

Nonprofit Group Home Makes Sacrifices To Address Staff Shortages: ‘I’ve Never Seen Staffing Difficulties Like This’

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MENDOTA HEIGHTS, Minn. (WCCO) — As group homes across the state struggle to find staff, some have been forced to close their doors, leaving families scrambling. The facilities are home to people with physical and developmental challenges.

To try and keep their homes open, one nonprofit has made a couple changes. John Lauritsen shows us how those changes are helping.

“In my 35 years I’ve never seen staffing difficulties like this,” said Rod Carlson of Living Well Disabilities Services.

For group homes statewide, the staffing struggle got so bad that there was talk of bringing in the National Guard to help.

“And certainly at one point the National Guard was suggested, the National Guard was early in COVID to help with some nursing homes,” said Carlson.

It never came to that for Living Well in Mendota Heights. But sacrifices have been made to keep their nearly 40 homes operating.

“We’re competing against restaurants and the Costco’s of the world. And all these other organizations that need employees as well,” said Carlson.

To recruit more workers, Living Well increased their pay from \$14.75 an hour to \$16 an hour, for direct care employees. A modest increase that’s made a big difference.

Certified nursing assistants also saw a pay bump to \$17 an hour, something many group homes have not been

able to do. But it meant going into a budget deficit to bring in nurses like Sunday Yengi.

“I love it. I love working here,” said Yengi.

While the pay increase was nice, Yengi said group homes need to recruit people who have a passion for helping others. She works in honor of her mentally-disabled brother who lives in South Sudan.

“When I work here with people who have a mental challenge, I feel like I’m helping my only brother,” said Yengi.

As part of its COVID plan, Living Well also pushed for vaccination requirements before they were mandated.

“These are just rapid tests we get that are provided by the state,” said Annelies Stevens, Director of Health Services and Wellness.

They say that made staff more comfortable working near residents with weakened immune systems.

“That’s what we’ve been able to focus on and maintain, which is what I’m really happy with,” said Stevens.

Living Well said the changes helped them hire more staff, but they are still a few nurses short.

As the nonprofit celebrates its 50th anniversary next week, they will lobby at the Capitol for higher wages for group home workers.