

Cuts threaten local centers for disabled workers

Federal move peels back state-approved funding

DEBBIE GRIFFIN

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What probably sounds like a flurry of acronyms and abbreviations spells out cuts of about 7 percent that will affect the staff and working clients of the Developmental Achievement Centers in Princeton and Milaca.

Director Rod Peltoma explained how the centers have been reeling since late February, when they heard from federal sources that funding would be cut effective in July, despite the Minnesota Legislature having already approved the funding last year.

"It was a shock to everybody that this is happening," Peltoma said.

The Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services (CMS) passed the news on to the Minnesota Department of Human Services, which notified legislators, and then the DACs got the news. Peltoma said they've run an efficient service in the community for years, and the 7 percent will hurt.

Nobody is sure what it means yet, but everyone fears it means less services

for the developmentally challenged clients who work through the center daily. Peltoma said any less money will make it even more difficult to find and keep qualified, dependable people on the staff. He comments that the lack of workforce is already critical.

Peltoma worries not only for the Milaca and Princeton DACs but also all the state programs serving the disabled, as well as group homes. He said investments were made in the previous legislative session, and the local centers were counting on that going into effect in July.

He said the dollars through CMS come through Minnesota applying for waivers to the federal government in order to access the Medicare and Medicaid funds. He said that's why the federal agency is in charge of administration and distribution of the funds.

The Minnesota Office of Habilitation and Rehabilitation (MOHR) is a trade-association advocate on the part of those affected by the cuts and has been spreading the word. Within that word is a call for people to support two bills proposed in the Minnesota Legislature this session to help replace the federal funding: SF 2089 and HF 3191.

Peltoma said the news is a real stinger because the cuts represent money the advocates of the disabled fought to get in 2014-2015. He said it seems to be a move to take the dollars away from disability programs and put them straight to the state's bottom line.

"The cut proves to be really

devastating obviously to the individuals with disabilities but also the staff that serves those individuals," he said.

The two DACs collectively serve 130 disabled people in the area, and Peltoma said the cut comes straight off the rate paid per individual. He thinks it is a shame because one of the services the DACs provide in the community is to help people learn skills for work and independent living. The centers provide a place to have vocational, as well as social opportunities.

"If our services were not available, there would be a lot of people who would just stay home," said Peltoma.

He said he's cautiously optimistic that the state lawmakers will address the shortfall, and there is potential to do so through an angle of competitive workforce. He said he knew that local lawmakers Sen. Andrew Mathews and Rep. Sondra Erickson had been notified of the situation. Peltoma said people everywhere could urge their lawmakers to support the bills that would make up the difference the cuts will make.

Peltoma said people could also contact him to get involved through Best Life Alliance and other advocates: rodpm@mlcdac.org. They're encouraging people to get in touch with their representatives and let their voice be heard.

The MOHR president, Mike Burke, said: "All we are looking for is for some sense of long-term stability. Stability in a system that will allow us to pay our staff competitive wages, which ultimately helps thousands of people with disabilities across the state who rely on our services for their quality of life."

A direct threat to service



providers, the cuts involve complex formulas that determine rates paid to disability service providers which are tied to an inflationary factor and funding agreements with the federal government, Burke said.

MOHR is a member of Best Life Alliance, which is a state-wide coalition serving people with disabilities, their families and providers of home and community-based services. A MOHR group of more than 1,000 rallied at the Capitol in March to draw attention to this situation.