

WACOSA, Rise seek help as COVID-19 shuts down adult day centers

[Nora G. Hertel](#), **St. Cloud Times** Published 3:35 p.m. CT April 15, 2020 | Updated 4:06 p.m. CT April 15, 2020

WAITE PARK — WACOSA clients have called every day because they want to get back to it. "They miss their friends. They miss their work," said Nancy Betts, vice president of quality assurance and programs for WACOSA.

The nonprofit provides work and personal enrichment for adults with disabilities in Waite Park, St. Cloud and Sauk Rapids. WACOSA served 685 people last year, and it employs 165 full-, part-time and on-call staff, Betts said.

But adult day centers closed when the [state determined them non-critical](#) during the coronavirus pandemic and Minnesota's stay-at-home order.

The closures have caused a financial blow to WACOSA and other day programs for adults with disabilities, and those organizations are asking the Legislature for support this week.



In this file photo Executive Director Steve Howard talks about the work of the agency at WACOSA in Waite Park. (Photo: Dave Schwarz, dschwarz@stcloudtimes.com)

"We are only paid when folks attend," said WACOSA Executive Director Steven Howard. He and others who provide day programs for adults with disabilities worry some programs, which took decades to develop, could fold during the pandemic.

"The lack of our services would really hinder folks," Howard said. "Our society is becoming more and more accepting of people with special needs and challenges, but there's still work to do there."

St. Cloud Republican Sen. Jerry Relph signed on Tuesday as [co-author of a bill](#) that would provide payments equal to 50% of past revenue for some day programs and employment services, according to an [April 9 memo about the bill](#).

"We're trying to make sure that there's something to come back to after this whole thing is over," Relph said Tuesday. "It's (for) the vulnerable population that we, as a society, have an obligation to try and help."

With the closure of adult day centers, another [Minnesota nonprofit Rise](#) will lose \$800,000 each month, and that's after expenses have been cut and employees furloughed, said Rise President and CEO Lynn Noren. Rise has 30 locations in the state, including a St. Cloud office that provides employment support for people with mental health issues and those who are deaf or hard of hearing.

Organizations that provide employment and day services for disabled adults want funding help on their fixed costs and guidance from the Department of Human Services on providing remote services during the COVID-19 outbreak, Noren said.

"It's hard," she said. "It's heartbreaking not to be able to provide some support at this time."



In this February 2019 file photo, Sara Deppa cuts tubes of insulation to length at WACOSA in Waite Park. (Photo: Dave Schwarz, dschwarz@stcloudtimes.com)

WACOSA just set up a private Facebook group to connect with clients and sends out memos and makes phone calls to maintain contact.

Clients depend on WACOSA's services, Howard said. And they provide high-quality and timely work for community businesses.

"They're excited to come back and see their friends and take part in the employment that they can take part in," he said.



In this April 2016 file photo WACOSA workers Cody Keenan, left, and Deb Loecken test completed lighting assemblies in Waite Park. (Photo: Kimm Anderson, kanderson@stcloudtimes.com)

Rather than lay off employees, WACOSA continues to provide benefits and a percent of their pay through furloughs. Many staff are filling in at residential facilities that need help now that clients are home all day, sheltering in place.

A bill that could provide financial aid to organizations like WACOSA and Rise will have a hearing Wednesday afternoon with the Senate Human Services Reform Finance and Policy Committee, which is chaired by another author of the bill, Sen. Jim Abeler, R-Anoka. Relph expects many amendments to the bill.

The challenge lawmakers face is similar to the challenge facing those who serve adults with disabilities.

"Our biggest problem is money," Relph said. "The budget is hemorrhaging."

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