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MOHR Announces 2023 MOHR Choice Award Winners

Eight organizations recognized for providing opportunities for individuals with disabilities through innovative programming

ST. PAUL, Minn. — The Minnesota Organization for Habilitation and Rehabilitation (MOHR) is announcing its 2023 MOHR Choice Award Winners. The eight honorees consist of large and small day and employment services organizations from all corners of the state that have created innovative programs to positively affect the lives of individuals with disabilities.

“Every year we take the opportunity to highlight exceptional programs offered by MOHR members,” explains Julie Johnson, MOHR Board Chair. “We look for programs that are deeply impactful and help individuals with disabilities engage with the community around them.”

This year’s winners include programs focused on art, building life skills, and community engagement.

“The programs highlighted this year ensure that people living with disabilities are uplifted, celebrated, and given the opportunity to use their skills to add value to their communities,” adds Johnson.

2023 MOHR Choice Winners

Aitkin County DAC, Oakridge Homes, and Aitkin Community Education – Aitkin, MN – Encouraging intergenerational community engagement

The Better Together program is a collaborative effort of local partners focusing on bringing people of all abilities and ages together. It was created in 2021 to encourage more community integration between individuals with disabilities, the school district, and the broader community as well as provide more opportunities for individuals with disabilities. For example, prior to Better Together, Special Olympics opportunities were not available in the Aitkin area. Now, the area has community coaches along with partner staff that coordinate Bowling and Track/Field events among others.

MSS – St. Paul, MN - Facilitating careers in the arts

MSS is the first provider in Minnesota to offer formal art employment services for artists with disabilities. The Art Employment program support artists in their professional development and careers including individual art exploration or development services, as well as an 'Explore Employment in the Arts' course. The more than 85 artists who have received art employment services have shown in galleries around the Twin Cities, had solo exhibitions, artist residencies, developed connections in the arts community, and have received earnings through artwork licensing and sales.

TSE, Inc – Roseville, MN - Expanding community engagement through volunteer opportunities

Choices For All is a program created by TSE in 2022 to increase community employment, eliminate TSE's use of its 14(c) certificate, and to expand community enrichment activities for the people TSE serves. Although many of the people TSE serves seek community employment, many others choose to utilize day support services instead. Choices For All is allowing them to achieve active, fulfilling, and vibrant lifestyles and participate in the community. TSE has partnered with several organizations including Every Plate, Dept of Indian Works, Kids in Need Foundation, and North St Paul Food Shelf, where TSE persons served as volunteers alongside other community members. All volunteer sites are repeated on a weekly basis in order to build naturally strong relationships with community members working towards the same goal. However, TSE doesn't just do "outings." They explore, teach, experience, expand, and review what they saw, who they met, and what they learned, providing participants with valuable life skills and lessons.

Mille Lacs County Area DAC – Milaca, MN - Building comfort and community

Though Mille Lacs County Area DAC has been in the heart of Milaca for almost 50 years, they recently discovered that not everyone in the town of 3,000 know who they were, and that they didn't know their neighbors. The solution was to create the Hello Neighbor program. On a rotating basis, nine staff members help their clients put together a welcome basket, make a card, and sign it. Then, on a specific day, a staff member and a handful of persons served will visit a business in the neighborhood to greet them and learn more about them. The Hello Neighbor program also welcomes new business to Milaca. Thus far, visits have been made to more than 63 neighborhood businesses and government entities. The opportunity to get to know their neighbors, build friendships, and discover new places to shop or to learn is immeasurable for individuals served by Mille Lacs County Area DAC.

Functional Industries Inc. and Buffalo Community Center – Buffalo, MN - Merging programming with community involvement

The Buffalo Community Center has integrated the 50+ individuals served by Functional Industries directly into its community activities including art classes, volunteering opportunities, wellness and exercise classes, and even pool club. The goal was to create options and opportunities for individuals with disabilities to further integrate into the community. Excitingly, the Buffalo Community Center works to understand the interests and skills of Functional Industries' clients and incorporates those interests into new activities and events. They also reach out and ask for volunteers to assist with childcare options and luncheons.

PAI – White Bear Lake, MN - Building life skills through art

In 2022, White Bear Center for the Arts' (WBCA) teaching artist, Sylvia Roman, designed curriculum specific for PAI participants and classes called Connecting the Dots. She brought ideas to two separate classes at all four of PAI's sites, each of which supported 8 - 13 participants. This is particularly important because when people living with disabilities are provided opportunities for expression through the arts, they tend to experience greater self-worth and accomplishment. Art also improves motor skills, interpersonal communication, and comprehension. In 2022, PAI also significantly evolved and deepened its Community Arts programming, resulting in a first-ever gallery exhibition of PAI-participant artwork in a public space for all to see. And more than that, PAI worked with WBCA to have an exhibit opening, inviting participants to debut their work and take pride in their creativity and effort. The exhibit was on display from November 9, 2022 through February 17, 2023.

Opportunity Partners — Remote Services – Minnetonka, MN - Providing virtual engagement opportunities

Started in 2020, Opportunity Partners' Remote Services program helps people connect as a group to learn, explore, and engage in enrichment activities. The program creates space for people to socialize, learn new skills, discuss various topics and collaborate as a group on the different activities each week. The remote sessions consist of group social sessions (enrichment activities, conversations, exploration, self-advocacy discussions, etc.), social hours (large groups meet to socialize and participate in a large group activity which can include games, discussions, presentations, etc.) and drop-in sessions that people can join freely whenever they want to. The program began with three staff members and has since grown to six staff members serving an average of 80 people. Remote Services continues to be an important program for Opportunity Partners, even with a return to in-person services. The industry staff shortage means the organization still can't bring everyone back for in-person programming. However, there are immediate openings for new people to join the Remote Services, whereas there are waiting lists for most other programs. It is also important for

people who can't leave their home due to a health condition, transportation issues, etc.

Rise – Spring Lake Park, MN - Exploring potential career paths

Rise Vocation Evaluation Services is a partnership with the state of Minnesota offering paid work or vocational evaluations to eligible jobseekers with disabilities who have limited work experience, and also to workers hoping to re-enter the workforce. A Rise team member supervises the worker at a job site, ensuring quality work. Rise offers this program at 40 locations in Anoka and Hennepin Counties. Evaluation positions often include janitorial, clerical, production, childcare, and food services/hospitality. A typical evaluation lasts about a month. During that process, evaluators follow up on referrals, meet with the client and their counselor, establish learning goals, and create a plan. They also meet one-to-one with the client during that time. If that individual needs more support, the evaluator will facilitate work adjustment training to complete the process. When completed, the client leaves with a better understanding of what they can and want to do with regards to a career.

About MOHR

MOHR is a 501(c)(6) nonprofit association that serves 100+ member organizations across Minnesota who provide day and employment services to tens of thousands of Minnesotans with intellectual and developmental disabilities. The purpose of MOHR is to provide leadership, inspire excellence, engage in advocacy, and facilitate the success of its members through collaboration, research, networking, awareness building, resources, and active participation in legislative and policy-making forums. MOHR is governed by a volunteer board of directors who present a clear and authoritative voice on issues affecting the independence and well-being of youth and adults with disabilities. Learn more at <https://mohrmn.org/>.

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