of the membership is in the same boat. "I'm really afraid we've spent 40-plus years building this infrastructure, and it's going to crumble if we don't get some help."

The Senate bill is asking the state to help those providers pay their fixed costs, such as rent and insurance. Considering the people they serve, many of them with respiratory and other health problems, Johnson believes the providers' economic recovery will be much slower because clients will be more cautious to return to their old routines.

## CLIENTS AND THEIR PARENTS ASK FOR HELP

The stay-at-home order has been difficult for everyone, but those with intellectual delays have had trouble understanding why their routines have been disrupted.

Jim Clapper's son Bob, 33, has Downs Syndrome. He lives in a group home and attends a day program in Vadnais Heights called Merrick Inc.

He has a janitorial job at a Kowalski's grocery store and spends a couple of hours at the Merrick center for other activities.

"Every day he asks us, 'Can I go back to work now?' We have to tell him no," Clapper said. "He just doesn't understand it. This is getting long for him."

Clapper's son has been with Merrick for over 12 years. If it shuts down, it would be a difficult transition for Bob and a lot of work for his parents.

“We’re very nervous about it. Will these programs be able to survive?” Clapper said.

Cecelia Burns-Hansen, 27, a non-verbal woman from Bloomington who has autism has not been able to attend her day program in Apple Valley. Her mother, Elizabeth Burns, worries about what would happen if the program shuts down.

“She has a lot of energy. She needs a lot of space,” Burns said. “She doesn’t have friends, except for the people at MSS. It’s her lifeline. If she didn’t have it, I don’t know what we’d do.”

## TOO LOW A PRIORITY?

Advocates say they feel like Minnesotans with disabilities are often at the bottom of the priorities list at the Capitol.

“It’s been more like an obstacle course,” Abeler said of his efforts to get aid to the day centers. He said the biggest obstacle has been the government’s pre-occupation with COVID-19, comparing the situation to a homeowner whose furnace went out in the summer, but pressing issues delayed getting it fixed until winter.

“The day is going to come when we wish we would have accommodated this,” he said.

## ONE STEP FORWARD, TWO BACK

In 2018, changes were made to a formula known as the Disability Waiver Rate System that cut rates paid to providers by 7 percent, something Johnson and others resisted. They were able to win back 4.7 percent last session after what Abeler described as “a hard-fought battle.”

Pandemic restrictions created a staffing shortage at group homes, such as the ones Bob Clapper and Burns-Hansen live in, because clients were suddenly home all day needing care.

Abeler and Hoffman worked to get site-specific licensure requirements relaxed temporarily so that staff from the centers could help out in the group homes. They also advocated for financial relief for day centers. The governor’s emergency executive order gave group homes more flexibility, but did not help with the centers’ fixed costs.

## THINKING BEYOND THE CRISIS

Minnesota Department of Health Services Assistant Commissioner Gertrude Matemba-Mutasa said the state continues to review ways to support providers.

“We are working together to keep the more than 1 million vulnerable people on our programs safe, including people with disabilities,” she said. “The department is listening to what our partners are telling us they need and considering all options for flexibilities the commissioner can authorize under the governor’s emergency executive order. We will continue to gather new ideas and make modifications to services until the end of the peacetime emergency.”

Burns said compared to other places she’s lived, Minnesota does a lot for people with special needs. She’s asking legislators to think beyond the crisis and help keep day programs from folding.

“I’m begging them to pay attention to my daughter,” she said. “She’s an amazing human being.”

---

Tags: [Coronavirus](#) [Minnesota](#) [St. Paul](#)

---

## Deanna Weniger | Weekend reporter

Deanna Weniger is a weekend reporter, covering breaking news and anything left over from the week day reporters. She has worked the environmental beat in Port Huron, MI, where she also was a columnist. She is a pastor's wife, homeschool mom, owner of 11 chickens and veggie gardener extraordinaire.

dweniger@pioneerpress.com [Follow Deanna Weniger @dlweniger](#)

As you comment, please be respectful of other commenters and other viewpoints. Our goal with article comments is to provide a space for civil, informative and constructive conversations. We reserve the right to remove any comment we deem to be defamatory, rude, insulting to others, hateful, off-topic or reckless to the community. See our full terms of use [here](#).

[VIEW COMMENTS](#)