

The Staffing Disaster that is Unfolding in Disability Services

Disability services in Minnesota are on the verge of collapse

The system of group homes that support people with disabilities in Minnesota is on the verge of collapse. Though other factors contribute to this impending catastrophe, the main issue is staffing. The industry is simply unable to recruit and retain qualified workers in today's labor market. Funding for people with disabilities does not allow group home providers to effectively compete with other employers that can offer significantly more pay for less-challenging, less-demanding jobs. Unless this problem is addressed immediately and aggressively, the system that supports some of the most vulnerable people in Minnesota will fail.

The Situation at ACR Homes

ACR Homes was established in 1981 and currently provides residential services for over 200 people with disabilities who need 24/7 care in residential homes around the 5-county metro area. ACR homes are licensed as Community Residential Services (CRS) and Intermediate Care Facilities for Individuals with Intellectual Disabilities (ICF-IID), with typically four individuals with disabilities living in each residential home.

We Provide 24/7 care for complex needs

- A typical client of ACR has 7 diagnoses, needs 30+ medications and treatments each day, has 40+ doctor's appointments per year, and is non-ambulatory and requires an accessible home. More complex clients may have as many as 15+ diagnoses, over 80+ medications and treatments each day, and over 80+ doctor's appointments per year. ACR serves 70+ different diagnoses across clients.
- Staff are trained to pass medications and to handle 25 different types of specialized equipment and procedures including hydraulic patient lifts, vagal nerve stimulators, feeding tubes, ostomy care, supplemental oxygen, diabetes care, advanced airway suctioning and catheterization. This is in addition to helping with activities of daily living and community inclusion.
- Most of our clients' families are not able to take them home due to their high medical, physical, and behavioral needs.
- DT&H service closures or reduced hours increased the number of staffing hours needed at ACR.
- **Our current DWRS Framework rate to provide this kind of complex care is \$16.33 per hour. This is not enough to compete with other employers that can offer significantly more pay for less demanding work.**
- **A family shared with us a DHS hiring flyer offering \$19.91-\$26.23 per hour for direct care work. We agree that higher wages are necessary to attract direct care staff.**

We have a disastrous staffing shortage

- ACR needs 1,150 DSPs to be fully staffed. As of 2/2/22, we had 878 staff—we are 272 staff short.
 - Hiring has been increasingly difficult in recent years
 - Beginning in September 2021, we have been chronically short by about 300 staff, or about 90 shifts per day, or about 5,000 hours per week
- In 2021, ACR hired 519 employees (down from previous years), but 703 employees left ACR (an all-time high). A recent survey by ARRM indicates that, across the state, two out of three DSPs leave the job in less than a year. This is disastrous for people with disabilities who need consistent care! Our staff retention used to hover around 75% through the 2010s. In 2021, that number dropped to 51.6% of our new hires being retained.
- As a result of the staffing shortage, we have been forced to stop operating at 12 locations thus far in 2021-2022) out of 55 locations.

ACR's efforts to combat the staffing shortage

- We are now operating at large and unsustainable monthly losses. We have been forced to offer incentives as high as \$75/hour to fill critical health and safety shifts which has increased our payroll expenses to unsustainable levels.
- To attract staff, ACR offers an internship program, a transportation program, referral bonuses, and as of July 2021, hiring bonuses for direct care staff
- ACR has 3 full-time recruiters, 2 part-time recruiters including a high school recruiter, and 200+ on-campus and in-community recruiters
- We advertise on 9 websites, 3 radio stations, in newspapers and school publications, on bus and light rail lines, on billboards, on 21 colleges and universities, at 12 high schools, at 22 different job fairs

The current situation is unsustainable

- Other providers are in the same predicament as ACR. With no staff to work, more group homes will close.
- The group home system is already at capacity, and nursing homes are in about the same shape. ACR has 302 people with disabilities on our waiting list. Where will people go to receive appropriate care?

Funding for disability services must be a priority in the Governor's budget and the legislative agenda

- We need an increase in permanent funding to boost direct-care compensation to at least \$20 per hour.
 - ACR began offering \$20/hour for float staff in July 2021 and it resulted in a large increase in interest in the position and 36 float staff have been hired and retained to date. We made this change out of desperation, but it is not realistic given our current funding.
- We also need immediate emergency funding of large grants to individual group home companies so they can pay recruiting bonuses to immediately attract new workers and pay retention bonuses to stop good employees from leaving for better pay. Such grant money would also be used to jump wage rates immediately, considering that newly established funding formula rate increases wouldn't actually reach payrolls until 2023. Emergency grants could possibly come from American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) funds, Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security Act (CARES) funds, Minnesota DHS-administered emergency Medicaid funds, Minnesota's \$7.7 billion budget surplus, and other pools of money that could be diverted to help reduce the impact of this very real crisis.

Timeline of the Growing Staffing Crisis at ACR Homes Resulting in Consolidations and Closures

October 2018:	Closed Perrot (4 bed CRS) due to inability to retain staff
February 2019:	Closed 14 th Ave. (4 bed CRS) due to inability to retain staff
April 2020:	COVID-19 pandemic causes a short-lived increase in our staffing resources
June 2021:	Stopped filling openings in ACR homes; there are 302 people on our waiting list
June 2021:	First time in 40 years that summer months not fully staffed
June 2021:	Began asking family members/guardians to take their loved ones home on pre-scheduled visits and on activities and appointments
July 2021:	Began offering hiring bonuses for direct care staff
August 2021:	Reached out to former employees urging them to return and help fill shifts
September 2021:	Averaging 5,000 hours open per week of direct care, roughly 90 shifts per day
September 2021:	Changed ratios from 2:4 to 1:4 where safe to do so; teams notified
September 2021:	Implemented the anticipated 1/1/22 funding increase to increase wages
September 2021:	Asked administrative and nursing staff to work most of their hours doing direct care, which impacted other responsibilities

September 2021: Began offering unprecedented incentives (\$75/hour) over Labor Day weekend which has continued

September 2021: Canceled a DHS review due to administrative staff working direct care

October 2021: Announced permanent closure of Cummings (4-person ICF-IID) and Edinborough (1-person in-home 245D services)

October 2021: Approached DHS to discuss emergency planning including temporary consolidation using 5th bed exceptions and a larger assisted living setting

October 2021: Began contracting with temp agencies for staff

November 1, 2021: Disaster declared in message to staff and ACR began operating under disaster plan

November 16, 2021: Sent first letter to Gov. Walz with urgent request for assistance from National Guard with numerous follow-up phone calls. Still awaiting response.

November 2021: Notified care teams of the continued crisis and asked families to take their loved one home for 3 months where possible – none were able

November 2021: Began heavily utilizing DHS Crisis COVID Staffing Pool

November 2021: Temporarily closed 87th Trail (4-person CRS) using 5th bed exceptions

December 2021: Temporarily moved Riverdale (4-person CRS) and Regent (4-person CRS) to larger assisted living setting

December 2021: Sent urgent email to DHS and Ombudsman informing them of the major staffing crisis over the holidays

December 2021: Informed all administrative office staff that they needed to provide availability during the holidays when they could be called upon to work direct care

January 3, 2022: Second letter sent to Gov. Walz requesting emergency assistance from National Guard. Still awaiting response.

January 2022: Temporarily closed Brooks (4-person CRS) and 135th (4-person CRS) using current openings and larger assisted living settings

January 2022: Temporarily moved OGV (4-person CRS), Valdars (4-person CRS), 140th East (4-person CRS) to larger assisted living setting

January 2022: 60-day notice of termination of services delivered to 17 individuals notifying them of closure of 4 ACR homes: Trenton, Pintail, Upper 55th, Crestridge (all 4-person CRS homes); effective closing date of 3/14/2022

February 2022: Temporarily moved Robin Ct. (4-person CRS) to larger assisted living setting

March 14, 2022: Effective closing date of Trenton, Pintail, Upper 55th, Crestridge