



Lori Sorenson photos/0309 direct care workers.

Direct care workers Dave Vis and Whitney Oye help Casey Van Engelenhoven with his upright brace Thursday morning, March 2, at Rock County Opportunities in Luverne. Vis and Oye are among a dozen workers at RCO whose wages are suppressed by low Medicare reimbursement rates.

Putting a value on human care

Low wages put pressure on employers of direct care workers

By Lori Sorenson

Direct care personnel play a critical role in the wellbeing of vulnerable adults, but it's hard to hire and retain quality workers when wages are low.

Rock County Opportunities Inc. in Luverne is fortunate to have quality workers, but enticing them to stay has been difficult, according to director Elizabeth Schear.

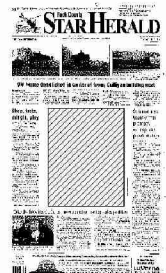
"We have had a lot of turnover in the past few years, and it has a lot to do with low wages, no

benefits and really, really hard work," said Schear (who recently remarried and changed her name from Beth Bartels).

"And with increasing regulations, there's so much pressure to do things absolutely perfectly, and that makes their work stressful."

More paperwork generated by the regulations takes time away from direct care of disabled individuals, and Schear said she and other manage-

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ment find themselves filling in where needed, and that makes their days longer.

She said many direct care workers, who earn roughly \$11 per hour, eventually burn out and go elsewhere.

"And I don't blame them," Schear said. "They can go work somewhere else for \$13 an hour and not have to work as hard or have near the stress."

While the job has its rewards, Schear said direct care workers have difficult responsibilities, such as helping with personal hygiene and certain health care needs.

RCO employs 17 people. Five are in management and 12 are staff, 10 of whom are full-time. They are in charge of 46 people who come into RCO on a regular basis for work and rehabilitation. Another five are supervised for work outside RCO in the community.

Schear said she's pleased with the current RCO staff, but she's always advertising for help wanted because of chronic turnover.

Raising wages for direct care workers would require legislative action, since their salaries are funded through Medicaid reimbursements.

A majority of Minnesota's legislators in both parties co-authored the "Best Life Alliance Bill," which failed in 2016, but is in the 2017 pipeline.

If passed, direct care wages would increase 4 percent this year and 4 percent

next year.

Rep. Joe Schomacker, Luverne, has been advocating in the Minnesota Legislature for higher direct care wages,

"It takes a special type of person to provide care for our most vulnerable adults, and rates the state pays don't reflect that," he said.

"I continue to advocate for rates that reflect the work, and I am working for reforms that provide long-term sustainability in the funding."

Schomacker added the same problems are plaguing hospitals and nursing homes where wages for nurses' aids remain low.

Schear said it all comes down to wages.

"If I could ask for one thing, it would be higher wages and benefits for our staff so the employees we have will stay longer," she said.

"That would be beneficial for the clients because they get to know their direct care staff and learn to trust them."

She added that time spent hiring and training new workers also cuts into the time management could be spending on direct care for clients.

Schear pointed out that clients in rural Luverne and Rock County are fortunate to have the luxury of nearby family and other support networks.

Many of the industry's saddest stories are coming from metro areas where vulnerable adults simply aren't

receiving care due to worker shortages.

"If they don't receive care, they might not get out of bed and serious health conditions can occur as a result of this lack of care," Schear said.

These dire circumstances haven't yet reached Rock County, but Schear said she hopes it doesn't reach that point.

According to the [Minnesota Organization for Habilitation and Rehabilitation](#), there are 8,700 unfilled direct support positions in Minnesota and that number is growing as pay rates continue to lag behind other industries.

"This is a crisis," said MOHR spokesperson Sherie Wallace. "There is no one with the qualifications of caring people want to work for that level of pay."

She said low wages affect services across the spectrum of caring for vulnerable adults.

"It's very difficult to attract folks with these wages, especially in residential programs," Wallace said.

"And if these houses close, that affects the day programs. People who live in the homes spend their days at RCO, so one affects the other."

That's why MOHR is lobbying the legislature for wage hikes, said Mike Burke, organization president.

"It is hard to lose able, talented and passionate employees because they can earn more flipping burgers at a local fast food shop," Burke said.