



Photo by Mark Wilmes

**Rep. Joe Schomacker (left) talked with Hope DAC Director Cathy Nelson and Jim Nichols on a visit to Tyler last week.**

# State representative visits Tyler

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State Representative Joe Schomacker paid a visit to Hope DAC in Tyler last week. The DAC provides community-based day services for people with developmental disabilities, providing day training and habilitation services to individuals.

Schomacker toured the facility to see some of the work that is done by the clients.

Executive Director Cathy Nelson told the representative that the DAC provides crucial individualized care for their clients.

"We're able to do alot of jobs because we know we are able to set up the adaptations to help

them perform the work and get paid for it," Nelson said. "It is pretty important for people to take pride in their work and to understand that they are needed to produce a good product."

Nelson stated that Hope DAC serves 18 clients through the work of six direct service professionals.

"We're concerned about the future of not only our services, but all the services these people receive," Nelson revealed. "I don't know what would happen to them if we can't get adequate staff. We're in a better situation than they are at the homes. We have the good hours and the good schedules—we don't work weekends and holidays. It is so

hard to try to hire people for \$10-\$12 an hour when they can get the same thing at McDonald's or just about any place else without nearly the responsibility."

Nelson went on to say that it takes a person with a certain set of skills, and it takes more than an offer of wages close to minimum to attract them.

"We have alot of [clients] who have medical needs and there is the vulnerability of the clients that the staff is responsible for," Nelson said. "If they mess something up they can be held accountable. This is really an in-

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tense position. It's not just anybody off the street who can do this. I'm really concerned that if we are not able to raise wages there won't be enough people to help our clients. Where will these people go?"

If the DAC would end up having to close, Nelson said it would create issues for the local REM home also.

"If we have to shut down, that need for services is going to have to be shifted someplace else," she stated. "REM has a hard time getting people recruited and getting them to stay."

Much of the employee retention that has happened in Tyler, Nelson said, is due to extraordinary efforts locally.

"Our board has been very supportive of our staff and they've made sure that our staff has received increases even though they can't always afford it," she told Schomacker. "Our staff has been together for a long time. I think our baby on the staff has been here 15 years."

Jim Nichols of Lake Benton was also on hand to meet with Schomacker. Nichols has a family member served by the DAC. He voiced his concerns that if services provided by REM and the DAC are scaled back, area nursing homes could be overburdened.

"[Our nursing homes] are well-staffed," Nichols said. "They get great care, but there's a limit to how much they can handle too. If we start overloading the nursing homes, what are they going to do?"

Nelson added that in addition, nursing homes would not be an age-appropriate answer.

"Most of these peoples are young," Nelson said. "They shouldn't be in a nursing home. They belong here and they belong in a home with their friends and roommates."

Schomacker said that the process will play out in the coming weeks.

"We just passed our omnibus bill off the floor on Friday," he revealed. "There has been this back and forth between us and the governor's office about the definition of some of the rate increases from before. About seven or eight years ago there was a provision put in when they put in the new rate system that says that every five years there would be an inflationary rate increase. We're on that fifth year this July. Because in the last five years there has been about a seven percent increase, the department said that seven percent is actually an advance on the inflationary increase. We're saying that no, that was actually supposed to be an increase overall and not just on the inflationary portion. We kind of lucked out a little bit because that money is already appropriated and set aside for these services."

Nelson said that from the information she has received, rates would be rolled back.

"From what I've seen from the RMS (Rate Management System) it is cutting our rates. We were starting out at about a \$72 per diem and by the time the RMS is done it's at least \$10 lower," Nelson said.

Minnesota implemented the RMS in 2013. It is a web-based application

for the Disability Waiver Rate System (DWRS). Nelson told Schomacker that most of the changes over the past few years were intended to make things better, but it hasn't worked out that way.

"They just didn't know enough about the implications for us down here and for a lot of the people here who are going to fall in that gray area," she stated. "We've all been together so long that they are our friends. We are Minnesotans and we can do better than this."

Schomacker felt that would work to the DAC's advantage as the process plays out.

"That's one thing you really have going for you," he admitted. "The people who are here really want to be here."

Schomacker said he would continue to work with Minnesota Organization for Habilitation and Rehabilitation (MOHR) to come up with pathway through the upcoming legislative sessions which will be starting soon. MOHR has been advocating for the legislature to address workforce shortages, support extended employment services, ensure employment and day services sustainability and many other issues impacting individuals with disabilities.

"We go back in next week," he said. "I think I'll be able to get on the Health and Human Services conference committee this time. Then we'll get in with the senate and we'll have to send the governor a couple of versions of it before we can get something to agree on."



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