

Do Safety Concerns Justify a MARC Holiday Shutdown?

Five MARC centers are scheduled to close for three days between Christmas and New Years, 2004, according to Richard Berling, MARC's Executive Director. These centers provide activities during the day for 209 adults with developmental disabilities in Dane County. Most of the people use wheel chairs and need regular supervision and personal care. Richard Berling cites 2 reasons for the shutdown: Dane County budget cuts and the safety of clients caused by the resulting staff cuts.

Another MARC program, MARC-RES, providing support for people with developmental disabilities working in jobs in the community, will not be affected by the shutdown.

The shutdown has generated controversy from residential providers and the staff at Dane County Human Services. Both are unhappy about MARC's decision to close its doors for the three days. Dan Rossiter, a Program Manager with the Dane County Human Services Department, told The Messenger that they (the county) have denied permission for the MARC shutdown because the people must be cared for by staff paid by the residential agencies. There are no funds to pay for this additional cost.

While 45 of the MARC clients live at home with their families, 164 people live in housing provided with staff to support them paid by residential providers. Olwen Blake of REM, one of Dane County's local residential provider agencies, says, "We don't have funds to pay for the (staff) time during which MARC is closed. We aren't set up for that (providing service during the day)".

MARC Director Berling points to more that 12 years of reduced funding from the county as the real problem. MARC has been providing service for 52 years, and the cumulative effect of the loss in revenue has hit them harder than other agencies. He says that most of the funds for service come from Dane County, and MARC has lost ground over the years to the point where, "We have had to cut staff so much that the safety of our clients is now a major concern in all of our centers. We appreciate that our union has worked with us to allow their vacation days to be scheduled in such a way as to give our clients more coverage during the rest of the year, raising our daily staff-to-client ratio." MARC has stopped hiring subs for vacationing or ill staff in 2004 due to budget cuts. "Safety is the major concern for us at MARC with these budget cuts." says Berling.

When asked about the County position on keeping MARC open during the holidays, Berling said that MARC doesn't feel the County can tell them to stay open without the funds to operate safely. "But, if they (the Dane County staff) want to talk safety, we'll be the first ones at the table. Until then, we are closed December 28-29-30, 2004, for safety reasons." said Berling

Brokers are reviewing all of their clients' accounts between April and July. Families should contact their brokers and ask to amend upward their allocation from the County to cover service for these three days.

As of the time this issue went to press, problems have been identified, but a solution that would keep 209 people with developmental disabilities in a warm safe place on three cold December days has not been found. The Arc-Dane County will follow this situation and ask all parties to work to plan some kind of resolution that keeps people with developmental disabilities in a safe and productive environment.