

# CUTS FOR DISABILITY SERVICES HIT JULY 1 7%

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- Julie Johnson  
Incoming MOHR  
president

## Eden Prairie organizations parties in lawsuit seeking injunction to head off cuts

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Seven percent, in some contexts, isn't much. Dish up 7 percent less dinner, and you might not notice.

The budgets of the dozens of disability service organizations throughout the state, however, are not so resilient to a 7-percent change.

Their revenue streams are complicated, but due to a series of adjustments to rate setting for the services they provide, those organizations are facing roughly a 7-percent budget cut July 1.

The cut was not intentional. When advocacy organizations, among them the Minnesota Organization for Habilitation and Rehabilitation and the Association of Residential Resources in Minnesota, approached state legislators, a fix was inserted into the omnibus supplemental spending bill.

Post-session, however, that bill was vetoed. In response, those organizations – abbreviated MOHR and ARRM – and a number of individuals filed a class-action lawsuit in federal court against Commissioner of Human Services Emily Johnson Piper, seeking an emergency injunction against the implementation of the cuts.

“It’s fair to say it was our last resort,” said Julie Johnson, incoming president of MOHR. “Those cuts affect nearly one-third of all funding for people with disabilities in the programs that we support.”

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MOHR is composed of more than 100 service organizations that provide vocational and day training and general habilitation services to individuals with disabilities throughout the state. ARRM, similarly composed, works with a similar population, providing housing services.

Those organizations vary in size, from serving only a handful of people to hundreds of individuals a year, but the cuts will affect all of the organizations — and each of the people they serve.

"The cuts will affect approximately 32,000 individuals across the state," said Johnson. "The gist of the suit, for us, is that this will directly impact the services we can provide. All of the providers are struggling with staffing shortages and a lot of things changing. Any more cuts, on top of what we're already dealing with, is really devastating."

**CHOICE, Inc.**

Two members of MOHR scrambling to adjust to the coming cuts, should the injunction not succeed, operate in the city of Eden Prairie.

CHOICE, Inc., makes its headquarters in Eden Prairie and serves people at facilities in Minnetonka and Maple Grove as well. Michael Kraines is its executive director.

"We provide employment support, education, community education — it's about getting people with intellectual disabilities involved, just in life in general," Kraines said of the organization. "We're going all over the board, so people can get involved and figure out what they like to do in life."

CHOICE operates Monday through Friday and serves approximately 200 people, having operated in some capacity for the past 49 years. It does so with a staff of 58 people — and, according to Kraines, paying staff accounts for the largest share of the organization's budget.

"A good 65 percent of our budget, sometimes pushing 70, is staff wages and benefits," said Kraines. "We're already stressed in our ability to pay a competitive wage — and when I say competitive, I mean



CHOICE, Inc. participants Millie, Mallory and Alex and staff member Joelle Paschke meet with House District 46B Rep. Cheryl Youaki (DFL-Hopkins) (far left) as part of a self-advocacy group. (PHOTO COURTESY OF CHOICE, INC.)

compared to the industry." Kraines noted that the needs of those with disabilities don't fluctuate with supply and demand. The hardest impact of the cuts, he said, will be on staffing — where CHOICE and other organizations are already struggling.

"We have not been fully staffed as an organization in over two years," said Kraines. "If you're running critically short-staffed and you have to cut wages, the people you're serving ultimately get hurt — in a vague sense, but also in a real sense, too."

"When somebody needs self-needs care, it's not something you can put on the shelf," continued Kraines. "You can't automate this, and you can't say, 'We're really busy — we can't deal with the fact that you've soiled your clothes right now. Why don't you just sit in it for half an hour?' That's not how it works."

**Crestomathy, Inc.**

Crestomathy, Inc., provides similar services as CHOICE, operating in Eden Prairie, Minneapolis and Burnsville. Its executive director is Linda Moore, who said that Crestomathy specializes in working with clients who require extra care.

"We specialize in working with more-difficult-than-average people with intellectual disabilities," explained Moore. "We utilize specialized therapeutic techniques like dialectical behavioral therapy. The

purpose of that is to teach people to de-escalate when they become agitated or anxious."

Moore recalled her reaction to learning of the impending cuts.

"Initially, it was shocking," said Moore. "Normally, we know when something is coming and we can prepare for it. But to have it thrown out there at the end of February was just shocking."

Moore said it was heartening to have legislators respond quickly to the issue, and given Gov. Mark Dayton's veto, she expressed hope that the matter could be resolved quickly in court. Like Kraines, she said that the cuts would result in significant changes for her organization, should they go into effect.

"It would be an overwhelming change for us," said Moore. "Our largest line item is our direct care staff, so we would have to cut staffing. Then, we would have to look at our clients. There are some people we would not be able to serve."

It isn't just that Crestomathy couldn't provide service to some clients, said Moore. Service to all clients would be affected, she said.

"You just don't feel comfortable taking a group of maybe six people out as one staff member," said Moore. "And, we may not be able to spare enough people to help clients with their community jobs. That work is therapeutic

— it helps their self-esteem. They feel valued."

**Time is running out**

The first hearing for the lawsuit was scheduled for June 27 as of press time, leaving only days to process an injunction before the cuts would take effect. Johnson expressed hopes that the suit would resolve quickly and worries about what might happen if it doesn't.

"Some of the things we have to provide for people — they're very basic needs," said Johnson. "To have even more of a staff shortage to help people get up and get dressed or bathe — just regular, everyday personal care needs that we all take for granted — it's just not doable. Any more strain on that is going

to create some real-life issues for those individuals."

Johnson stressed that the programs joining the suit support individuals with essential services rather than more dispensable forms of enrichment.

"These are crucial services that support individuals with disabilities," said Johnson. "It's not about program expansion or enhancement. This is crucial funding to keep life-altering services available for the individuals we support."

**Continuing advocacy**

Johnson pointed out that, even if the injunction is filed and the cuts averted, those who serve individuals with disabilities are still seeking help from commu-

nity members in advocating for the disabled.

"I would urge people to get involved in this," said Johnson. "People with disabilities are members of everybody's family. It's not just an issue for us, or the people receiving the services — it's an issue for everybody in the state."

Moore pointed to a new advocacy group forming in the state — the Minnesota Families and Advocates Coalition — as a great place to start for those looking to help.

"It's a grassroots effort from members of this group — the parents who gave permission to have their sons and daughters be represented by the lawsuit," said Moore. "When a provider tries to do that, it looks like we're protecting our turf — it's much more powerful to have a family say, 'This is what I want.'"

"And, for individuals who use the services, it's even more powerful to have them say, 'This is important to me,'" added Moore.

Otherwise, Johnson urged community members to get involved and contact legislators on this issue.

"Tell them how important and crucial these services are in your community," said Johnson. "These aren't issues about a provider. They're issues about people and their quality of life."

For more info on the organizations mentioned in this article, visit:

- [arrm.org](http://arrm.org)
- [mohrmn.org](http://mohrmn.org)
- [choicejobs.org](http://choicejobs.org)
- [crestomathyinc.org](http://crestomathyinc.org)
- [mfnacgroup.org](http://mfnacgroup.org)