

ProAct emphasizes the 'intangibles'

Lost revenue challenges those who help people with challenges

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On a typical business day, the ProAct building in Red Wing bustles with activity.

The organization focuses on job development and preparation for individuals with disabilities and provides education paired with real-life work experience to prepare these adults for community integration.

With classes on topics such as computer usage, social skills and the importance of exercise, ProAct works to advance individuals toward professional involvement and independence.

Despite the abundance of activity going on in the building itself, Sally Ogren said that most of what they do happens in the community.

"We have people working individual jobs in the community, we have people working in groups with a job coach at businesses of all sorts," said Ogren, with is director of ProAct in Red Wing and Zumbrota.

Yet despite the good work of ProAct, interest in employment with such organizations is often very low.

"The whole industry is short workers," said Steve Ditschler, president and chief executive officer of ProAct.

A shortage of staff is nothing new, but the company expects this challenge to be greater with the newest court decision.

For years, representatives from ProAct and similar organizations have lobbied the Minnesota Legislature for a 7 percent increase in funding to support disability program staff with increases in cost of living. On July 1, this 7 percent was to be cut, leading service providers to work hard in finding a "fix" to keep their

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ProAct president and chief executive officer

funding.

Sherie Wallace of The Wallace Group does communications for ProAct. She has been busy discerning the fluctuations in funding.

"State legislators responded to restore the funds lost by the 7 percent cut by placing language in the state omnibus spending bill," she said.

This "fix" didn't quite work as planned, as Gov. Mark Dayton vetoed this spending bill during the last legislative session, losing the concerns of service providers amidst other state costs.

While there is no one to blame for this cut, Ditschler said the whole organization will be affected by it, starting with the staff.

"Quality staff is what makes the experience of the people being served," Ditschler said.

"What you'd hate to do in the roles we're in is to see any diminished ability to attract and retain quality staff that the folks have come to depend on."

ProAct leaders are aware of the other employers in region, many offering higher starting rates, that have their own reasons for being an attractive workplace.

Yet they are confident

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that their employment provides staff with something that other industries don't. It's what Ditschler and Ogren call "the intangibles."

"People get attached to the people they're serving," Ogren said.

Ditschler believes ProAct staff finds joy in the achievements of the individuals served.

He said, "Once you get a great deal of satisfaction in what you're doing, it can offset pay benefits a bit."

ProAct is preparing for

these cuts by discussing a limit to the number of community outings or developing a waiting list for services, both actions the organization only considers out of desperation.

"However we tighten our belts with the budget, we cannot sacrifice the safety and security of the individuals," Wallace said.

Regardless of any changes, disabled adults will continue to receive services from ProAct that will change their lives, the three said, and consequently bring joy to the hard-working employees who provide these services.

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